Original Article

DAM as SaaS 2.0: Monetizing the content life cycle

Mukul Krishna

is widely recognized as an expert and thought-leader in the Digital Media industry, with his primary expertise being in the content management, video server, streaming and encoding markets. Krishna is responsible for the global digital media practice at Frost & Sullivan. He has extensively written on, analyzed and managed projects within this space. Apart from analyzing these markets, Krishna has also led consulting projects in these fields for key Frost & Sullivan clients. He is a regular speaker and panelist at industry conferences and gives quarterly webinars at Frost & Sullivan about the state of the digital media industry. Krishna also regularly participates in brainstorming strategy sessions with Frost & Sullivan clients to help them with growth strategies. He is on the executive board of editors of the *International Journal of Digital Asset Management* and has been recently been nominated to be a Fellow at the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, UK.

ABSTRACT Digital Asset Management (DAM) has evolved tremendously over this decade, and has spawned the emerging model of DAM as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS). DAM as SaaS has not only capitalized on the value proposition of the overall DAM market, but has also brought to the table some very compelling benefits that are unique to the SaaS model.

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The value proposition of DAM is based on eliminating the cost of lost or misplaced work, cycle-time acceleration, workflow integration, collaboration and maintaining brand integrity. Using the SaaS model for DAM, customers not only receive the above-mentioned benefits, in some cases faster than through an installed deployment, but are also able to free up valuable internal IT resources to carry out other productive tasks. Extensive service-level agreements and negotiated contracts also ensure continued stability of the business process with guaranteed uptime and the ability to bring the solution in-house if needed. Software updates are also provided on a continuous and iterative basis.

These factors have helped propel the DAM as SaaS market to grow at much faster growth rates than installed solutions. As seen in the revenue forecast chart in Figure 1, based on Frost & Sullivan's latest analysis this market is expected to grow at a very aggressive compound annual growth rate of well over 30 per cent, and achieve revenues totaling over a quarter of a billion dollars by 2013.

Though the increased use of digital media is a boon for the DAM vendor community, it is also a double-edged sword creating some significant challenges that have emerged owing to the rapid proliferation of digital media.

INCREASING FILE SIZES AND BANDWIDTH CONSTRAINTS

Apart from the increased creation and use of digital media, the average file size of content is also increasing. To take the example of images, both the file size and the sheer number of digital images taken have steadily increased each year. This is true for almost all media types from text to images and audio/visual content. The emergence and popularity of high-definition video has been further fueled by the availability of numerous devices to receive content. This burgeoning demand has created a huge infrastructure challenge. High-resolution images and video are storage and bandwidth intensive.

Coupled with the sheer increase in the amount of content being created and shared, this has created a tremendous strain on the

Correspondence:
Mukul Krishna
Digital Media Practice,
Frost & Sullivan,
7550 IH 10 West,
Suite 400,
San Antonio,
TX 78229-5616 USA
Tel: 210-247-3850
E-mail: mkrishna@frost
.com

Figure 1: DAM as SaaS solutions market: Revenue forecasts (World), 2003–2013.

existing delivery infrastructure, both upstream and downstream. Creative and marketing departments now deal with an increasing number of media types. A lot of the marketing collateral that is created has many different versions that need to be collaborated on during the production process. Internal and external stakeholders of the content need access to it in real-time. These processes create serious bottlenecks in the delivery mechanism, as most corporate infrastructure has not been set up to deal with high volumes of high-resolution content. Such scenarios impede the ability of marketing departments to be nimble and react to market dynamism.

INTEGRATION WITH CONTENT WORKFLOWS

A serious challenge facing organizations is the ability to integrate their content workflows with the DAM system. The DAM market is fast-growing and highly lucrative. This has prompted many vendors to enter the DAM market with solutions that merely provide basic indexing and search capabilities. By definition, a DAM system is a solution that enables the ingest, archival, search, management, repurposing, sharing and cross-platform publishing of content in a

seamless, collaborative and secure environment that is easily integrated with other third-party systems within the content workflow spanning the asset lifecycle from creation to delivery.

Many solutions that claim to be DAM at best provide some superficial integration ability, if any, with some of the tools of the content workflow. In most cases there are no Application Programming Interface (APIs) that are built into the other tools of the content workflow. For example, a person in the IT workflow looking for product images to post to the company web server would first look for the piece of content within the repository, save it locally and then re-upload to the web server. This creates needless latency and contributes to a lack of control of the asset, thus prolonging the process, and creating a greater risk exposure to a process that can be easily handled within the DAM systems through a Web Services framework.

LACK OF APPROVAL AND ROUTING PROCESSES

Another major issue facing most marketing and creative departments is the lack of any coherent approval or routing process. These processes are manually driven and require a lot of human intervention to keep track of what assets are

sent to whom for approval, and then manually entering the received comments into the system. This again creates a lot of process latency and exposes the workflow to a higher degree of human error.

DAM as SaaS 2.0. to the rescue — The Widen solution

The DAM vendor community is proactively trying to address these challenges. Widen Enterprises has been quick to realize that the best way to address the bandwidth issues caused by increasing amounts of high-resolution content was to put a node between the customer and the host server. This is very similar to the well-established Content Delivery Network (CDN) architecture used to ease traffic over the Internet.

