

Case Study

Avantis CD/DVD Servers stand the test of time at Coventry University

Market Sector: **Education**
Customer: **Coventry University**
Solution: **Avantis Nexus**

Background

Coventry University has been using an Avantis CD/DVD server to provide students and staff with shared access to multimedia for over three years. Peter Barnes, senior analyst programmer explains that it has been in regular use and exceptionally reliable during the time it has been in position.

The University has one of the original Avantis Nexus servers. The contents have changed a lot over time as the University has added and deleted CD images. The role of the unit is changing. We took a look at the life of the server past and present.



The Problem

Prior to purchasing the Avantis solution, Coventry University had been using a CD tower to share CDs across the network. CD towers are based on optical drive technology – data is accessed across the network from a CD in a CD-ROM drive on the tower. This technology has real performance limitations and can only cope with a small number of simultaneous requests for CD data. CD towers are also prone to mechanical failure, require regular maintenance and are not very cost efficient.

With a growing number of multimedia learning programs and research materials available on CD-ROM, and a requirement to network this data to some 500 workstations, the CD tower was no longer a viable option for Coventry University. The Avantis Nexus unit was seen as the solution to this problem.

The Solution

The Nexus CD/DVD Server has been one of Avantis' most popular offerings within Colleges and Universities. The product has had many revisions as Avantis are always seeking to improve the experience for the user and maintain their promise of 100 percent CD/DVD compatibility.

The Nexus features ultra wide SCSI hard drives that offer much faster access and transfer rates than any optical drive. Special caching software allows the CDs to be stored as images on an integral hard drive on the server so any number of students can access the information at the same time.

Nexus can cope with up to 255 concurrent users and can handle an unlimited number of occasional users. Its top of the range configuration can hold a guaranteed minimum of 200 CDs. The unit at Coventry University has a minimum capacity of around 140 CDs although Peter Barnes admits they would find it difficult to fill all this space! "Many of the CDs we work with have quite low capacities some have just 30MB of data on them" he said. Of course, this is one of the advantages of using a hard disk based solution as opposed to a CD tower or jukebox. CD capacities are much larger and are not limited by the number of CD drives in a tower.



As CD formats and copy protection software evolves Avantis has constantly updated their client software to ensure 100 percent CD/DVD compatibility – support for ALL types of CD and DVD formats. These updates have been made available for free to all Avantis customers from the company website www.avantisworld.com

How is Coventry University using the Product?

The Nexus Server is available to around 500 PCs in 15 open access rooms. It is used to store a range of different CDs (no DVDs as yet) from science subjects to careers advice.

Coventry University has a Microsoft Windows NT 4 and Novell NetWare 5 network set up and have had very few problems with the Nexus Server. “The earlier versions of NT were very erratic,” explained Barnes “we had some problems getting all the machines to see the server at first. We would have rooms where half the PCs could see the Server and the other half couldn’t,” he said.

Despite this Peter Barnes didn’t call the Avantis support line “I’m loath to do that when the problem is with our network” explained Barnes “if half the computers were fine and half weren’t then it was obviously something that we had done” he said. Luckily the problem was traced back to other various programs that were installed on the PC during the build process.

The problem has not reappeared. In fact the Nexus server has integrated very well into the network at Coventry University. Barnes uses a Novell ZEN application to start the drive mapping process (Avantis CD Map) demonstrating how well the product has been integrated into the network.

Reliability the Key

In three years of use the CD/DVD Server has proved to be amazingly reliable and cheap to run. **“The only maintenance I do is to change the clock every six months!”** Barnes said. **“Even then I only do that because it reminds me to!”** he added.

This kind of report is not uncommon amongst Avantis customers. Based on tried and tested technology the Avantis offering is very stable. **“It just keeps on running,”** said Barnes.

The Avantis Nexus server is a big difference to the CD tower Coventry was using before. The minimal administration and maintenance required offers excellent value for money. Combining this with the increased performance and improved reliability Peter Barnes said, **“Given the choice I’d take the CD server again.”**

Present and Future

The CDs on the Server have changed a lot with time **“I have to change the CDs regularly as licenses or courses change”** said Barnes **“any of the lecturers can ask us to install any CD they like as long as we get the licenses sorted out.”** The Avantis solution comes complete with an administration package that allows the University to enforce and monitor license usage. **“The careers software is actually the most popular,”** said Barnes **“we get peaks and troughs for each subject area as coursework changes, but the careers advice is very popular just after exams”** he said.

The role of the CD Server is changing though as people are less concerned about placing application files that were previously stored on a CD on to the main file server. One major difficulty with this approach is that many titles like Microsoft Encarta will not run if they are just copied onto the file server.

This is where the added value of the Avantis solution takes hold as the Avantis Virtual CD/DVD Drive software (MVD™) fools the application into believing it is really in a local CD-ROM drive. Avantis do not copy the CD; they take a raw bit image, a process known as Adaptive CD Imaging™, so that all files and folders behave exactly as they would on the optical format. These two technologies combined allow Avantis to guarantee 100 percent CD/DVD compatibility.





However the web has led to a decline in some CD based products. Newspaper and periodical archives such as 'The Times' and 'The Economist' were once mainstay CD products, many of these have now moved to the web as Barnes observes, "most CDs are now websites on disk." Moving this content to the web may not be an effective use of money for all businesses though as Barnes explained "**an advantage of a CD Server is that with applications like the careers software where it is really only getting used at certain times of the year you are not paying to keep a site live when very few people will be accessing it.**"

Conclusion

The role of the CD Server is changing but as software packages continue to get bigger and more complicated and the use of multimedia more intensive, the CD Server still has a vital role to play. Coventry University has had many years of good service from their machine and Peter Barnes has no regrets about the installation. The University is still getting use from the product and as Avantis still support the unit (even if their support hasn't been needed!) they will continue to do so.

The product has delivered excellent value for money and has capacity to spare. Should the University need to provide shared network access to DVDs in the future they have a solution that is ready to go - each PC has a virtual DVD drive already installed, saving the cost and time involved in installing DVD drives to each PC.

The Nexus is a great solution for those who need to share large CD/DVD based files, or applications with multimedia content, as the SCSI hard disks provide vastly improved speed and reliability over optical towers. The CD is aging but with so many CD burners out there a lot more data is being recorded to CD. DVD has yet to make its full impact on the computer industry and it looks as though CD/DVD Server technology could be around for some time to come!

Avantis would like to thank the staff of Coventry University for their assistance in production of this article.

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