Digital Asset Management Software:

The Essential Features for Visual Asset Management

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DIGM Major

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DIGM 4372

Method

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What are the essential features of digital asset management systems that provide optimal visual asset management capabilities?

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⊠ Statement of the Problem/Question

⊠ Literature Review

☐ Method

Problem Statement

We're living in a digital world and photography is no different (Zhang, 2012). More photos are created every two minutes than in the entire 1800s and the popularity of digital photography is overpowering analog photography (Zhang, 2012). Because of this trend, a wider variety of people are taking, editing, storing, and sharing photos and videos. To get the most out of the visual assets taken every day, people and organizations can use digital asset management (DAM) systems. DAM is the effective management and distribution of digital assets including images, creative files, documents, audio and video clips (Extensis, 2013). Tim Padilla (2005), the Director of Digital Asset Management for Warner Bros., explained in one of his articles that one of the most obvious and critical aspects of a DAM system is its reliability in the fulfillment of user's storage and distribution needs. This study looks at what are the essential features of digital asset management systems that provide optimal visual asset management capabilities.

DAM systems vary based on the type of objects they are meant to store and manage. For the purposes of this paper, DAM refers specifically to visual asset managing software. These programs are not only designed to help users upload, manage, and share, but also, to edit their photos and videos more conveniently. Just as there are users with different skillsets, there are also varieties of DAM programs available, which offer different tools and features to maximize user experience. Requirements for a good DAM system can vary based on the user's skills and their level of interest. DAM programs can be useful for creating professional photo books and images, for quickly sharing photos from an event with employees or friends and family, making major or minor adjustments to photos and videos, and even for organizing and storing a visual asset library.

The overwhelming number of features and services DAM systems offer can make finding the best option daunting. Since different DAM systems offer a range of tools and features, it is

important to know which ones would benefit a specific user the most. A person who wishes to have more managing and archiving options will most likely need a different program than people with editing and sharing intensive requirements. Even though a lot of programs are tailored to benefit certain group of users, there are several features that should be offered by each program. Such features include organizing, quick sharing, and basic editing options like rotating, cropping, brightness, contrast, and resizing (Muchmore, 2013). The depth and complexity of these features can be based on the target audience and their needs.

The purpose of this paper is not to find a single perfect digital asset management system that would fit everyone's needs, but rather to discover and compare the capabilities of different visual asset management software and which customer base are they most suitable for. When conducting the research, different aspects are considered. This paper looks into the extent of tools offered by the programs, interface design and usability, price and features relationship, and required skills.

Terms

Digital Asset – an electronic file or any other distinct type of content that is or contains certain kinds of rich content: photos, videos, PDFs, print-ready marketing collaterals, Adobe InDesign files, any graphics, visualizations, 3D images, animations or audios.

Digital Asset Management (DAM) – centralized repository for digital files that allows the content to be archived, searched and retrieved

User Interface (UI) – set of commands or menus through which a user communicates with a program

Metadata – data that describes other data. It provides information about a certain item's content

Proxy file – a media element such as a preview that is provided to allow users to review files before accessing the original

Workflow – the series of activities that are necessary to complete a task

Literature Review

A 2013 Gartener report states that more than 25% of the content that workers see in a day consists of pictures, video, or audio (Extensis, 2013). Because a large percentage of information intake happens through visual media, handling visual assets effectively is an important task for both organizations and individuals. This is where Digital Asset Management (DAM) comes in play. As the Stibo Systems website explains, "DAM is the management, cataloging, storage, retrieval, and distribution of digital, media, and brand assets – which can include everything from PDFs, videos, images, to music, and more." Although this is the general description of digital asset management, DAM can stand for either the strategy of managing digital assets throughout their entire lifecycle, or the systems, which are the combination of specific type of software and hardware that help to implement a DAM strategy (Keathley E. , 2014).

In order for DAM programs to be certified as DAMs they have to meet the following ten characteristics as described by Mark Davey, CEO of IQequity and President of DAM Foundation, and ratified by DAM Foundation board members. The ten essential characteristics inquire that DAM systems:

1) Ingest assets individually or in mass sets.
2) Secure the assets they contain.
3) Store assets as both binaries and metadata.
4) Render/transform assets on ingest into new forms, such as thumbnails or proxy files.
5) Enrich assets through the extension of metadata and metrics regarding the use and reuse of the assets throughout its lifecycle.
6) Relate assets by tracking the relationships between and among an original asset and versions/variants of the original.

