Cycle Time

Activity lifecycle of digital assets

Michael Moon

is President of GISTICS and a lecturer and leading authority on digital asset management, automation of marketing services and multichannel brands. He has delivered more than 300 keynotes, presentations, executive seminars, workshops and web-based seminars around the world. His book *Firebrands: Building Brand Loyalty in the Internet Age* has been published in 13 different languages. He also conducts primary research through surveys and one-to-one interviews. Michael and his team advise international-brand corporations on multichannel strategies for brand management and digital asset management, including Amway, Boeing, Disney, Frank Russell Company, Gap, General Motors, FCB, Hallmark, Hasbro, Leo Burnett, Nokia, Sanoma WSOY, TeliaSonera, Thomson Corporation, VF Corp and Warner Bros

Journal of Digital Asset Management (2007) **3**, 112–115. doi:10.1057/palgrave.dam.3650082

What makes a digital file an asset? A simple question and a deceptively simple answer: reusability. What makes digital file *reusable*? Well, the answer becomes more complex: whoever created the digital file, or decided to reuse a particular file already suited for reuse, took a few extra steps to ensure reusability: placing the file in a well-managed file area (DAM repository or file server) and creating a database record of that file with descriptive metadata. What steps do master DAM practitioners take to ensure the greatest levels of reusability?

In this column we will provide an update, more comprehensive treatment of what we call the Activity Lifecycle of Digital Assets, defining seven major phases (Ideate, Create, Manage, Distribute, Localize, Consume and Analyze–Consume) and 7–13 discrete activities that play a part in maximizing the reusability of a digital asset. This lifecycle model provides an effective way to visualize how your firm spends time and money creating these digital assets:

- Source Assets
 - Illustrations, photos, graphic designs, templates
 - Copy-text and XML style sheets
 - Translation memories for N number of languages Packaging Artwork (3D CAD, 2D die-lines, label and box art, technical data, guidelines)
- Manuals
- Licensed Artwork (partner brand, celebrity spokesperson, special ingredients)
- Video
- Streaming Media
- Web Content

- POP
- Collateral

TYPICAL DIGITAL ASSET OF A MARKETING SUPPLY CHAIN

Activity lifecycle of digital assets

As you examine the defined phases and activities below, master DAM practitioners ask these simple and annoying-to-answer questions by individual type of digital asset:

- With respect to the particular activity (eg Review Proofs of the Create phase), how do you get the item (to proof)?
- How do you know to look for it?
- Where do you look?
- When or how often do you look?
- How do you know it's the right version?
- How do you get it? (Request, email attachment, download, DVD by overnight express)?
- Who's accountable for providing the correct version and by what means of fulfillment?
- How many times a week do you perform this task?
- How long does it take to perform this task?
- How many times does the initial "find it" task fail to produce the right result?
- How many times do you typically repeat the task to get the right result?

You may well imagine that asking each of these questions of 20 or so users or workers across all seven phases and 70 or so activities produces quite a shock, calling attention to the core realization: DAM means digital workflows. Our team just spent an entire week asking a

medium-size marketing department these questions. Until we asked them these types of questions, they thought honestly to themselves, that they had a pretty good or at least good enough workflow. Ha! We used the term “Fish don’t know wet!” to describe how many, many otherwise capability and productive organizations take many things for granted, so taken for granted, that they cannot imagine anything but miniscule incremental changes and benefits.

I. Ideate comprises those activities normally associated with concept development or communications planning. This means that Ideate often comprises several unstructured, nonlinear activities among product management, marketing and creative teams. Each of these activities describe in general detail and sequence what we call Ideate phase of digital asset management. Each organization will conduct its operations as some variation of this general theme, adding or deleting specific activities.

