Sage Digital ENDEC Impresses

You Get Digital I/O, Network Capabilities, E-mail, Auto Scheduler — and No Paper

BY AMANDA ALEXANDER

The Digital ENDEC from Sage Alerting Systems has a sleek look, digital I/O, network capabilities, e-mail and FTP capabilities, online interface and automatic scheduler.

◗ PRODUCT EVALUATION

Compared to what I am used to in an EAS unit, it is a much-needed improvement.

In an effort to gain early compliance with the new EAS/CAP rules, Crawford Broadcasting Co.'s Denver cluster recently received four Sage units.

My first impressions were good. They look crisp, the color is bold and they really stand out in our control rooms. I love the fact that there is no onboard printer or paper tape to mess with. The unit is 2 RU high and it has a small display with four buttons as the controls. Connecting it was no problem as everything was marked clearly. I was able quickly to transfer the connections from the old units to the new. I did run a new AES cable so we could connect the units up using their digital outputs, something we could not with the older units.

In addition to analog, the Sage units provide both digital inputs and outputs. This allowed us to remove one of the last analog sources in our otherwise all-digital studios.

This unit provides more features than I know what to do with, things I've never had on an EAS unit. While my experience is with our older TFT EAS 911 units, I suspect my comparison applies to other legacy EAS equipment as well.

NO PAPER RUNS

Most notable is the lack of an onboard printer and paper tape.

Jorge Carballo, at left, is the operations manager of 810 KLVZ.

For so many years we have had to deal with printouts that come straight from the unit. It could be a hassle at times because a unit might malfunction or we could have several activations, usually weather warnings, in one day (especially in the spring).

This would cause a long paper run in the control rooms.

I am not big into the whole "green" movement, but one thing I have never enjoyed is wasting paper. I am now able to print out all the tests and activations for a week on a single piece of paper and include any discrepancies. I then use this piece of paper as part of the station log.

Having access to equipment via the Internet is something we are seeing more of each year. The Digital ENDEC now gives us this capability with our EAS equipment.

For years we have had to rely on board operators or engineers to babysit the EAS units to make sure a test was sent each week. We are all human and we make mistakes. There are times when a board op gets busy or has a lapse in memory and forgets to run the weekly test (RWT). It's part of my job to check before the end of each week to be sure the RWT has run.

I am usually busy from the time I walk in the door until the time I leave work; it's not always convenient to go into each control room to check on our four stations to make sure we have received and sent the required weekly and monthly tests.

To top it off, we have never been able to have our automation system take care of EAS tests for us so one is never missed.

These units not only can be monitored from a distance with the click of a mouse, but can be used with an automation system.

We are unable to interface the Digital ENDEC via TCP/IP with our RCS NexGen digital media system; RCS and Sage are working on the drivers and code to make this work. Until then, we are able to rely on the unit itself to run the tests for us automatically with the built-in scheduler.

The scheduler allows for either a standard or randomized time each week to run a test. Although the schedule is randomized, you don't lose the ability to edit. If you

At work in the rack.

choose not to interrupt paid programming or would rather run the test only when a board operator will be present, you can make that happen.

Another way to not interrupt a program element is to use the commercial tally the unit offers. You can use a hold-off feature to prevent activations and tests other than EAN/EAT from being aired during commercial breaks. This will only hold off an alert for 15 minutes, though.

QUICK PROGRAMMING

Sage provides a free program with the unit, ENDECSetD, for programming and configuration via the Digital ENDEC's Web interface.

The program is run and options are set, then the configuration is saved to a file. I can then log as administrator into the Digital ENDEC's Web interface and upload the saved configuration file to the unit. Because it is a saved configuration file, it's easy to open up the file, change the settings to another station and save it under a new name for that station. This allows for quick program-

ming of multiple stations in a single market.

ENDECSetD provides a tabbed menu system, which makes figuring out what to do fairly simple. In addition to setting up call sign, FIPS codes and the like, we are able to set up e-mail addresses to be notified or FTP sites for upload when alerts come through or are sent out. The alerts only include incoming tests that might be forwarded as well as any test sent out by the unit. You can also tell whom to send the e-mail to.

With FTP you have one choice of where to upload the report; with e-mail, you can put in as many recipients as you want. I have set up our operation managers with this so they can better keep track of the sent tests for their station, as well as myself. With no paper tape to look at, a weekly test could otherwise easily be forgotten. The e-mail notification provides a good backstop if used correctly.

Along with these e-mails or uploads to an FTP site, you can set

up the unit to print to a variety of Hewlett-Packard network printers or a local (USB) printer, so if you wish you can have the unit print after each test.

The Digital ENDEC is designed so that when you go to the IP address you set for it, it takes you to a Web interface for the unit. There are two levels of access: operator and administrator.

The main screen shows the alert status. If there is an alert pending you can send it or kill it from this screen. You can abort sending a message and you can send a weekly test. All this happens with a mouse click.

On this Web interface you can view the logs, see a visual representation of the audio levels of the incoming stations and listen to a stream of the inputs through a media player. You can also upload firmware

updates, retrieve the settings from the unit saved in ENDECSetD or restore the new settings to the unit. To restore, you go into the downloaded program mentioned, save it to your local computer, and then from

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the Web interface you restore the settings, select the file to restore and upload it.

IMPRESSIONS

There are several things I really like.

The lack of paper would have to be number one. The Web interface has proven to be helpful by allowing printing of all a week's tests and activations onto a single sheet of paper. The fact that I am able to monitor the stations' tests from a remote location, such as my home, helps me to better keep track of what has been done each week and what still needs to be done.

The e-mails I and our operation managers receive have proven to play a key role in keeping us from missing sending out a weekly test. All this has made preparing and checking the EAS logs less time-consum-

ing. I also like the internal scheduler, and when the standards for CAP 1.2 take effect, I will be able to switch over with a firmware update instead of going out and spending thousands of dollars on a unit that has the newer standard. This will ease any worry that comes with updates.

There are a few things I do not particularly like about the unit.

Foremost is the password needed to send out a weekly test. On our older TFT units, operators just had to push a single button and the test would go out. While I realize the password is a security measure to guard against accidental activations, it should be an option that can be turned on or off as desired. In some installations the password represents an added burden for the board operator to remember and may lead to botched tests.

(Asked about this, Harold Price of Sage replied by e-mail, "The administrator can remove the user password by setting the password length to 0 on the front panel, or by entering a blank field for user password in ENDECSetD. That will allow an operator to send weekly tests and to forward pending alerts without entering a password.")

I also don't much like the waste of paper when the unit is set to print any test; it prints only two or three lines on an entire sheet of paper. I don't really see a way around this, but it still seems wasteful.

Compared to what I am used to in an EAS unit, the Sage Digital ENDEC is a much-needed improvement. The features added have already eased my monitoring of the units. No longer do I have to worry about a board op sending a test when needed. I am able to view the logs and if no test has been sent for the week I can remotely force one using the unit's Web interface. The fact that I can monitor all our units from a single computer allows me to breathe easier knowing if there is an issue, I will most likely be able to figure out the problem without leaving my desk.

While there are some improvements yet to be made, I firmly believe this is the unit to beat. The Sage Alerting Systems Digital ENDEC lists for $2,695 and is available from various dealers.

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