CDNs emerged in the late 1990s as a piece in the Internet value chain combining hardware and software technologies to ease traffic congestion and handle peak usage. CDN vendors have established infrastructure comprising data centers, central access points and a wide network of servers in various regions that catalyze the delivery of content from the source to the end-users. The edge servers cache and distribute the most accessed content from the source. The CDN service then involves processing a request from the end-user and directing it to the server most proximate in the geographical network, instead of routing it to the original server. This helps in serving frequently requested content and reducing bottlenecks in the Internet delivery. This in turn reduces time latency, and helps content providers to manage and monitor their end traffic usage (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Content delivery network: Market definition.

Widen has been very innovative in using the same underlying principle of moving content as close to the end-users as possible without imposing burden on the originating content server.

THE WIDEN APPLIANCE

The Widen Appliance brings digital assets closer to the departments creating and using the digital media. The Appliance is an on-site hardware/software combination managed by Widen within the SaaS architecture. APIs allow for integration possibilities with desktop applications such as Adobe Creative Suite, generating a familiar window into the digital assets used by the entire organization. Widen manages the on-site service used in tandem with its hosted services to enable a fully replicated set of digital assets in different geographic locations supporting multiple creative operations and business continuity plans.

Digital assets are now served to users through desktop integration with the Appliance for immediate repurposing, enabling business continuity planning with fully replicated sets of digital media. The customer does not have to worry about maintenance of the Appliance, as Widen maintains the responsibility for maintenance and upgrades. This model helps in creating efficiencies on the creation-end upstream enabling the creative and marketing department knowledge workers to work at network speeds while the SaaS model supports global demand for digital media downstream, accelerating the entire workflow and eliminating bottlenecks.

In addition, Widen has created more modules to better address the end-user market needs. These enhancements include the following.

BACKDROP – PHOTOGRAPHY ROUTING/APPROVAL SYSTEM

Backdrop is a web-based photography management application for photographers and/or corporate marketing departments to route images for comment and approval. Images are delivered automatically to clients in the formats and sizes needed for immediate approval and feedback. Integration with Widen's DAM system provides creative teams a single point of entry for review, comment and distribution of images.

This eliminates repetitive administrative tasks in routing and approving images and streamlines time- and resource-intensive processes through automatic routing and on-demand file conversions. This enables users to share images with clients immediately via the web across multiple geographic locations thereby accelerating cycle time considerably.

PROJECT COLLABORATION

Widen Project Collaboration is a web-based document-approval application for routing documents to multiple individuals for review, comment, markup and approval. The online application consolidates all reviewer comments in one central location with time stamping on all actions. Automatic email notifications trigger tasks for selected users to review each version of the project by a set deadline. Final versions can be released into the digital asset library.

This process improves communication by allowing multiple stages of the approval process to take place simultaneously, while enforcing greater accountability with automatic email triggers and tracking of all activity in one location. This is significantly faster than traditional email routing and no attachments are sent, thus eliminating clogging of email servers and easing storage concerns on the desktop while eliminating printing and delivery costs. This again accelerates the approval cycle time.

DYNAMIC MEDIA BUILDING

Widen Dynamic Media Building provides self-service promotional resources to sales channels for the creation of localized promotions from a menu of brand-approved marketing content. Users point and click to populate printable media templates with predetermined images and text options. Printable media types include ads, brochures, direct mail, point-of-sale displays, sell sheets and proposals. The application pulls high-resolution photos and logos from the digital asset library. Text options can be pre-configured or allow users to enter their own text. Document previews are generated during every step of the build process. Users receive a print-ready PDF file in the end and have the option to deliver the file with print specifications to their preferred print vendor.

Dynamic Media Building enables sales channels to co-brand materials within brand guidelines, as well as the creation of professional quality media online without design expertise or creative software. The solution automates repetitive graphic design processes. Corporate campaigns can be extended through the repurposing of existing assets, thus providing a higher return on investment.

CRM INTEGRATION WITH SALESFORCE.COM

Widen is partnering with Salesforce.com to deliver the first-to-market DAM integration within the CRM application. Digital Media Organizer and Marketing Template Creation give Salesforce.com users a value-add experience in distributing digital media and creating marketing templates. This seamless integration allows organizations to manage digital media and deliver marketing materials to sales channels through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) portal. Dynamic creation and conversion of promotional materials can now get expedited to field representatives, vendors and retailers.

WEB SERVICES

Widen Web Services enables multiple systems to work together to accomplish departmental and organizational objectives. Widen technology operates as a platform to integrate with technologies that complement DAM. This full breadth of software services enables marketing and creative teams to be empowered through a seamless, integrated workflow from a single point of entry to a collection of best-in-class software technology and resources. Customers can now leverage the core competencies of multiple software applications through one window.

Revisiting Reebok – Mapping the asset life cycle to productivity

Reebok is a classic case study to see how an asset's life cycle can be managed from creation/acquisition through to delivery (Figure 3).

