



Flame Distribution scales operations with QScan (Quales)

Major Australian-based content versioning and preparation house Flame Media implements QScan for its Quality Control procedures with tremendous success.

Faced with a burgeoning workload of incoming content to version and pass Quality Control (QC) for international sales and distribution, Flame Media realized that it needed to automate large parts of its existing manual QC procedures. After thorough examination and demonstration of available solutions, the company selected QScan for its automated QC procedure. When evaluating the QC product market sector, Flame Media had a number of key points that they needed verified. Their selection criteria included: value for money, simultaneous multi-user support and integration with its existing workflow. It also included return on investment, specifically, the ability to save time and resources, especially on existing labor-intensive workflows.

Flame Media elaborates in greater detail on its choice of QC system and how it has performed in practice.

Worldwide Delivery

Flame Media is a television production and distribution house specializing in high-quality factual entertainment and documentary content.

With offices in London, Sydney, Singapore, Cardiff, Greece, China and representation in New York, Flame Media is made up of 40 highly experienced, professionals across the distribution, production and advisory arms. Its Sydney based distribution arm - Flame Distribution - distributes factual, unscripted and documentary content representing more than 160 independent producers from around the world. With a catalogue of 3,000 hours of carefully selected programming, Flame takes a bespoke approach to marketing each title.

Growing Demand, Growing Bottleneck

Most creative post agencies work on multiple projects concurrently, however, with hundreds of hours of media located in their storage pool, it becomes difficult for them to QC all their media. Flame Media was experiencing a breaking point in which not even the dedication and experience of their technical staff could keep pace with the volume of incoming material – not if they were to maintain its reputation for high standards. Explains Jason Lee, Technical Manager at Flame, *“Flame Media’s technical department is primarily responsible for management of master materials*

from acquisitions to delivery. We are acquiring many more hours of content and delivering more every week. As such, resources are strained, and the ability to uphold our high standard of work is put under pressure."

In particular, the facility's reliance on human QC was building up bottlenecks in Flame's ability to pass compliant assets through to sales. Manual QC can be appropriate for some instances, such as simple single-format checks, but when there is a demand for checking multiple files and criteria, this option alone makes it difficult for creative agencies to scale their QC procedures. *"We realized we needed to change our procedures when we started to acquire a lot more content,"* explains Lee. *"Because the ratio of content and acquisitions started to get a lot bigger, we had to hire an extra person to help with the additional QC work. At the time, we were just crazy flat-out and dealing with a lot of problematic content. I was looking at options that could help us speed up the QC process."* All content is required to go through a QC process before international sale, but some content arrives with more issues than others. Problems range from freeze frames to interlacing and conversion issues to files with 'dead' pixels.

"Not all content comes to us pretty and ready for sale by any means," informs Lee. *"The quality is not always there. A lot of producers think that when they have done a show, they don't need to do any more. We have a series of protocols in place to make sure that the quality of content is good before we pass it for worldwide sale because we represent the buyer. We want to make sure that we're providing a premium service and that means having the best QC procedure in place."* Not only is eyeball QC extremely tedious work, it is not infallible, and problems can slip through. When that happens, and the issue is included in the final master, the broadcaster can reject the file. At best this will add another layer of work to already tight deadlines at the content preparation house and at worse can negatively impact the client relationship.

Flame Media were being tasked with managing up to 30 hours of content a week but peak periods could more than double this amount. Following program sales around Mipcom for example, QC demands typically ramped up to 50 and even 80 hours' worth of content. At other times, whole seasons might be delivered to the facility in one go.

A cookery show of 180 episodes x 30 minutes, for example, puts immense pressure on the facility to turnaround within a month let alone a few weeks.

"Being a team of 40, we can only do so much," says Lee. *"At the same time, we've got other responsibilities as well. We've got service sales that the sales team made, and we've got to do our other jobs and duties as required by the technical department."*

Solution Evaluation

Automated QC was imperative, and Flame Media set out to evaluate a number of solutions. *"Some solutions required us to pay for a standardized package but if you needed features like using QuickTime, or to QC certain audio elements, you had to pay extra,"* says Lee. *"If you wanted a full license for the QC software you ended up with a price tag of almost U\$40,000."* Lee adds, *"With other solutions we found the user interface difficult to get to grips with. And then there were some vendors pricing their solution to operate for a certain number of hours per day. That model may work for smaller post facilities, but we didn't want to be stuck in a situation where we're paying extra for a full license to run 24 hours a day."*

The QScan solution, however, fits the bill. *"With QScan, we're not having to pay extra for additional features. That's why I was initially attracted to the product,"* says Lee. *"There's no restriction on license either. It's one price for the entire system. For us, that just offers tremendous flexibility because we can scale at will."*

QScan is a fully featured, comprehensive video and audio QC system that is used to check the integrity of media files. The earlier any issues are found with media, the easier and quicker it is to rectify them. QScan will analyze media files arriving into a facility and will automatically perform a series of automated tests on both the audio and video signals, confirming the files meet prescribed channel specifications.

QScan in Practice

The real test of the solution, of course, was in its ability to quickly and accurately identify issues and ease the facility's workflow pressures. *"The first time we used QScan was during a period when we were receiving a lot of problematic content,"* says Lee. *"We put it through QScan and that immediately*



saved us having to spend extra time to check the content with an eyeball QC. Within five or 10 minutes, we received the QC report, clearly informing us what to reject, and what to accept."

Operators looking at a broadcast monitor cannot easily 'look inside' the file. QScan provides a unique view of both audio and video, presenting a timeline to operators showing exactly where the events are occurring as a graph within the timeline. *"The QScan visual interface is less daunting than other solutions we tried, and graphically it's more intuitive. That definitely helped us save a lot of time and attain quicker turnaround in getting content fixed."*

Flame Media has easily integrated QScan with its Signiant media shuttle transport so that every time content is sent to the facility it is automatically pushed to QScan for an immediate QC check. The database is structured in a way that saves data searches, so repetitive QC on specific content is incredibly fast.

"QScan has proved especially helpful with content that has had a lot of freeze frames and syntax errors. Too many files have come to us that we thought that we could play and we've had problems in which QScan has reported back and told us the file is corrupt. That's been very handy for us to catch drop frames and dead pixels which are extremely hard to detect in a manual QC." Lee explains, "You could be watching content at rates of 24 or 29 frames a second. There is no way you're going to visibly see

issues like dead pixels. QScan scans the content at frame level and can identify errors."

If content fails a QC test at any stage, Flame's next step is to inform the producer. With QScan we can send the producer a detailed QC report which pinpoints exactly where the file failed. Either we can perform the fixes in-house or the producer fixes and sends another file. Either way, the content will go through the whole QC procedure again. *"We do still eyeball the content as an additional failsafe, but we're not spending 30 or 40 minutes per show doing it. Essentially, we rely on the QScan report to tell us all we need to know."*

Lee concludes, *"Having QScan on board has helped us manage the content and relieved a lot of the stress from our team. It has allowed us to free up a lot more time to do other duties that require attention in the technical department. It has reduced the labour we were spending in the acquisition stage. Although we still maintain our rigorous set of processes to catch every instance of non-compliance or file error and making sure that we have the best quality product at the end of the line. That way, everyone is happy."*