1. *Research* activities describe the gathering of facts and support materials.
2. *Specify* activities involve the definition of a new product or its marketing communication — the who, what, where, etc.
3. *Quantity* activities apply rationale to the marketing of a new product or communication project (such as a promotion).
4. *Draft proposal* activities entail the development of marketing plan or creative brief.
5. *Review* activities describe the often-iterative process of editing and reshaping a final proposal to launch a new product or campaign.
6. *Propose* activities involve a presentation to management, discussion and review of project particulars.
7. *Authorize* activities often entail a purchase requisition or formal budgeting procedure.

II. Create phase of the DAM lifecycle emphasizes the production of digital assets and final-form expressions of those assets also known as “content.” The Create phase consists of 13-plus activities that begins as an unstructured, nonlinear collaboration and, as its progresses, becomes a linear, structured workflow. Industry

workflow benchmarks indicate that reviews and approvals stand out as the most inefficient and time-consuming effort, followed by difficulty of finding and retrieving the correct version of a work in process. The Create phase with DAM also emphasizes extensive “reuse” of preexisting media components, text, publishing templates and automation routines.

1. *Standardize formats* activities entail the development and systematic use of standards for file formats, colors, fonts and layouts.
2. *Compose-author* activities comprise the primary work of graphics designers, animators and video post-production.
3. *Review* activities entail the receipt and inspection of artwork as well as one-on-one or small-group discussions.
4. *Annotate* activities append comments and mark-up instructions to physical or digital copies of artwork.
5. *Approve* activities comprise the formal or informal authorization to proceed with development of finalized artwork.
6. *Create templates* activities entail the development of design or publishing templates with style sheets and automation scripts.
7. *Digitize media* activities entail scanning of physical art and photos or the ingestion of raw video footage.
8. *License media* activities consist of reviewing various stock media catalogs and purchasing desired items.
9. *Gather media assets* activities involve searching email attachments, desktop and workgroup storage systems, DVD/CDs, and DAMs.
10. *Proof* activities entail the pre-flight-ing or processing of final artwork, production of physical or digital proof sheets or movies and delivery.
11. *Review proofs* activities entail the receipt of physical or digital proof sheets or movies and close inspection for any defects or mistakes.
12. *Annotate-mark up* activities append comments and mark-up instructions to physical or digital proof sheets or movies.
13. *Approve finals* comprise the formal or informal authorization to publish or release finalized and proof artwork and final-form materials.

III. Manage phase comprises database administration and asset-activity analysis. This phase also requires at least one “librarian” or media operations analyst who sets up and manages a list of search keywords and related metadata (specialized descriptions for each asset). For international operations, the Manage phase multiplies in complexity due to multiple languages, file formats and fonts.

1. *Ingest-upload* activities move high-resolution source digital files into a DAM system, often using specialized media handling or transport systems.
2. *Index-catalog* activities entail the creation of structured metadata and lower-resolution versions of each asset; this may include identifying and profiling constituent media components or layers within each compound asset, document or video clip.
3. *Caption-annotate* activities entail the creation of unstructured descriptions of each asset, describing the contents or meanings depicted in each asset.
4. *Store* describes traditional database management and administration activities.
5. *Clear rights* activities research and define the particulars of intellectual property rights of an asset, including how various classes of users might use or modify an asset as well as any geographic or brand-use restrictions.
6. *Declare entitlements* activities express user rights and permissions for each asset, codifying business rules within a DAM system.
7. *Track usage* activities analyze who used which asset as well as who did not use an asset or portfolio of assets and did not.
8. *Audit* activities not only certify compliance with risk management and regulations but also establish economic returns for reuse and automated workflows of DAM.

IV. Distribute consists of many commonly understood and self-explanatory activities.

1. *Search* uses predefined and free-form keywords and structured forms with pull-down menus and check boxes, often optimizing search results for the performance of a single task by a particular class of users.

