DigitalMedia™ Helps Philanthropic group provide non-profit organizations with high-tech meeting space

The McKnight Foundation is a Minnesota-based family philanthropic organization dedicated to supporting local non-profits.

When the foundation moved into new offices, administrators decided it would fit well with their mission to offer equipped meeting space at no charge to organizations they helped fund, as well as other worthy local groups. They started by offering one large and two smaller meeting rooms, each with video projection and sound systems. Since demand was so high for these meeting spaces they added four more rooms.

"We host about 175 guest meetings each year, plus our own meetings and events," explained Lorri Todd, Meeting and Event Planner for the McKnight Foundation. "We host board meetings, staff training, strategic planning meetings, even dinners and receptions, for which we provide the space plus planning and technology services."

The Challenge

Although the space-sharing program worked well, by the beginning of 2010 it was obvious that the AV system in the boardroom needed work. This room is a very large space, normally equipped with tables and chairs for up to 75 people and expandable by opening an air wall to accommodate meetings or dinners for 120 and receptions for up to 200 guests.

"The audio system was simply not flexible enough," Todd explained. Though the furniture could be configured in many different ways, loudspeakers, intended for boardroom-style setups, were grouped in the center of the room. To make matters worse, there was only one volume level setting for

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the entire room, with no way to adjust individual sources, and the system would often receive feedback during audio conferences.

"The foundation was starting to run into situations where presenters brought in laptops with digital outputs, and they were unable to connect to the system," said Don Owens, sales manager at RAV Technologies of Plymouth, MN.

The Solution

Todd gathered proposals from three Minnesota AV integrators, but was particularly impressed with RAV's future-looking approach. "With the changes in connectivity that are upon us, it was obvious that we needed to give them an all-digital infrastructure," Owens explained. "We based our design on Crestron's DigitalMedia system."

Owens says the decision to use Crestron DigitalMedia™ was not a hard one. "Crestron seems to be the only company presently offering a turnkey digital video solution that actually works," he noted. "I can't imagine using anything else."

Owens brought in Crestron Authorized Independent Programmer (CAIP) Jeff Gallus of Minneapolis-based, JG Technologies to help design the system using this new digital technology.

Together they created a system with both analog and digital laptop inputs, a Blu-ray Disc® player and cable TV receiver, all sending video to an InFocus LCD projector.

Systems at a Glance

The audio system includes audio processors, podium mic, two wireless mics and eight wireless table mics, all available for sound reinforcement and audio conferencing. Users can bring in their own music on an Apple® iPod® or CD, and can make audio recordings of their meetings using a solid-state recorder/player, saving copies to their laptops or USB flash drive.

"From an installation standpoint this was a simple project," Owens said. "We pulled a single DigitalMedia cable to a wall plate at each of the two possible podium locations, terminated the connections and we were ready to go."

The Crestron DigitalMedia transmitter can accept both analog and digital AV inputs, and transmit either signal through the same cable, taking up only one channel in the switcher. "Since there was no need to separate the analog from the digital lines, we were able to take care of all of the switching with just a single DigitalMedia 6X1 switcher. A simple VGA or HDMI® connection took care of all their needs."

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The foundation also provides video connectivity to guest groups by rolling a video conferencing system into the boardroom. This is a portable system, but once they plug it into one of the two wall plates, users can send conference video to the InFocus® projector and use the installed sound system for conference audio.

An important challenge was making operations easy enough that outside presenters would need little or no technical help during a meeting. "There are literally hundreds of people who use this room each year," said Owens.

Gallus designed a user interface with two sets of pages on the touch screens. One is intended for guests who may be unfamiliar with the system. It gives them projector on/off, source select, master volume, plus basic controls for the Blu-ray, iPod® dock and audio conferencing system. Other functions are automated. Select "Blu-ray" on the touch screen and the system turns on the projector and lowers the projection screen.

Using password-protected technician pages, Todd can adjust individual microphone levels, speaker levels, zones, and room configuration presets.

"The way Crestron DigitalMedia handles EDID tables was also very helpful in simplifying controls," Owens added. "Notifying each computer of the optimal resolution for the source simplifies the overall process when connecting a presenter's laptop to the system."

Benefits

Finding a good place to hold business meetings can be tough for a non-profit. Rental space is expensive, forcing many organizations to meet in churches, libraries and schools. AV support can be primitive in places like these, and audio and video conferencing rare. The McKnight Boardroom proves that technology and nonprofit can mix and work seamlessly.

It was very important that the room be adaptable to whatever changes new technology may bring. "We wanted to be forward thinking, so that the new systems would still work in five to seven years or more" said Todd.