Managing Digital Assets in the Cloud

By David MacLaren

Every day, publishers of all kinds and sizes are realizing that multichannel publishing is becoming more and more complex. Tablets, smartphones, e-readers and the like are opening up new distribution channels so fast that most publishers can hardly keep up, making it harder for them to maintain and continue monetizing existing channels like print and Web.

To adapt to and prosper in this multiplatform, multichannel environment, publishers need to be agile and adept at storing, organizing, accessing, formatting and distributing photos, illustrations, video, audio and text files (see sidebar on the changing face of the publishing industry). There’s simply no time nowadays to manually search, reformat and resize assets for each distribution channel.

Although publishing platforms are evolving, most publishers are still managing their content the way they did a decade or more ago.

THE CURRENT PICTURE

Publishers today are all over the board on how they manage their digital assets and many are cobbling together a number of technologies to manage their digital assets. We know one magazine publisher with print and online versions that stores text files online in Google Docs and images on disks and a local file server. Images are simply indexed by magazine edition and saved in individual folders with no formal naming conventions or keywords. This is more common than some might think and results in a lot of frustration for all involved—from pre-press to production and archiving. This magazine publisher has to painstakingly reformat and resize all of its images for its print and online versions using Photoshop, distribute the images via e-mail and then back up all the images and their various formats and sizes.

This process might be workable, but it’s not ideal in any way. Technology can easily streamline the workflow and automate many of the tasks, saving everyone involved a lot of time and frustration. Some publishers have already turned to traditional server-based (on-premise or co-located) digital asset management systems and are benefiting from increased operational efficiencies.

CONSIDER A DIGITAL ASSET MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Digital asset management systems dramatically improve how a publisher organizes, archives and accesses its digital assets and automates repetitive tasks such as reformatting and resizing, contributing to increased production efficiencies, lower labor costs and increased ROI on assets.

Whether assets are created or processed using PageMaker, InDesign, Acrobat, PowerPoint, Word, Excel, AutoCAD, Quark, Photoshop, Illustrator or any of a myriad of other software programs, a good digital asset management system can handle all the resulting file formats—storing just the source files—and converts, reformats, transcodes and resizes the assets on the fly based on the specific requirements of individual users, departments, suppliers, custom-
Even a small publisher can easily generate thousands of digital assets a year, all of which must be stored and filed securely. To some, that might mean filing cabinets, CD-ROMs, hard drives, local servers, cloud-based storage services or some combination thereof, any of which makes it difficult to locate, repurpose and share those digital assets.

A good digital asset management system will help a publisher organize and archive assets by automatically tagging them during upload with attributes such as file size, format, date created, equipment used, etc., while allowing the publisher to categorize each asset according to its specific needs, such as project, creative, usage rights, etc. A publisher should also be able to easily add keywords to each category and individual asset. These features make locating one or more specific assets fast and simple for any user.

In addition to helping publishers organize, archive and back up their assets, a good digital asset management system will enable publishers to set access and use permissions by individual user, user group, asset or category. This takes yet another tedious task out of publisher’s hands and allows the digital asset management system to police who has access to which assets and what they’re allowed to do with them.

All in all, a good digital asset management system should save a publisher, large or small, at least a few hours per week (if not per day) and can make their jobs, as well as those of their staff, suppliers and customers, much easier.

Now, I can hear some of you saying, “We love all of the things that digital asset management systems can do, but let’s cut to the chase, have you seen how much they cost?” I agree. Traditional digital asset management systems are indeed quite expensive to purchase, set up and maintain, and this cost has prevented many publishers from benefiting from the many features that digital asset management systems offer.

Installing a traditional digital asset management system requires a publisher to first purchase or lease the necessary IT infrastructure and then license the digital asset management system itself. For a midsize publisher, the upfront infrastructure cost would range from $20,000 to $50,000 and the system licensing fee would range from $30,000 to $75,000 for the first year and then cost 25 percent per year thereafter. Add the cost to maintain and support the system over time and the total cost of ownership is prohibitive to most publishers.
The beauty of the cloud is it’s user agnostic. Whether you’re a consumer or a business, it will make your digital assets available when you need them...

**Clouds in the Forecast**

But what if a publisher could avoid the large upfront infrastructure investment and software licensing fees, as well as the ongoing maintenance and support costs? Would this make it more affordable and enable publishers of all sizes to consider using a digital asset management system?

This is where cloud computing comes in. Over the past few years, Google, Amazon and Microsoft have developed cloud platforms that allow software companies to deliver the same functionality of traditional software systems in a more cost-effective and business friendly manner.

The cloud effectively transfers the large upfront infrastructure costs and ongoing maintenance and support costs out of the hands of end users and puts them squarely in those of the cloud provider. In turn, the cloud provider charges the software company on a pay-as-you-go basis and the software company delivers the software to end users on a software-as-a-service (SaaS) basis.

Cost savings of using a cloud-based application and paying a monthly SaaS fee versus going the traditional route of purchasing and maintaining the software and required IT infrastructure yourself is significant. A cloud-based digital asset management system for the midsize publisher described earlier would cost (all in) in the neighborhood of $2,500 to $5,000 per month.

Cost aside, a cloud-based digital asset management system offers many additional advantages:

1. **Fewer IT Headaches.** Using a cloud-based system means a publisher can focus all of its efforts on its core business and let companies such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft manage and support the IT infrastructure their digital asset management system requires.

   **Scalability.** Storage, usage or user ceilings become a thing of the past since a cloud-based digital asset management system can scale quickly and cost effectively to meet the needs of any publisher.

   **Accessibility.** A cloud-based system is accessible from anywhere in the world at any time of day from any Internet-enabled device.

   **Safe and Secure.** IT departments are extremely risk-averse by nature and by job requirement. In the event of a disaster, the IT department requires a strategy to maintain and in worst-case scenarios recover the company’s assets. Since cloud-based applications generally provide double to triple redundancy, the IT department’s concerns can be assuaged with the right application and cloud platform provider.

Cloud computing is rapidly changing how consumers think about saving and accessing their photos, videos and other files. Every day, people are giving less and less thought to where or how their files are stored and to just how quickly they can be accessed when and where they need them. Businesses are being similarly affected and it won’t be long before they expect to have the same access to their digital assets as consumers. The beauty of the cloud is it’s user agnostic. Whether you’re a consumer or a business, it will make your digital assets available when you need them no matter where you are, what time it is, or what device or operating system you’re using—all on a SaaS basis.

Without a doubt, all publishers should look to the cloud as it truly is the future for all businesses.

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**The Changing Face of Publishing**

- Amazon currently sells 143 e-books for every 100 hardcover books.
- 7.6 million iPad/iPhone owners are ready to pay for news and updates on their devices instead of buying a newspaper.
- E-book revenues exceeded $500 million in 2010 and 2011 year-to-date sales are up 165.6%.
- By the end of 2012, Gartner expects 20% of businesses to be completely cloud-based.
- By 2013, Gartner predicts that more than 25% of the content that workers see in a typical day will be audio, video and pictures.
- From 2010-2014, tablet sales are expected to grow from 19.5 million to 208 million units (selling that many PCs took 10 years).