As deploying Widen's DAM solution Reebok has seen all sorts of benefits that include:

- A significant increase in requests for digital samples rather than physical samples that has helped eliminate a lot of traditional costs;

Figure 3: The asset life cycle.

- Increased collaboration and significant decreases in time-to-market; and
- Increased new revenue generation by empowering field sales with up-to-date content in real time.

Today these benefits are manifested across the entire life cycle

CONTENT CREATION/ACQUISITION

Widen has deep roots in the prepress industry. This strong legacy is brought into play through Widen's photography services. The digital sampling process begins by photographing items.

CONTENT REPURPOSING

Prepress operators create base assets from which colors and graphics can be applied to create digital representations of physical products that in many cases have not even been created yet. For example, from one photograph of a National Football League (NFL) jersey, Widen can create all 32 teams, home and away, for each player at the snap of a finger.

This is a significant cost and time saver for companies that are looking at building branded marketing collateral for similar products or just virtually testing the marketability of a product idea.

Before deploying DAM, Reebok had the NFL account with 32 teams and 10 000–15 000 images. Reebok would produce 30–40 physical samples, which were sent directly to retailers. These samples were prone to getting lost and Reebok's bills to the recipients would rarely get paid. Reebok's staff was small, and not expert in managing digital assets.

After deploying DAM as SaaS through Widen, Reebok has been able to scale and add the NBA, MLB, NHL and NCAA, including 600–700 teams and now over a whopping

200 000 thousand images. Reebok at an average now saves \$50 to \$60 per image for a physical sample that then does not need to be produced. Reebok's customers in turn are also saving roughly \$100 per image that they use versus producing it themselves from a physical sample.

CONTENT STORAGE

After prepress services are complete, the images are uploaded to the DAM system and tagged with Metadata. Widen hosts six different appliance locations throughout the United States with fully replicated sets of data enabling on-site designers to work at network speeds.

This repository acts as the nerve center through which content is checked in, stored, managed and checked out. This eliminates the costs associated with mundane and unproductive activities such as searching for assets that in a traditional siloed environment might well be misplaced or – worse – lost.

Reebok's Stock Keeping Unit (SKU) base has expanded from 100 000 in 2002 to over 600 000 in 2007. The company has seen a huge decrease in requests for physical samples, while seeing an explosion of requests for digital samples. Reebok deployment of DAM as SaaS is a great example of how a company with a critical need has been able to maximize value and minimize cost.

CONTENT DELIVERY

Some of the largest online retailers in the world, such as Eastbay, Dick's Sporting Goods and The Sports Authority, obtain their images from the Reebok DAM system hosted by Widen. Brand integrity being a paramount concern with a company like Reebok, the system as described makes it easy to get the Reebok brand approved, maintaining a consistent look and feel across multiple online and catalog vendor channels.

In 2007, with over 600 000 SKUs, Reebok was looking at a third of that or 200 000 digital samples that were downloaded. If they were still working with physical samples that would have meant a \$10 000 000 cost to Reebok and an additional \$20 000 000 cost for their customers. If it wasn't for the DAM as SaaS system deployed by Reebok, the company would not have been able to cope with this sort of demand.

For more information, a video interview with Doug Rammel, former CIO of Reebok who was instrumental in the DAM as SaaS deployment at Reebok, is available at www.widen.com/videocasestudies. At the link readers can also find an interview with fansedge.com, a user of the Reebok system.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The management of assets spans the entire content life cycle from creation through delivery, and is not a point solution. The value proposition of a properly implemented DAM system is immense, and includes:

- Elimination of the cost of lost or misplaced work.
- Cost savings on real estate by moving to digital storage instead of physical archives.
- Cost savings through the elimination of maintenance of physical archives.
- Cost savings through the elimination of physical delivery.
- Time reduction in the business process through accelerated search and retrieval, and increased real-time collaboration of assets.
- Reduction in time-to-market through digital delivery.
- Repurposing of content; and
- Repurposing of saved resources.

The value proposition is no leap of faith, but has been proven time and again through deployments like those at Reebok. To remain competitive, organizations across verticals are

clamoring to build efficiencies. This has changed the customer perception of DAM from 'nice to have' to 'must have'.

The ability to now provide an essential tool like DAM through a SaaS model further augments the flexibility that this solution provides. Customers need not go through the integration pains or deployment delays that plague installed solutions. Through SaaS, customers can start reaping the benefits of DAM in a matter of weeks rather than months. The scalability of these solutions allows these benefits to be reaped not only in the Small and Medium Businesses (SMB) space, but also across organizations of all sizes – across vertical markets.

With digital content being ubiquitous across all manner of organizations, the role of effective DAM has become that much more important, making the DAM system the nerve center of any workflow. DAM not only allows management of an organization's digital assets, but is also the hub that integrates traditionally siloed systems into a seamless workflow.

As technology continues to evolve, organizations need to be cognizant of emerging needs and future-proof themselves to stay relevant and competitive using the tools that empower their processes. With increasing burdens placed on internal IT departments, DAM as SaaS is just what marketers have been wishing for. It not only allows them to be active and nimble, but also frees up valuable IT resources. The keepers of corporate branded assets are finding themselves in good hands with SaaS DAM.