Networking: Managing assets -- digitally

September 19 2005

The networking of digital asset management (DAM) systems is the latest technology trend for the creative industries -- publishing, advertising and entertainment -- and is improving overall corporate performance there.

Jennifer Neumann, chief executive officer of Germany's Canto Inc. and the keynote speaker at the Seybold Chicago seminar in Chicago last week, said that the databases of photos, images and other digital content are being integrated with other networks, from sales, customer service as well as marketing.

Other speakers during the seminar for publishing-industry professionals -- held at the Hyatt Regency hotel at the McCormick Place convention center -- voiced similar themes. Stand-alone digital asset management systems are not enough anymore for total management, experts said.

"The trend to automate all work steps and to integrate various, data-centric information technology systems of a company is becoming quite common," said Neumann. "The immense pressure to increase efficiency, eliminate errors and reduce time to market, significantly, are driving the trend."

Neumann noted that "digital assets" are commonly found in marketing and communications departments but that integrating those assets strategically would actually take digital asset management to the next level. "Strategic planning is required for these system integration projects," said Neumann, which she characterized as enterprise content integration projects.

There are problems for many companies in reaching this goal, however, she noted. This kind of planning is long term -- something that conflicts with the need to reduce financial and operational costs, now, and the typical approach, which seeks to "achieve system installation in a short time," she said.

Neumann recommended that companies take a tactical, even pragmatic, approach. "Start small, and grow as different systems are integrated," she said.

According to Theresa Regli, director of content management at Moldecular Inc., who moderated another seminar on asset management strategies at the conference, publishing executives need to build a case for an asset management system architecture. This involves understanding the company's goals and objectives, strategic capabilities, as well as the IT architecture. Asset-management projects are not simple, she stressed. They are cross-functional and require a focus on "methodology" before they can be implemented.

New software coming to market may help facilitate that -- if embraced by the publishing industry. According to Jurgen Kurz, senior vice president of publishing products at Quark Inc., who spoke at the seminar last Monday, publishers, ad agencies and corporate communications departments are all looking for "integrated" solutions that enable them to manage documents created in an array of media formats. "You need tools to work together productively and efficiently," said Kurz. "But since publishing environments are heterogeneous, tools can't be proprietary."

Neumann noted that often those who try to implement digital asset management systems find that workflow is choking, but they don't know how to diagnose the problem and solve it. Often, the upstream process may be the problem, she said. If digital asset management systems are

"better integrated" into other workflow processes, the problem may be solved, said Neumann.

Another issue could be collection of the right "metadata" throughout the enterprise for the production project. If the right information is not collected, that could cause bottlenecks too, Neumann said.

"The DAM system eventually needs to be integrated with many, and sometimes all, other data systems of an enterprise," said Neumann. "That means ample strategic planning is required."

One system that many printers are increasingly integrating with their digital asset management systems is the Internet, according to Barb Pellow, chief marketing officer at the graphic communications group of Eastman Kodak. She was a featured panelist at a luncheon at the Print 05 & Converting 05 show, which was co-located with the Seybold conference. Pellow notes that she recently spoke with a printer whose entire business came primarily from Rochester, N.Y. "Now, after using the Internet to drive the business, 70 percent of the work comes from outside Rochester," said Pellow.

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