IDEAlliance and the Future of Multichannel Publishing

IDEALLIANCE BULLETIN: How does IDEAlliance define multichannel publishing?

DIANNE KENNEDY: Multichannel publishing is not as simple as presenting the same content across media channels. Certainly storing content in a neutral format so it can be delivered across media channels is part of the definition. But the more critical part is the encoding of content with metadata so appropriate content can be selected for each channel. While a video may be a component of a magazine article, for example, it is not appropriate to be bundled for a print issue, but totally appropriate for delivery to a tablet, smartphone or the Web. Even the title of an article may morph based on the delivery platform. This is the essence of multichannel publishing.

IB: Why is multichannel publishing important to print publishers and printers?

DK: Of course, print production is most important to print publishers and printers. But they should see that moving from the single print channel across new media channels provides a great opportunity for new products and service offerings. Just as publishers should be updating their staff's skills and their tools and workflows to publish across channels, printers should be doing the same if they hope to develop new revenue streams.

IB: Which media delivery platforms does IDEAlliance consider crucial for printers and publishers?

DK: Actually it is more important to position the organization to develop workflows and employ tools that will enable media delivery to any channel. For now, clearly tablets and smartphones make the most sense. But the long-term vision of developing workflows that can deliver content to any channel should always be kept in mind.

IB: What are some of the main issues publishers currently face when they try to publish on e-readers, tablets and smartphones?

DK: One size does not fit all. Layouts that look great for a product (8.5 x 11) will not look great on a smartphone. Today we are forced to use tools that enable us to develop multiple, pre-rendered layouts for each size, aspect ratio and resolution. This takes a lot of work and is only an interim solution until a new generation of tools that support more dynamic layouts are available.

IB: What are the most important initiatives that IDEAlliance is working on relative to multichannel publishing and emerging digital publishing platforms like ebooks, smartphones and tablets?

DK: The foundation of multichannel publishing is establishing content in a standard, platform-agnostic format and managing that content, media assets and usage rights. The two key initiatives on this front are PRISM® (all about organizing content and media assets) and nextPub®.

IB: Briefly describe nextPub® and bring us up to date on what’s happening with this initiative. How will nextPub move publishers closer to multichannel publishing?

DK: The IDEAlliance nextPub® Initiative is the publishing industry’s technology incubator. We bring together publishers, advertisers, service providers and technology solution providers to map out the future. We are defining ways to efficiently publish across media channels. In some cases this includes developing specifications and guidelines. It also includes prototyping and holding forums to provide industry input to guide tools providers to develop the tools we need to make multichannel publishing easy and profitable.

IB: How do you think HTML5 will be important in multichannel publishing, and do you see more publishers taking a browser-based approach to iPad publishing rather than developing a native app?

DK: HTML5 holds true promise but at the same time is still quite fragile in terms of memory and caching limitations. Also, different browsers are implementing different parts of the HTML5 spec, so that is problematic. The IDEAlliance nextPub group has examined the promise of HTML5 in light of current realities. We have determined that HTML5 is the “way to go” for the future, with the browser serving as the “app.” U.S. News Media is committed to HTML5 and Hearst just announced a similar strategy. IDEAlliance is committing to HTML5 by moving the specification for nextPub XML Source content from XHTML to HTML5.

IB: Currently, the revenue model for publishing on the iPad seems to be driven by consumer subscriptions. Will advertising become more important for publishing revenues on tablets and other digital platforms, and what sorts of standards need to be developed before advertising on tablets becomes a viable source of revenue? Will Ad Insertion Order Confirmation specifications come into play here?

DK: The inclusion of single page ads for tablet editions will be part of Version 1.0 of the nextPub XML Source Specification, along with defining the metadata to specify a unique Ad identifier (Ad-ID), as well as the book- and production metadata. IDEAlliance held meetings in late September to begin to identify work items to support the delivery of Ads for tablet editions. Since Ad Materials for tablets are not compiled by the materials supplier but are in the hands of the publisher to incorporate in a digital edition, many factors are on the table for this Working Group. Challenges include defining how to package and deliver the components of an Ad to the publisher and how to specify the intent of the way those components will be pulled together by the publisher during production of the digital magazine issue. We also see a need to develop best practices for proofing and pre-lighting Ads for tablets as part of this activity.

IB: Stephen Pinches of the Financial Times said that in the future, publishers will “launch a website and it will adapt to all the different scenarios. There will only be one URL or one way of getting to the content and it will automatically adapt to any given circumstance in the best way.” A single code base is the next step in the evolution. How soon do you see that happening?

DK: I think this is a way out for magazine publishers, where we have to deal with design that is much more complex than we see in newspapers. HTML5 promises to be platform-agnostic, but that is not the case today and it is unclear when or if this will really happen. For now, the IDEAlliance nextPub initiative is positioning the industry to embrace the future whenever it actually becomes a reality. We are in the early days, so it is very difficult to predict whether we will experience the “agonies” or the “ecstasy” when it comes to HTML5.

IB: How would you advise publishers to proceed with multichannel publishing now? Should they consider some platforms initially before others? Should they wait until more standards emerge?

*Dianne Kennedy is vice president of Emerging Technologies for IDEAlliance, the parent company of the IDEAlliance Bulletin. Kennedy oversees and guides the development of emerging technology specifications and best practices to support platform-agnostic, cross-media publishing.