Cycle Time

Approval workflow: Fixing the weakest link

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Most experienced DAMsters know that a ‘repository does not a business solution make’. Rather, many things must come together – good reusable digital media files and templates, well-formed metadata that someone has taken great care to uniformly apply, trained and engaged users and so on.

In this installment of Cycle Time, we will address a persistent and generally unresolved issue in many DAM service groups. First, let’s start with a key finding from our 2010 Survey of Best Practices in DAM. Figure 1 depicts three classes of DAM-using firms, consultancies and agencies, indicating that less than one-third of all firms use some form of online review and approval.

So what? What makes online approval so important?

In our research and benchmarking practice, we use a life cycle more for rich-media content (see Figure 2), identifying three main phases that

each entail many person-review cycles and peer-to-peer interactions.

The *Development* phase of the Rich-media Content Life cycle starts with Planning – an activity typically not addressed as an interactive service or application module in most DAM systems. Yet, the *Planning* activities may include a great deal of rich-media content, some internally generated (graphics and videos) and much of it externally generated (photos, image scans, screen grabs, screencasts, web pages and YouTube videos) of a mash-up gallery of market intelligence.

The *Ideate* activities often start with Creative Briefs and ‘swipe files’ of tear sheets, digital photos and video montages – all raw inputs to the creative problem-solving process that includes many open-ended cycles of collaborations, discussions and debates ending in a decision to stop or approval to proceed. Few and any DAM systems manage or support these

Does your DAM group or supplier use a formal online system (not necessarily involving your DAM) for managing the review and approval of creative work and collaterals?				
	What is your ORGANIZATION's role in the DAM Ecosystem?			Response Totals
	End-use firm	Independent consultancy	Marketing or media services firm or ad agency	
Yes	32.9% (23)	23.1% (6)	36.6% (15)	32.1% (44)
No	35.7% (25)	53.8% (14)	24.4% (10)	35.8% (49)
No but plan to	15.7% (11)	15.4% (4)	26.8% (11)	19.0% (26)
Does not apply	15.7% (11)	7.7% (2)	12.2% (5)	13.1% (18)
Column totals	100%	100%	100%	100%
Answered question	70	26	41	137

Figure 1: Online approval systems.

Note: Less than one-third surveyed use some form of online approval.

Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget • Discuss • Schedule • Assign 	Spreadsheets Presentations Documents: Creative Briefs Multimedia
Ideate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research • Write • Brief • Discuss 	Presentations Reports Spreadsheets Galleries & mash-ups
Create	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sketch • Buy/clear art • Accept • Compose 	Compositions & sketches Mash-ups and storyboards Copy drafts Rough cuts and layouts
REUSE		
Assemble / Edit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search • Insert/place • Review (multiple) • Edit/refine (multiple) • Approve 	Media assets Layouts
Manage / Distribute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ingest • Tag • Authorize • Publish 	Media assets Layouts Fonts Dynamic artwork & docs
Localize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrieve • Deconstruct • Adapt/edit • Re-assemble • Review (multiple) • Approve (multiple) 	Copy text Structure/templates Media assets Tech specs/color profiles
ENGAGEMENT		
Produce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEO/provision • RIP/transcode • Layout/distill • Manufacture/detail 	Web pages with videos Printed collateral Newsletters Packaging with POP displays
Consume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Browse/download • Print/play • Read/view • See/buy 	PC or mobile TV Printed publication/PDF Packaged good
Analyze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capture • Route • Interpret • Summarize 	Galleries & mash-ups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web sites • Catalogs • TV spots • Social net pages

Figure 2: Rich-media Content Life cycle.

Note: Most DAM provide some but limited support of Approval Management, typically in the mid-phase activities of Assemble/Edit, Manage/Distribute and, to a much lesser extent, Localize activities.

Ideate activities beyond a simple library of pre-existing content and digital assets.

To the extent that the firm has integrated its DAM with creative desktops and applications, the *Create* activities constitutes a mainstay online

DAM experience. However, most DAM groups have not automated the briefing, feedback, discussion, debate and approval activities for most of the work-in-process of the *Create* workflows. Moreover, fewer still have automated the art and

creative procurement processes – another source of metadata and control.

The *Reuse* phase of the Rich-media Content Life cycle defines much of what many consider DAM – a discussion that we do not need develop here. However, most firms in the survey have not automated the *Localize* activities – a subject of a Cycle Time column more than 2 years ago – and still a wide-open frontier for most firms. More on this later!

The *Engagement* phase of the Rich-media Content Life cycle represents the ‘application of media and digital services to the experience of customers (and other stakeholders)’, defining in large part how firms attract, serve and keep profitable customers for life.

In past Cycle Time columns, we also addressed many of the core ideas of Customer Engagement, including the emergence of a new

class of digital assets that we called Customer Engagement Objects.

In future columns, I expand this idea of compound media objects that one has connected to the Internet, thus setting the stage of a new level of feedback.

However, I want to close with a short note about the *Analyze* activities, suggesting that an integrated digital approach of review and approval should start with the capture of ‘analytic’ assets, thus informing the *Ideate* phase with multimedia inputs, replete with collaborative feedback, discussions, debates and mandates – powerful and cogent metadata or as some will now fashionably describe as para-metadata.

Think of Analytic Assets as a mash-up of web pages, videos, scans, images and analytic discussions, nicely packaged and thus controlled as a digital asset. Yes. Onward!