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DAM software limits encourage à la carte solutions

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by Nathan Lamb

Companies aiming to launch or revamp digital asset management software initiatives often begin that process by searching for a comprehensive technology to handle every conceivable task. But they often discover that few all-encompassing technologies work for digital asset management: Instead, à la carte tools and niche solutions remain the order of the day with DAM software, say experts.

Digital asset management (DAM) software provides metadata and other tools for storing and managing rich media assets, such as images, podcasts and video. The rise of content marketing and the desire to reuse digital content has many companies striving to build and manage DAM software libraries, but the market remains fragmented, with more than 50 vendors crowding the space.

DAM software can also provide a central repository for digital assets, but many companies are building data silo collections with multiple tools that are deployed with specific tasks in mind.

That's the case for Comedy Central TV channel's in-house marketing department, which uses two DAM applications and a content management system to handle logos, images and promo videos. Off-air studio director Kevin Gepford said it's a case of matching the best tools for specific tasks in the creative workflow. He listed cost and effectiveness as two reasons for a multi-tool approach.

"It's like the difference between a spoon and a fork," he said. "Sure, maybe you could get a spork — there are systems out there that do it — but I think we're not quite there yet in the DAM world, where you're going to find a system that meets all of your needs.

"It's easier to take a tool that solves one small problem," he added.

Data suggests that's a common perception with DAM software. A 2014 survey of 184 DAM users by the marketing firm Gleanster indicates that the average organization used at least three DAM and content management tools to handle digital assets.

Real Story Group analyst Theresa Regli described DAM as a highly specialized set of tools that are designed for specific tasks. While some vendors offer larger suites of

functionality, she said that’s often a case of licensing or purchasing separate technology and incorporating them into a common interface.

“I recently looked at a proposal from a large DAM vendor that wanted to sell 12 additional components with their core DAM,” she said. “Of those 12 additional components, 11 were actually different products.

“Some of the bigger DAM vendors try to incorporate that into the whole user interface so it’s one experience, but often that’s kind of clunky, because you’re really using something from another tool,” she added, at another point.

A DAM for all seasons?

Christo Datini is a senior archivist for Allied Vaughn, a Minneapolis-based firm that provides consulting and power-user services for companies launching or rebooting digital asset management initiatives. Having consulted with numerous companies looking to implement DAM software, Datini said users typically come into the process seeking a single system for managing digital assets, but many eventually determine that multiple tools are a better fit.

“I have found through my experience with ... various DAM clients that most out-of-the-box digital asset management solutions meet 85% of a given client’s needs,” he said. “While this is a very good start, it still requires the client to deploy — or interact with — additional smaller, more task-specific tools to complete the job in the most efficient manner possible.”

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Christo Datini
senior archivist, Allied Vaughn

DAM usage falls into three basic categories for Comedy Central’s promotional operations: raw assets, finished assets and collaboration projects.

Finished assets, such as logos, are housed in Extensis Portfolio DAM software. The primary goals are providing a central repository that’s widely available within the company while also ensuring brand continuity, Gepford said.

Raw assets, such as images from a promotional photo shoot, are stored in XDAM software. Only a handful of users are allowed to access this system, which handles the process of culling thousands of raw images to 50 or so approved shots that have been approved by all parties and can then be used for promotions.

The systems are siloed, but Gepford said that’s not an issue because the two repositories are accessed by different groups of users with different needs. Keeping them separate avoids mix-ups.

“All of the systems can handle all media,” Gepford said. “The important distinctions are the function they serve and who they serve.”

A custom enterprise content management system with some DAM capabilities handles collaboration projects. Built with the open source Ruby on Rails platform, the ECM system is used primarily for version control when building Flash and promo videos, a process that often requires dozens of approvals. Having overseen construction of the ECM after joining Comedy Central 11 years ago, Gepford said the priorities were ease of communication between team members and crucial features — such as file sharing — built directly into the dashboard.

“There are a lot of DAM and content management systems out there, but none of them really offer the complete set of tools we need for our particular workplace,” he said.

Tracking creative iterations and project management are not traditionally strengths of DAM software, so vendors often license that functionality or buy it outright, Regli explained. For those seeking an enterprise-wide solution for digital assets, she said it’s more of a strategy than technology, saying users need start by identifying the workflow and functionality they need and then develop a taxonomy, or site topic architecture, for labeling and track the rich media assets.

“You can’t go out and buy an enterprise DAM — that’s what vendors want you to believe — but in reality you need to connect a whole bunch of tools,” she said. “It’s a broader strategic decision that you have to put in place.”