

## Consumer Experience is King

Adam Lesh, Oct 2009

It's an exciting time. Never before has there been such a plethora of channels from which to consume content. Broadcast, DVD, Blu-ray, Internet, download, cell phones, and many, many more to come. They have, at least, one thing in common: the consumer. Eventually, no matter how cool or sexy it's dressed up, the consumer will decide whether he or she likes the content and how it is delivered. If the experience is good (iPod), it's a hit, if it's poor (UMD Video), it's a flop. Consumer experience is king.

That being said, we can't forget that consumer expectations drive consumer experience. What that means for us is that the same piece of content, when delivered through different channels with different levels of quality, can equally satisfy the consumer. Consumers expect high quality from a Blu-ray disc – perfect, or near-perfect, video and audio, and perfect functionality regardless of whether they are using a PS3 or WinDVD. However, the consumer is much more forgiving when watching precisely the same content via Hulu, for example. As a quality assurance (ensuring quality throughout the process)/quality control (ensuring quality of the final product) company, this flies in the face of our very core values. We tend to think that everything should be perfect.

I used the word "perfect" several times above, but I've begun to wonder what that word means anymore. Perfect for Blu-ray? Perfect for iTunes? In a world with degrees of quality, has the word "perfect" come to be synonymous with "acceptable?" The more I think about it, the more I am convinced not. The question isn't what is "perfect," but who owns "perfect?"

It used to be so simple. With VHS, if the master was "perfect" and a sampling of the VHS copies were approved, we shipped them. There was no consumer expectation of high quality video or audio. In fact, after VHS beat out Betamax, the consumer was, in many cases, conditioned to expect worse quality than broadcast. However, the convenience of VCR controls and time-shifting improved the consumer experience, if not the quality of picture and sound. The content owners owned "perfect."

All that changed a couple of decades later with the introduction of DVD (I'll skip over laserdisc, a sad footnote in the annals of consumer A/V products – composite video, come on!). A revolutionary product sold on the promise of improved video and audio, even when hooked up to the composite inputs on a TV. And it sold. The consumer embraced this new technology in numbers that even surprised most of the pundits. In retrospect, perhaps we shouldn't have been so surprised. Broadcast/Cable quality had improved so dramatically, along with the televisions themselves, that VHS really looked shabby. The public was ready and dove in whole-heartedly.

Now the content owners had to deliver, but not everyone immediately got the hint. In the rush to get discs on the market to support the players, quality was often sacrificed. What nobody anticipated was the parallel adoption of this new thing called "the Internet," really only coming into its own in the early nineties, just before the birth of DVD. When those first negative reviews started hitting the websites, the content owners stood up and took notice.

In an abrupt paradigm shift, not only did the master have to be perfect, but also the product on the shelf, including both A/V quality and functionality. Who knew? The consumer expected perfect and if the content owners didn't deliver, they took a direct hit in sales. Nothing like lost revenue to motivate change. No more cutting corners for the sake of expediency. Re-mastering, re-mixing and quality control became the new watchwords of the Industry. The consumer had taken ownership of "perfect."

The evolutionary introduction of Blu-ray hasn't actually changed the landscape significantly. In a relative sense, expectations haven't changed and that pesky Internet, or rather those dedicated reviewers with, perhaps, a little too much time on their hands, is still out there to keep us honest. No worries, we have that quality thing nailed.

Or do we? With BD-Live, perhaps we became a little too enamored with our own cleverness and forgot, just for a moment, that consumer experience is king. While undeniably technological triumphs, initial BD-Live offerings have so far failed to attract a large number of consumers. The good news is that we are still in the very early days of BD-Live. Even DVD took a couple of years to take off, so, essentially, we are still experimenting. I have no doubt we will eventually find that killer app which will drive widespread adoption of this exciting new technology.

Digital downloads prove the same point. No one really complains when picture and sound are not perfect on a website or downloaded content. However, in an interesting study, it was found that if a web page doesn't load within a few seconds, the user is likely to surf away. The consumer experience needs to be strong, just not necessarily in the way we expect. If we deliver "perfect" video and sound, but it takes more than a few seconds to start playing, will we lose the consumer? Now, more than ever, the consumer owns "perfect."

So, where does QA/QC fit in this constantly growing and changing digital world, where the consumer has varying degrees of expectation of quality? Again, it boils down to the consumer experience. How does a content owner ensure that it is providing the best possible consumer experience regardless of the distribution channel? Ironically, we start by coming full circle back to the days of QC for VHS. The first step is to ensure the master, now most often a package of related digital files including video, audio and subtitles, is perfect. These master files are the source of most of the "downstream" files that are distributed to the consumer, including downloads, Blu-ray, and sometimes even broadcast. Any flaws in those files will be passed down to the distribution files. Now, what used to be quality control, where the master tape was essentially the end product of the distribution process, becomes quality assurance, where the master files are just the beginning.

But, it doesn't end there. We still have to ensure a strong consumer experience. We know we have to continue to test DVD and Blu-ray for functionality and compatibility as well as A/V quality. As I said above, there is a high consumer expectation of quality on these media. However, though there may be a low consumer expectation of quality from a downloaded file, and therefore we may not need to test it, how about the website from which it is downloaded? The consumer still has a high expectation of quality from the experience as a whole. Proper error handling (when, for example, an internet connection is briefly lost), proper management of content when bandwidth is low or screen size is less than optimal, and simple, but important, QC of all weblinks and e-mail addresses, are critical to ensure a "perfect" consumer experience.

I should mention, although I have somewhat glossed over it, while consumer expectations of Blu-ray are similar to DVD, the QA/QC is several orders of magnitude more complex. DVD is a media disc, with a sprinkling of programming wrapped around the A/V content. Blu-ray is, for all intents and purposes, software. While a content owner can get away with QC for DVD, Blu-ray requires a quality assurance approach, with testing seeded through out the design, production, and distribution process, and encompassing, for connected applications, much of the same concerns as for websites (error handling, content management, etc.).

Who knows what will come next? Packaged media will be around for a long time, but will face increased competition from digital delivery channels. The key to success in those areas will be a strong, compelling consumer experience. Right now, digital delivery accounts for a tiny fraction of consumed A/V content. As the digital experience continues to improve, it will make further inroads into packaged media. But that's OK. Improved experience means increased expectations means improved experience and so on and so on. DVD/Blu-ray, iTunes, and even the recent theatrical 3D renaissance, demonstrate that the consumer will pay for a high quality experience. QA/QC is here to ensure that "perfect" consumer experience.

It's all good, as long as we remember – consumer experience is king.