



BY RICK NELSON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

## Museum contends with multimedia rights

Wherever technology goes, legal issues regarding copyright ownership seem to follow. When law and technology collide, it's often over piracy and DRM (digital-rights management). But it turns out that technology can raise rights issues even when no technological DRM schemes or deliberate attempts at piracy are involved.

One such instance came to my attention on a recent visit to LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)). I was there to learn about the prequalification testing the museum and its consultants performed before installing a campus-wide WLAN (wireless local-area network). You can read the details in a related article ([Reference 1](#)).

One feature of LACMA's WLAN is that it delivers multimedia content to visitors equipped with museum-issued PDAs (personal digital assistants). "Traditionally, museums have audio tours and paper-based content," says Peter Bodell, LACMA's chief information officer. "So, we stepped up and said, 'All right, we need to go to the next level; we need to get it to multimedia.'"

From a visitor's perspective, the implementation is impressive. On arriving at the museum, you can check out a tablet PC. As you stroll about the museum, you can key in three-digit codes near each object that give you access to associated multimedia content. You can listen to audio content while examining similar works on the tablet's screen. As you

tour the museum, you can select "favorites." When you get home, you'll have received an e-mailed link to your own virtual gallery, in which you can review your favorites and do more research.

The museum has asked an independent organization to conduct a study of visitor acceptance of the multimedia system, but Jane Burrell, vice president for education and public programs, says that initial indications are favorable. "People love the content," she says. "They've really been excited."

Museum personnel are as pleased with the system as visitors seem to be. "It's a great opportunity for us," says Burrell. "One of the things we hear from our curators all the time is, 'We want to write more. There is so much more we want to say about our objects.' But there is only so much that people can read in the galleries. We have strict guidelines for how much written text we can have in the galleries, and visitors can absorb only so much. But, with the ability to show images, we can tell a different kind of story—one that we couldn't tell with a label."

But telling that differ-

ent kind of story presents its own challenges, which can be as significant as the technical ones Bodell faced when trying to implement a WLAN that could handle the mix of traffic that PDAs, staff and visitor laptops, and VOIP (voice-over-Internet Protocol) handsets generate.

Content creation is itself a challenge, as Burrell and her staff work to produce multimedia programming for the museum's vast collection. But DRM issues are proving to be particularly challenging. Clearing the rights to use videos has been particularly difficult. "We've had so many people turn us down for video—just small documentary filmmakers who thought, 'OK, this is my chance to get rich,'" she says. "We have only limited funding for the rights, so we've had to say, 'We just can't afford it.'"

Another problem is that many museums that might be willing to share content simply aren't set up to address the rights issues that arise. LACMA staffers calling to request rights, Burrell says, get bounced from department to department, or their calls don't get returned.

And that's too bad. There's no technical solution to the problem. The problem may solve itself as multimedia capabilities expand to many other museums. And that expansion seems inevitable. "A lot of modern artists are starting to work with technology as a medium," Bodell notes. As museums adopt technology to support those artists, it would be the ideal time to provide multimedia content to visitors and to establish procedures for obtaining rights from and granting them to other institutions. Museums and their visitors will be much the richer. **EDN**

### REFERENCE

1 Nelson, Rick, "The art of wireless," *Test & Measurement World*, March 2009, pg 20, [www.tmworld.com/article/CA6639355](http://www.tmworld.com/article/CA6639355).

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