

Museum of Nature & Science in Dallas Utilizes LifeSize HD Video Technology to Provide Interactive Virtual Field Trips

After receiving a United Way grant of more than \$75,000, the museum implemented a new initiative to host virtual field trips to over 5,000 schools across the state of Texas

Organization

Museum of Nature & Science, Dallas, Texas

Established in 2006, the Museum of Nature & Science (MNS) is the result of a merging of three cultural institutions: the Dallas Museum of Natural History, The Science Place and the Dallas Children's Museum. A merger of this nature is unlike any in the nation, positioning the Museum of Nature & Science as an incredibly unique destination for families, schools and community members throughout Texas.

Along with its permanent exhibits, the museum hosts traveling exhibits and guest speakers. Additionally, the museum houses an IMAX® theatre, a planetarium and more than 200,000 items in its collections that cover approximately 1.7 billion years of the Earth's history. To continue its mission of inspiring minds through nature and science, MNS is mid-way through construction of a new state-of-the-art facility in Victory Park, near downtown Dallas, which is scheduled to open in 2013.

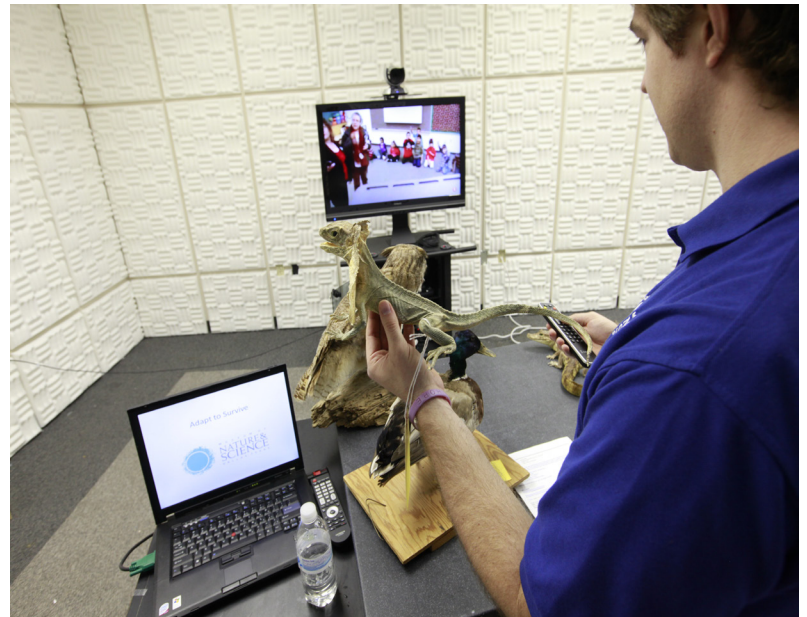


Photo Credit: Jason Janik/MNS



CHALLENGE

Geographic and economic restrictions made it difficult for some schools to visit the museum for field trips. MNS needed a way to bring the museum to them via virtual field trips.



SOLUTION

MNS purchased two LifeSize® Team 220™ endpoints and placed them on portable carts, allowing them to travel throughout the entire museum facility. LifeSize® Video Center™ is also used to stream/record field trips to share with even more schools.



RESULTS

Children are now able to experience field trips in new and exciting ways, never before thought possible. With related worksheets and activities, MNS provides students with hands-on, interactive learning experiences.



Challenge

Though the museum has a robust offering for in-person school field trips, decision makers wanted to reach past the museum's doors to an even broader audience. Geographic and economic restrictions often make it difficult for some schools to visit the museum and experience all it has to offer. As video conferencing technology becomes more and more prevalent in schools, the museum believes it is a natural step to utilize these types of resources to expand their reach and provide learning experiences to all children, regardless of location or financial means.

HD video collaboration is not a new idea to the museum. In fact, MNS previously applied for several grants, but with little success. However, with each attempt came renewed ambition and the grant writers continued to pursue funding. Finally, the United Way answered their call and awarded the organization a Community Impact grant of over \$75,000 to finally pursue their goal of enriching learning experiences for children through HD video technology.

Museum of Nature & Science's Key Requirements:

Lifelike: High definition picture quality that is so sharp, students will feel as if they are inside of the museum's walls.

Portable: The system must be able to travel throughout all of the museum's various exhibits with ease.

Scalable: No matter how large the exhibit or the museum's virtual field trip program grows, a video solution must flourish in every capacity.



"LifeSize met all of our criteria and it was great for our long-term goals. It far exceeded any other solution I evaluated."

– JUSTIN ASHFORD, DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY



Solution

The United Way grant did not specify which HD video technology to purchase, so the museum was free to choose a solution that fit their specific needs. The solution had to be of the highest quality so that the students would truly feel as if they were inside of the museum during field trips. Additionally, the solution had to be scalable and able to grow with the museum as it developed its new state-of-the-art facility. Finally, the solution had to be portable and easily navigable throughout all of the twists and turns of exhibition halls.

"I went out and looked at several different vendors, namely Polycom, Cisco and LifeSize," said Justin Ashford, director of technology. "In my opinion, LifeSize compared favorably from a performance and cost perspective. LifeSize met all of our criteria and it was great for our long-term goals. It far exceeded any other solution I evaluated."

The museum purchased two LifeSize Team 220 endpoints and placed them on portable carts. That way, the camera can follow a presenter in crystal-clear 1080p30 HD quality as they guide students throughout the museum's exhibits.



Photo Credit: Jason Janik/MNS



Results

The Museum of Nature & Science's "Sciencecasts" cover a range of topics, from the deep sea Planet Shark exhibit, to an examination of the mysteries of fire and ice, to a real-life fossil preparation paleontology lab. In order to schedule a field trip, teachers can log on to a third-party website to see all of the programs that the museum offers and make a reservation online.

Beyond simply viewing the tours, students are able to interact and have a hands-on experience during the field trip, as well. As part of the United Way funding request, students receive specialized field trip kits with worksheets, activities and crafts to help them understand the presentation on a deeper, more personal level. For example, students experiencing the paleontology lab receive fossil casts during their virtual field trip. During a point-to-point call, students can also interact with the museum's instructor and ask questions in real-time.

If a class cannot participate in a live field trip, they have the option to watch the presentation at a later, more convenient time using LifeSize Video Center, a solution that records and streams HD video conference sessions for 24/7 playback.

"I was a science teacher for ten years and I know how powerful good instruction can be," said Steve Hinkley, director of education. "I am personally proud to offer such rich learning experiences for these kids. We wanted video technology for so long and tried so many times. Now that it is here, the sky is the limit on what we can accomplish."

MNS is planning to conduct a formal working assessment of the technology in the summer of 2012 and hopes to report positive reception.



Photo Credit: Jason Janik/MNS



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