2. *View* depicts thumbnails or small low-resolution versions and related descriptions also called metadata.
3. *Render* describes a service common to DAM and uncommon for most file management, file transfer and content management systems: the just-in-time personalized production of a visual or multimedia asset to the specific formats and technical parameters of a particular user’s request.
4. *Encrypt* describes the application of anti-piracy provisions such as watermarking and specialized access methods to each asset that a particular user-class has requested to download or play.
5. *Collect assets* activities entail the physical assembly or gathering of requested assets; in some cases, this may require retrieving assets from near-line tape libraries or DVD-based juke boxes.
6. *Package assets* describe the placement of individual assets within a container, including a compressed Zip-file, DVD, CD-ROM or videocassette; this may also include production of labels, freight documentation and air bills.
7. *Download package* describes the simple transport of a Zipped container by FTP or its browser equivalent HTTP.
8. *Promote availability* consists of direct promotion and incentives for reusing assets among various types of uses, relying on newsletters, screencast video demonstrations of power functions and departmental usage reports.

V. Localize phase consists of self-explanatory activities that may take place concurrently in 20–80 regional offices or agencies. DAM-enabled organization harness specialized project dashboards, remote proofing and color matching tools, translation memories, and automated publishing systems to reduce localization costs by as much as 60 per cent.

1. *Interpret strategy* activities constitute a collaborative and iterative process, placing great emphasis on time-shift communications and interactions.
2. *Locate source copy* activities emphasize identification of what we call “one version of the brand-marketing truth” — a canon of key words, phrases, technical data and copy.

3. *Regionalize imagery* activities entail photo editing and processing — a highly specialized skill normally found in creative agencies and not local marketing groups.
4. *Create localized content* activities reexpress core brand concepts and copy to meet local market and regulatory requirements.
5. *Copy fit and rework* place localized copy and images within a reconfigured space on packaging or collateral pieces.
6. *Validate* activities mirror the review and proof activities of the Create phase, often using online collaboration and workflow management tools.
7. *Format and publish* activities emphasize the development of final artwork that meets the technical specification of local market production house, printers or publishers; mirrors the review proofs, annotate-mark up and approve finals activities of the Create phase.

VI. *Consume* phase consists of several self-explanatory activities as well as a few that need definition.

1. *Order* activities describe the commonly accepted practice of specifying wanted items, using a shopping cart or a pick list.
2. *Process transaction* activities execute the order.
3. *Version-acquire* activities entail the *ad hoc* formatting of a file upon downloading it.
4. *Decrypt-unlock* activities extract the downloaded or DVD-based file(s) from its security envelope or compressed package.
5. *Print or play* activities represent a self-explanatory term.
6. *Customize* activities entail the automated personalization or customization of file, often incorporating live data from databases or customer inputs.

7. *Process royalties* activities represent an often complex, multi-party accounting workflow.
8. *Warehouse-dispose* activities involve inventory management or responsible disposal of both hard goods and digital files.

VII. *Analyze-Archive* phase consists of activities of analysis and forward-correcting advice for the creation of more usable or valuable media assets as well as set of self-explanatory activities required for regulatory compliance (Sarbanes–Oxley, etc).

1. *Query* activities emphasize fact-finding usually in a forensics mode, identifying what happened and fixing a meaning or value to what happened.
2. *Analyze* activities examine the DAM system as a whole and the value of various types of assets and asset-management processes.
3. *Report* activities call attention to economic and qualitative added-value of DAM and particular assets over their lifecycle.
4. *Certify* activities emphasize corporate requirements and policies for risk management and regulatory compliance.
5. *Journal* activities detail the inventory of items designated for long-term storage or scheduled removal and destruction.
6. *Offline-archive* activities may entail storage in tape or DVD libraries; in some cases, these activities may include long-term off-site storage.
7. *Destroy* activities represent the secure and certified removal an asset from the DAM system and its permanent destruction or erasure.

Please write or email us about your experience in modeling “current state” workflows of your organization and how models such as the Activity Lifecycle of Digital Assets or something like it helped you to “get the fish to feel the wet.”