



“Retrieving images the old way?”

Managing Your Digital Assets

Get a group of creative professionals talking, and you'll hear war stories about the frustration experienced by their companies as they struggle to manage their expanding collection of digital assets.

The suggested solution is confusing, described in buzzwords and acronyms with little definition – such as digital asset management, content management, and media asset management. To keep things simple, we'll use the most commonly accepted term: Digital Asset Management, or DAM.

What are digital assets and how do you go about managing them?

Digital assets are computer files, such as photographic images, artwork, company logos, advertising layouts, audio files, or even video clips, generally used to produce catalogs, product packaging, displays and exhibits, marketing brochures, multimedia presentations, and other visual presentations – often by several different departments and/or even in different countries.

A DAM system is a combination of hardware, software, policies, and procedures designed to organize, manage, and distribute these assets – internally or externally – in a controlled manner, to those who will use them. A DAM system helps users quickly locate and obtain the needed files, using a local application or over the Internet.

What's in it for me?

The reasons why companies invest in DAM are varied and tend to fall into three categories: to improve productivity, to increase the effectiveness of sales and marketing efforts, and to maximize external sales and marketing channels (retail partners, independent sales representatives, and the media, among others).

An effective DAM solution increases a company's profitability by allowing its users to locate digital files quickly and accurately – which increases throughput, speeds turnaround, and reduces the need for manual labor. By eliminating the loss of time typically experienced while looking for files, and the costs associated with using the wrong files, companies can achieve significant savings.

An effective DAM solution also provides sales personnel with access to the latest files for their presentations and proposals, from wherever they are and whenever they need them, thereby improving their effectiveness.

Similarly, giving channel partners access to specific digital assets improves their ability to effectively and consistently advertise your company's products and services.

What Are the Options?

Once you've decided to invest in a DAM solution, should you buy it, build it yourself, or take advantage of outside providers? Your decision must take into account such factors as budget constraints, your existing infrastructure, your user knowledge base, internal and external requirements, security concerns, and so forth.

Purchasing an off-the-shelf DAM solution allows you to take advantage of someone else's research and development. The manufacturer has spent the time and money to develop a professional application, and you'll benefit from its technical support and upgrades. The obvious disadvantage of off-the-shelf solutions is that they are designed for a broad market and may not fit your specific needs.

Prices for purchasing solutions vary widely, based on their features and scalability. Basic, single-user DAM applications can

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When setting up a DAM solution, you'll be asked to develop a set of naming rules.

A good file-naming system will take into account multiple computer operating systems, as well as Internet, FTP, and E-mail systems.

The following universal rules are worth considering:

- Restrict the allowable character sets to A-Z, a-z, 0-9, period (.), underscore (_), and hyphen (-). Avoid all other special characters.
- Place a file extension at the end of all file names. Extensions are usually three to four characters following a period, such as ".xml", ".txt", ".pdf", ".html", ".xml", ".gif", ".jpg", ".xls", and ".doc".
- Use a period only once in a filename, before the file extension. A period should never appear at the beginning of a filename.
- Limit file names to 32 characters – including the file extension.
- Lowercase is preferable to mixed case for file names. The use of all uppercase characters is not recommended.

be bought for less than \$100. The cost of enterprise-level, turnkey systems can easily exceed \$100,000, plus fees for installation, training, software licensing, and ongoing maintenance and support contracts.

For small, internal production departments, even a minimal investment in a DAM solution can have an immediate payback.

Building your own DAM solution may be the most cost-effective solution to fit your specific needs, but this requires an in-depth knowledge of application and Internet development, database management, cross-platform functionality, and networking, security, and server technologies.

If you have this knowledge and decide to build your own system, you may also want to consider the total cost of development of the system, how it will be used, and what it will cost to keep it up to date.

The third option to consider is outsourcing your DAM solution to an Application Service Provider (ASP). An ASP eliminates the need for capital investment in a DAM system and allows you to invest incrementally over time. Select an ASP with advanced DAM knowledge who can advise and train your employees, help organize the digital assets, develop naming conventions, determine appropriate file formats, and create guidelines, policies, and procedures for your users.

If your users are in multiple locations or you will be distributing assets to channel partners or other external users, an ASP can eliminate the need to provide access to your internal systems through a firewall, which puts your company's security at risk.

Should you decide on an ASP, be sure to define ownership of the assets up front. In the event either party terminates the agreement, it must be clearly understood what will happen to the assets. Insist on this in writing, and review it carefully.

How to get started?

Educate yourself. You'll find numerous white papers, articles, and case studies on digital asset management on the Internet. You may also want to talk with other companies in your own industry, similar industries, or even other industries who are using DAM systems, and learn from their experiences.

Then start planning. The biggest challenge to achieving an effective DAM solution is typically the preparation and training required. A DAM system is a framework, or tool, to help you organize your digital assets and streamline your workflow processes. You'll need sufficient preparation and training to maximize its benefit.

Take time to properly set up your DAM solution, or hire a knowledgeable consultant who will spend the time you cannot spare. Locate and assemble your digital assets, and identify which assets to include and not to include. Decide how you'll store your assets. Develop a file naming system; determine who will have access to the system, how they will access it, and what additional information should be included (metadata).

Make sure you've considered all options, and then make the best decision for your specific needs. The time spent up front will be worth the effort. -gs



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