One Size Fits All? Not in Multichannel Publishing

A general rule of multichannel publishing technologies is that no single technology fits all vertical market applications.

By Joseph Bachana

The type of technology used is governed by three considerations, namely 1) how structured the content is, 2) whether the publisher will allow for templated “mail-merge” of content and presentation vs. requiring lovingly handcrafted design layouts and 3) whether the publication is very short or long form, requiring rules-based imposition and pagination. The answers to these questions, in addition to the channels of publication other than print, will affect both the technology and the workflows that a company can utilize for multichannel publishing automation.

For instance, a catalog book publisher interested in implementing multichannel publishing technology will be concerned with the workflows associated with categorically organizing products, having them arrayed on handsomely designed page layout design templates, then possibly customizing the look and feel of those pages, depending on whether the catalog publisher’s primary goal is to drive automation or create a beautiful look-and-feel for the “book.”
Lorem Ipsum is simply dummy text of the printing and typesetting industry. Lorem Ipsum has been the industry's standard dummy text ever since the 1500s, when an unknown printer took a galley of type and scrambled it to make a type specimen book. It has survived not only five centuries, but also the leap into electronic typesetting, remaining essentially unchanged. It was popularised in the 1960s with the release of Letraset sheets containing Lorem Ipsum passages, and more recently with desktop publishing software like Aldus PageMaker including versions of Lorem Ipsum.

It is a long established fact that a reader will be distracted by the readable content of a page when looking at its layout. The point of using Lorem Ipsum is that it has a more-or-less normal distribution of letters, as opposed to using 'content here, content here', making it look like readable English.

Various versions have evolved over the years, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose (injected humour and the like). 'Lorem ipsum' will uncover many web sites still in their infancy. Many desktop publishing packages and web page editors now use Lorem Ipsum as their default model text, and a search for 'content here, content here' will uncover many web sites still in their infancy.
In any event, with catalog multichannel publishing, all content must be stored neatly in rows and tables within a relational database. This includes image references, product pricing, engineering/specifications data and marketing copy. The well-formed catalog multichannel publishing solution will then allow the user to package, impose and paginate the content in a print catalog format and sales sheets, while the data will be readily available for presentation on the company’s website and other digital channels. With direct mail, there is more of a need to drive higher-volume instances of content to customize the message down to the household level. While the direct mail multichannel publishing solution must also have product/offer data stored in a relational database, the publisher will generally use some form of high-volume data print engine to deliver the highly customized, highly targeted messaging not only in templated print format but e-mail as well. Ideally, these channels share the same unified marketing message. The same database row is serving up the content for Web, e-mail, print and so on.

When we turn to periodic literature, the picture changes somewhat. Journal publishers characteristically strive to decouple content from presentation, mainly to allow for extensive peer review with less of a focus on design. In contrast to the transactional nature of multichannel publishing in direct mail, journal publishing workflow and document management are prioritized.

As opposed to journal publishing, most magazine publishers still emphasize layout software programs to manipulate content on the print presentation layer. This creates challenges later in the workflow, when the magazine publisher wants to re-use the same content on the Web or in mobile devices or tablets. Essentially, the text and images that are used on the layout program are parked there with much relation to one another or to the logic of the published issue. Editorial workflow systems like K4 or WoodWing help separate the content (in InCopy) from presentation (in InDesign), but the applications being used are still print-centric for authoring and editing as opposed to media-independent.

Book publishers perhaps suffer the widest chasm along the continuum of multichannel publishing possibilities. While text-only books theoretically are the easiest to migrate into e-book formats, many of the world’s top publishers have only a fraction of their books in digital format ready to be sold through the major distribution networks. Typically, books are written in MS Word or some word processing tool and then flowed into a layout program with post-processing done at the prepress stage to prep the book for printing. The books are then sent to a production house for conversion. Scarily, the books often make it to production houses in PDF format and are then re-keyed by data entry people who have absolutely no understanding of the content they’re re-typing. That would be considered the opposite of a multichannel publishing strategy, wouldn’t you agree? (Yes, this article was written late in 2011, I had to double-check the date myself.)

The situation deteriorates further as you move along the continuum of books to highly designed formats and K-12 books, where layout is supreme. In those instances, the ability to leverage content parked on a QuarkXPress or an InDesign file can be quite cumbersome, especially when the file format might be from a very old version of one of those page-layout programs.

**Observations: Common Multichannel Publishing Technology Needs Across Markets**

If we look at the various types of publishers that aspire to deliver content across media channels, we see commonalities in what the organizations need. They are:

1. **Separate Content From Presentation:** Whether you have structured content like a product record/marketing tactic, an article that is structured with various elements (head, subhead, byline, body, pull quote, etc), or a book that is structured relationally (unit, chapter, subchapter, sidebar, etc.), in all cases the publisher needs to find a way to allow the author and the editors to work on the content unbound from the presentation layer. Think of the old days on the Web when we all worked on text within an HTML page before the advent of Web content management systems. Not particularly scalable, was it?

2. **Workflow Management:** The multichannel publishing platform will necessarily require some form of media...
independent workflow interface for editing and packaging content for distribution to the various media form factors. While a great deal of technology is available for structured content management, it is still amazing how few opportunities there are for creating and editing relatively “unstructured” channel-independent content (note that some people might find the term unstructured to be unsatisfactory. Is any content really unstructured at the end of the day?). The technologies do exist, although mostly they are focused on keeping editorial content separate from presentation throughout print workflows, as opposed to keeping editorial content separate for use in any channel at any time.

3 STORE THE CONTENT CENTRELY WITHIN A MEDIA-NEUTRAL CONTENT REPOSITORY: Whether the organization decides to centralize reusable content within some XML repository or in a relational database, a primary tenet of multichannel publishing technology is getting content in one place and in a standardized format. Without standardization, automating multichannel delivery is far more difficult, if not impossible.

