

Why Direct Mailers Need

Digital Asset Management Systems

We answer the key questions that mailers face when purchasing a digital asset management system or service

To the layman, mail in the digital age may sound like an oxymoron, but direct mailer insiders have been using digital creative software and data to drive direct mail campaigns for years now. Database technology and variable printing capabilities can spur state-of-the-art targeted mail and even forge a path for prospects from the mailbox to the computer.

Having a strong digital asset management (DAM) system in place helps make high-tech mailings possible, connecting your business software—used to manage your lists, testing and tracking—and your creative software.

Ultimately, DAM allows mailers to better manage creative workflow so even the most intricate campaigns involving thousands of unique pieces of data can be rolled out seamlessly by designers, and assets can be reused in future campaigns or across other channels. From talking to DAM experts from leading software providers, we've developed this list of common questions that can help shape your DAM purchase decision.

What is a DAM system exactly?

A DAM system is software that houses digital assets—such as images, design templates and data files—anything associated with a mailing, and makes those items searchable and retrievable. Integration between the DAM system and your creative and business software streamlines workflow. Not only can you find the photograph used in the winning control cam-

paign from last year, but that photograph also can carry metadata like licensing rights, revisions and dates used, and it can be automatically reformatted for web or print with the click of a mouse.

Steve Sauder, chief technology officer of North Plains, a Toronto-based provider of DAM solutions, works with client Publishers Clearing House to reduce the number of clicks that it takes designers to put together an intricate mailing with hundreds of thumbnail images. "They have a big business control system that determines what magazines and products go on each page of the mailing, which basically amounts to a huge list of all the SKU numbers that need to go on a particular mailing. And before the designer even comes in the morning to work on this thing, we've gone through; communicated with that business system; and pulled together into a single location all of the images, graphics and pieces they're going to need," he details.

Do I need a hosted or enterprise solution?

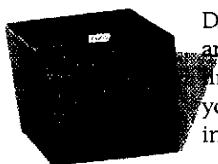
While a hosted solution costs less and can be up and running in a matter of days as opposed to the capital investment and weeks it might take to deploy an enterprise solution, most experts recommend mailers invest in their own enterprise solutions that live inside their companies' firewalls. When your new DAM system makes your mailing channel a rollicking success, the monthly hosting fees and lack of ownership over hosted assets can become a bigger financial burden in the long run.

"You discover very quickly that a hosted solution costs you a lot more money than you would have paid to have just purchased up front ... now you got this big investment and all of these designs that are sitting in the hosted solution, and the only way to move to the more affordable solution is to recreate everything," warns Phil Rose, product marketing manager for New York-based XMPie Inc., a provider of cross-media dynamic publishing. He adds that certain vendors will offer a desktop solution, which allows for a lesser up-front investment for one workstation and can easily transition into a large-scale enterprise deployment if needed.

How scalable is a DAM solution?

"The notion that software is ever complete is somewhat of an anachronism; software is continually evolving," says Damian Saccocio, vice president of marketing and product management for Rockville, Md.-based Artesia, the Open Text Digital Media Group. DAM solutions are no exception—and as new creative software, formats and marketing needs emerge, you will be able to adapt your DAM system. Artesia offers service and support to accommodate new software releases, and Saccocio says this is an industry standard. Systems also need to grow to accommodate mailer volume. "The system can certainly be built to grow gracefully from 10,000 to 100,000 to millions of assets," he says.

If you are using a hosted solution, Rose recommends you ask the vendor how its sys-



tem handles growth over time and whether it supports such multichannel technologies as personalized e-mail and websites, which are becoming more widely used along with direct mail. Check that your vendor works closely with or monitors your creative software maker, so you can achieve the most timely DAM upgrades to coincide with creative software upgrades.

What kind of preparation is involved?

The first step is to call an experienced DAM solutions provider and talk through your company's needs, budget and business processes. To be sure full integration is possible, assess what kinds of other software and systems you have in place. Before deployment, give some forethought to how you want to use your assets. "A little bit of thought going into what metadata you want to track associated with assets is really an important step in the process of a rollout, because you don't want to do too much [tracking], and you don't want to do too little," Saccocio shares.

Also, think creatively about what is in your files. Rose gives the example of a Sears campaign that used just the name, address and ZIP code to develop a mailing that showed a personalized map with the number of steps to the nearest Sears store. "All they had to do was know the person's ZIP code," Rose says. "Start thinking about your data. The more innovative you can be about it, the better. A lot of companies who are offering these services have a lot of experience doing this, and they can really help you."

How can I use the DAM system to generate more revenue?

DAM makes digital distribution, and on- and offline one-to-one communications possible. "The whole idea is to reuse media and personalize it and target it appropriately. So the media you are using in your printing, if you want to reuse that and connect it to a database of prospects, we can help facilitate that," Saccocio explains. His customers have used DAM systems to

move into international markets. Because they can deliver digital promotions, there's very little incremental costs.

Rose has seen companies use personalized websites to clean existing data and build prospect databases using two-way communication between the prospect and database. "You send them to their own personalized website, and you present them with what you believe their address to be and ... they can edit that data and send it back to you, and it automatically updates your database. The next time you perform a variable data print run, you've got the right data," Rose describes. He also says adding a refer-a-friend option can generate valuable lead information and append it to your growing list. "People start cleaning their database, because the more they get into it and start making data-driven decisions, they also start learning about the data that they're not collecting today—and what they need to collect to do the cool things tomorrow," Rose concludes. **IDM**

