

Mobile Positioning System

Leica Geosystems triangulates its U.S. customer base with a video-enabled PowerPoint presentation

■ ROBERT L. LINDSTROM

Surveyors—those orange-vested, tripod-wielding toreaders of the highway—are members of an intricate, arcane industry that few outsiders comprehend. Even fewer understand the complexity and operation of the high-cost instruments used by these vacant-lot-dwelling professionals. But according to Carson Kennedy of Leica Geosystems, there is one thing even more challenging than mastering the surveyor's art: creating a sales presentation to introduce these nomadic triangulators to the new and rapidly changing tools of their trade.

Surveyors spend a lot of time in the field, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring them together in one location, says Kennedy, the U.S. marketing programs manager for the Swiss manufacturer of high-end surveying equipment. Earlier this year, in an attempt to vector in on its U.S. customers, Leica mounted a 30-city road show—the first it had ever attempted in the United States.

Targeting, budgeting and launching the traveling presentation and product exposition was only slightly less complicated than measuring the exact height of Mount Everest, says Kennedy. The intent of the traveling presentation was to introduce Leica's three new products and to recast Leica in a more customer-friendly light. Leica, says Kennedy, traditionally has had a "Mercedes-like" reputation—high-end, elitist



and a bit stuffy. Kennedy wanted the road show to present Leica as a down-to-earth organization (pun intended). On the whole, surveyors tend to be a very straightforward and practical bunch, he says. "Their



business is not about ego; it's about productivity." So the presentation had to be both entertaining and highly informative.

With six weeks and roughly a \$150,000 budget, Leica hired Aspen Productions in Atlanta to create the audiovisual portion of the presentation, which was based on Leica's theme of "Beyond 2000." Leica wanted to present a company history and product information using audio, video and PowerPoint-based slides from several presentations already used by product teams.

The presentation had to fit on a single CD-ROM that would run in PowerPoint '97 on a 166 MHz machine. Because the disc would be sent to regional dealers and sales representatives, it had to load and run with minimal assistance from the presenter and had to be editable by users. Finally, Leica wanted some

type of interactive "emcee" that would interact with the presenter.

The result is a study in compromise and efficiency. Leica, Aspen and the animation company Kaplan Graphics of Atlanta managed to meet all of the requirements while providing a presentation that, at least in sections, breaks free of the typical bullet-riddled PowerPoint show.

The presentation opens with the



clichéd-but-effective theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey. The audio track introduces the title slide of a space shuttle arcing into the night sky and reflected in the still estuary. The space theme is reinforced in the first of 27 video segments by intercutting scenes of the shuttle readying for launch and on-screen narration from a man who appears to be an astronaut talking about his experience in space. Those scenes are juxtaposed with a female surveyor as she sets out on a job. Eventually, it becomes clear the speaker is a surveyor, not an astronaut—but only after convincing parallels are drawn between the rigors and precision of space exploration and the demands of surveying.

In the next automatically triggered segment, an animated character, Theo, flies onto the screen and introduces himself. His name is short for theodolite, a type of surveying tool. The character is an animated version of Leica's newest product. The producers and Leica at first wanted to use a live animated actor to interact in real time with the presenter and audience. But spending \$30,000 per city to send the actor and the technology on the road was far beyond the budget. "If it had been a single event, we would have

used the live actor," says Kennedy.

The compromise presents Theo as a wisecracking character who is both chummy and knowledgeable about surveying. He asks questions throughout the show to reinforce the knowledge level of the presenter and to pre-empt questions and criticism from the audience. "We wanted Theo to ask the questions that were in the audience's mind," says Kennedy. At the beginning, Theo tells the audience which important points to listen for in the presenter's address. After the audience has heard all the product information, Theo reiterates the most critical aspects of what they have been told. Finally, he issues a call to action when he invites all the attendees to visit the expo for hands-on experience.

According to Robert Kaplan, creative director at Kaplan Graphics, the five minutes of animation were created in just two weeks by a team of five animators, led by Ciaran Quinn. The character, created using Discreet 3D Studio MAX, appears on-screen 10 times during the presentation. "Theo is the hook to hold attention through the long show and to tie the segments together," says Kaplan. "Most of these people had never seen this sort of animated character before. They were blown away."

Kaplan compressed the animation as MPEG-1 because of the need for smaller files and because the presentation video needed to be software-driven to conform to the variety of expected playback machines. The resolution for all of the video was set at 640 x 480. The only glitch was the lag time Kaplan encountered in PowerPoint as it launched the video. "We had to insert about five seconds of black screen to cover the delay," he says.

The second major video segment features actors portraying surveyors as they talk about their needs and the rigors of their profession. Their comments are interspersed with historical photographs covering the history of surveying and Leica. At two points, the video cuts to scenes from James Bond movies in which Bond receives

and tests some of his trademark high-tech equipment. "The idea was to suggest that surveying equipment from Leica is as high-tech as it gets," says Kennedy. "It also added an element of fun to the video." After the 20-or-so minutes of video and animation, the rest of the show consists of more than six dozen bullet slides supported by video demonstrations of the products at work.

The show hit the road with a single technician/operator, who was hired to drive the truck equipped with draperies, an audio system, speakers, lavalier mics, a projector and a rear-projection screen. The schedule included two shows per week for three months. The overall response was extremely positive, says Kennedy. The only problem was getting surveyors to attend at some of the locations. Although the show sometimes drew audiences of 100 to 200 people, sometimes only 15 to 20 people showed up. "If we learned one thing," he says, "it was how tough it is to bring those surveyors in from the field when the weather's good." ■

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