4 SEMANTIC ENRICHMENT: Another important feature of a multichannel publishing strategy is that the content units or elements must be tagged with sufficient categorical information to search and retrieve, not to mention to “mash up” or package with other like content. Additional metadata can include rights/usage information across channels, as well as scheduling/publishing information if the content needs to be presented at certain times. With the huge variety of businesses that need to multichannel publish, most vertical markets use their own taxonomies to tag or even auto-tag content for repackaging and re-use.

5 MANAGE DIGITAL ASSETS: Some organizations forgo the centralization of digital assets. Instead, they just take the shortcut of either referencing image paths within their content repository or simply place the images on the page needing to be published within their layout program (whether it’s their print design application or their Web CMS). The best practices in multichannel publishing call for centralizing all digital assets (images, graphics, logos, interactive objects, video, audio, etc.) with appropriate usage rights applied. The assets are either stored in native format then instanced in real time in response to a request to deliver to a particular channel, or the digital asset management system is configured so that all appropriate versions of an asset are pre-baked within the system and referenced within the content repository.

6 DELIVERY MECHANISMS: Naturally, the multichannel publishing platform also requires software that will deliver the content to the intended channel, with the appropriate ancillary and related content, in the correct format/design, at the right time and to the right audience.

7 (OPTIONAL) ANALYTICS/BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE: While this is not necessarily a required characteristic of a multichannel publishing platform, with the increasing need to deliver content digitally via Web, tablet and mobile devices, publishers will strive to gather as much intelligence about the consumption patterns of their readership as possible.

TRENDING MULTICHANNEL TECHNOLOGIES
One rapidly growing area of multichannel publishing technology is in delivery to tablet devices. While tablet and e-reader devices have been available for decades, Amazon and Apple both drove the popularity with their respective approaches, the Kindle and the iPad.

Whereas on the Web, most publishers have struggled to monetize their content (essentially that publisher’s competitor was giving the content away, so they needed to as well), both Apple and Amazon essentially created a walled garden for content to be delivered through a proprietary distribution framework and custom operating systems. This gives publishers the opportunity to charge for content once again. However, while in the past a publisher could ostensibly reach the consumer directly through the Web, Apple and Amazon have insinuated themselves as intermediaries between the publisher and the consumer in the Apple Store and the Kindle Store, respectively.

MULTICHANNEL PUBLISHING TO THE TABLET
Organizations have several ways to deliver content to tablet devices.
CUSTOM APPS: The advantage of taking this approach is that the publisher controls the consumer’s interactive experience with content. The disadvantage is that each device manufacturer has its own SDK, so if the publisher wants to deliver content to Android, BlackBerry Playbook, iPad or other devices (Windows 8 tablets are due in 2012), they will face the redundant costs of developing an app to work on the different devices.

HTML5: In the past, rich media interactions in a Web browser were handled with plugins to the browser such as Adobe Flash and Microsoft Silverlight. The current generation of HTML, Version 5, now allows the Web browser to better handle video, audio and animations.

One major commercial benefit to publishers is that Web apps can now be delivered on tablet devices without the device manufacturer inserting itself as an intermediary in the transaction and requiring use of the manufacturer’s fulfillment system.

The other incredible boon of HTML5 is that it is (or soon will be) supported across all devices. That means that publishers will be able to create Web-based applications in HTML5 that can be delivered with one code base to maintain, as opposed to multiple apps. Still another benefit is that the consumer doesn’t have to worry about downloading and keeping plugins up to date on different devices or desktops.

HTML5 is still in its relative infancy, however, and portions of the HTML5 specification are still evolving. Also, while mobile browsers for the iPad and Android are all based on WebKit, which has full support of HTML5, earlier versions of BlackBerry and Windows mobile phones do not support HTML5.

Moreover, earlier versions of popular Web browser technology (Microsoft Internet Explorer 8 and earlier, for instance) do not support HTML5, which could be problematic if you are trying to build the brand interface across devices.

Finally, you cannot just port a Flash application, video or Web advert over to HTML5. The application must be remade, which can be costly and time-consuming.

PRIVATE DISTRIBUTION FRAMEWORK: Many publishers are playing catch-up without a tablet or multichannel publishing strategy in place. If they need to go to market quickly, then app and HTML5 development are not necessarily options. A few of the options for publishers that are using the Adobe Creative Suite of applications are:

ADOBE DIGITAL PUBLISHING SUITE

Earlier this year, Adobe released a suite of tools to let publishers convert InDesign files to a format that can be delivered to viewer applications on a variety of manufacturers’ tablet devices. The benefit to the publisher is that InDesign is already widely in use for layout production, so the publisher won’t need to invest in a tablet application or HTML5 development whatsoever to create and present content across devices. Rather, the publisher can simply deliver the folio issue to the branded content viewer application and let Adobe deliver it to all the proprietary devices.

Niche software vendor WoodWing released a competitive solution in 2010 (prior to Adobe releasing DPS) called WoodWing Digital Magazine Tools. DMT ostensibly functions in the same manner as Adobe’s solution, except that the technology works directly within WoodWing’s editorial workflow platform. Dozens of major publishers around the world are leveraging both Adobe’s Digital Publishing Suite and WoodWing’s Digital Magazine Tools and distribution framework.

The benefit of these software as a service (SaaS)-based solutions is speed to market over HTML5 or tablet app development. However, neither of these solutions is true multichannel publishing since content is not separated from presentation for re-use across channels, but rather is delivered together for rendering on various devices. For magazine publishers struggling to monetize their branded content within a unique design aesthetic, these two solutions are probably the most cost-effective and quickest ways to reach their consumers on any tablet.