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Operational BI

The Case for Digital Asset Management

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Digital asset management, or DAM, has often been described as a process or a tool for organizing the creation, management, distribution, and archiving of rich media assets. In the DAM world, the term "assets" generally refers to rich media files such as images, photos, video and audio, whereas a "file" generally refers to email, documents, records, or scanned images. Creative agencies, publishers, broadcasters and media outlets have long realized the wisdom of utilizing DAM solutions in the production of their media assets including managing digital rights, conferring with clients, handling review cycles, retouching images, and editing photos and videos. Until recently, many other enterprises have relied solely on enterprise content management (ECM) solutions alone or with antiquated or feature-limited, homegrown DAM tools to manage both documents and digital assets.

However, the recent proliferation in demand for multimedia assets has seen the importance of digital asset management soar. Contributing factors include the pervasive use of rich media such as flash and video on web pages, increases in network bandwidth capacity, increased use of creative authoring applications such as Adobe Creative Suite 3, the complexity and large size of rich media such as video and graphic animations, and the requirement for sophisticated rights management functionality. These and other factors have led to a growing number of use cases for DAM, with nearly every industry needing a better means of managing their digital assets.

ECM & DAM: same family, different species

ECM solutions offer an efficient method to manage a company's static information. According to Gartner, ECM is really an "umbrella term" representing a vision and framework for integrating a broad range of content management technologies and content formats.

Because digital assets such as audio and video are considered unstructured information, industry experts consider DAM to be a component of ECM. Another point of misconception is the belief that document management (DM) encompasses DAM. This unfortunately leads to confusion when selecting the most appropriate solution for organizations. DAM solutions provide deep integration functionality with creative authoring applications such as Adobe Creative Suite 3 or Quark. While it's true that ECM solutions excel at managing "knowledge," DAM is King when it comes to managing the creation, editing, publishing and the distribution workflows around rich, multimedia assets.

Finding common ground

DAM and ECM share many important similarities, and as noted above, this may lead to the confusion about their best application. Both solutions offer workflows for managing files and provide audit histories and version control. They both use metadata for indexing, quick searching and retrieval. However, while the preceding functions may appear similar, it is important to note that DAM specializes in managing rich media assets such as video, audio, and photographs, while ECM is more suited to manage simple office files such as text and Excel documents, email, and scanned images such as faxes.

Understanding key distinctions

Perhaps the best way to understand the key distinctions between a DAM and ECM systems is to explore a specific example of its application.

For the creative professional, the content management solution might be able to manage the photo file type in its repository and enable limited metadata to be applied, but that's about it. Every time they need the photo, they must log into the DM system, check it out, open it up in Adobe Photoshop, make changes, save it to their desktop, open up the DM system, and add the new version to the repository. They can then email their colleague, notifying them of the changes, and hope that their colleague takes over the editing workflow from that point on. This process repeated over and over as necessary for other projects.

A DAM solution enables this same professional to open the stored photo in the DAM repository directly from Adobe Photoshop. Edits are made and saved directly through the native application. Once completed, an automatic email is sent notifying the changes that were made. Automated workflow processes facilitate the photo editing until it reaches its ultimate destination, which in this case is a magazine. Rights and permissions are applied at every stage of the workflow, and that very same photo (along with all previous versions) is available for reuse by other team members for different projects. Additionally, because this photo is securely stored in the DAM repository, its file size does not pose any sharing limitations, collaboration or file transfers.

The drive for digital asset management

It is increasingly common for businesses of all kinds to produce corporate videos and podcasts, e-Learning modules, YouTube clips, training materials, brand identity graphics, and sophisticated web content. Just as ECM systems harness knowledge, DAM systems bring order to the creative process involved with producing and leveraging these assets to their fullest extent.

As video assets become a de facto requirement for all businesses, this distinction becomes increasingly important. Specialized video workflow is needed.

A recent Forrester report noted: "With technologies like digital cameras and inexpensive authoring tools driving asset creation costs down, digital assets are greatly increasing in number and these rich media are being used across a wider range of enterprises. Inadequate management of these growing libraries, however, will make reusing and repurposing difficult, leading many organizations to take another look at DAM." Analysts at IDC concur: "IDC believes the digital asset management market will enjoy a compound annual growth rate of more than 25 percent during the period of 2006-2010, outperforming the overall content management market...and the software market as a whole, by a wide margin...DAM will remain an independent and lively market...given the specialized requirements of DAM solutions."

The benefits of DAM

Organizations deploying specialized DAM solutions typically realize the following benefits:

Generation of new revenue streams - Organizations derive new revenue by converting and repurposing existing content like bookcovers to promote their ebooks. Consider an image that costs thousands of dollars to create and recreate multiple times. With DAM, it can be reused.

Brand and messaging continuity - Built-in revision control, asset repurposing, and approval processes ensures organizations maintain consistent use and re-expression of digital assets, from brochures and corporate videos to web content.

Digital Media Management and Distribution - DAM systems enable the efficient organization, indexing, and distribution of digital assets. Advanced DAM systems provide a distributed architecture and multi-site asset storage, as well as the ability to provide multiple repositories for self-synchronization of both assets and their associated metadata. This means professionals can quickly and easily find and create what they need and distribute it to their intended audience with the click of a few buttons.

Global Web-Based Access - Organizations can distribute digital masters and other types of licensed assets via secure web access. Advanced DAM systems also provide asset ordering and fulfillment modules that can easily integrate with existing ecommerce and transaction servers. Not only can organizations quickly access their files from any web interface, they can create new revenue streams and "sell" their assets via virtual storefronts.

The best of both worlds

The above-described capabilities are vastly different from anything ECM vendors can offer, which is merely to incorporate media assets into a searchable ecosystem. True DAM systems are involved in all aspects of the creative workflow process, back-end content distribution and revenue generation through the repurposing of existing content.

Forcing ECM systems to handle the complexities of DAM systems only leads to frustration and disappointment. A better approach is to find a solution that best meets each distinct requirement within your organization. Then ensure that your core digital asset management needs are met with a best-of-breed DAM solution. Use your DAM solution to create, collaborate, and edit creative assets. Once that's done, simply select the best way to distribute them. ECM systems can't do that.

The bottom line

While many ECM vendors offer very basic DAM functionality, they have lost touch with the both the creative and collaborative process integral to the creation of rich media assets. ECM systems may support the ability to attach static images or short video clips, but the proper management of rich media assets requires a more sophisticated approach. Forward-thinking enterprises are choosing DAM vendor solutions that are designed to support the creative process while enabling the approval and distribution workflow capabilities they need. Selecting the best DAM solution leverages the expertise of both knowledge management and creative workflow process to their fullest extent, saving precious time and resources every step of the way.