7) Regulate a structured process in the management, creation, and review of assets with workflow tools.

8) Allow for users to find assets and to retrieve those assets by facilitating search through metadata, collections, workflows, and access control tools.

9) Have a preview function that allows users to view assets before downloading or opening a file on their own device.

10) Produce/publish content by providing methods whereby assets may be shared, linked to, or otherwise be distributed outside the system. (Davey, 2014)

Even though these ten characteristics are essential for DAMs, they do not guarantee success for the software. In addition to the basic requirements, DAMs should also generate unique ID codes, handle several different file types, and provide administrative capabilities and the ability to have different user types (Keathley E. , 2014).

Moreover, user interface (UI) is one of the characteristics that forms the basis of a good system, but is often overlooked (Rouke, DAM Usability and Access: How do I look (and feel)?, 2014). In his article "DAM Usability and Access: How do I look (and feel)?", James Rouke (2014), a DAM consultant at IQequity, states that "a well-functioning system that looks dated or too technical might miss out to a less well-functioning system that looks nicer and is easier to use." The goal of the UI is to make the users feel excited by the opportunities presented by the system, not to make them feel alienated as described by David Austerberry (2005), the author of *Digital Asset Management* (Focal Press, 2004). Michael Kräftner (2010), CEO of Celum, also knows the importance of simple UI. He states that even though the system is extremely complex "it should smell, look, and feel like something I am already used to." Kräftner (2010) explains this fenomen through the following methaphor:

"[The system] should be a Ferrari that at the first glance just looks like the coziest minivan you can imagine, but under the hood it is still a Ferrari, but I am not scared about its possible speed. I will enjoy driving fast, but I am not scared because it does not look aggressive."

Yet another feature that is essential for a successful DAM system is the interoperability and content exchangeability with other systems (Käftner, 2010). An example of this type of compatibility is Cumulus' Adobe Drive Adapter that allows the user to work natively in the Adobe software and quickly check the file back in to Cumulus (Canto, 2014). Another plug-in for Cumulus is the PDF Extended Pack, which aids in separating pages and rebuilding PDF files (Canto, 2014). Similarly, North Plains (2012) provides the "compatibility with Adobe Creative Suite 6 and the capability to transfer assets and metadata from Xinet to Telescope via ConnectR functionality" with extensive updates in 2012.

Considering all the characteristics and features, a good DAM solution should give the users the flexibility to match their workflow (Extensis, 2013). According to the Best Practices Guide by Extensis this includes being able to publish as many websites as needed, distribute all assets or a subset of them, control the distribution of files, maintain brand consistency, create branded portals where users can access assets on-demand 24/7, and have unlimited number of users visit the sites. It is important to remember that "the DAM should be useful to the user and speed up operations rather than hinder them" (Rouke, Creating Order out of Media Chaos, a book review, 2014). As Elizabeth Keathley (2014) states in her latest DAM book: "Never forget though that the most important idea behind a DAM is making the machine you build serve the users, not the other way around" (p. 73).

Based on user feedback, Capterra (2014) has listed the top digital asset management software products of 2014. The list includes IntelligenceBank, WebDam, Integrate, Widen Media Collective, and Cumulus (Capterra, Inc., 2014). Special features that contribute to the success of some of these software are discussed above. Based on Keathley's book though, a good DAM system is mainly about striking a balance between "speed versus safety, flexibility versus reliability, flexibility versus consistency, usability versus quality, and accessibility versus security" (Keathley E. F., 2014, p. 34).

Method

This study sought to discover and compare the capabilities of different DAM systems and how essential attributes vary based on the customerbase. To find out the critical aspects of a DAM system, different software were compared. Their attributes were evaluated based on customer feedback and the most essential aspects were drawn out from the research.

As described in the literature review section of this study, there are several important requirements a successful DAM system has to meet. Some sources state that UI is the most important part of a visual asset management system, whereas others consider either flexibility to accomomodate user workflow, or interoperability with other systems to be the most important feature. Whatever the most essential part of a DAM system for a specific user may be, striking a balance is critical for an overall good software (Keathley E. F., 2014). In this study, some of the top DAMs of 2014 were compared based on user feedback. The research was conducted to show the main userbase for the top systems and what draws people to these DAM systems. Also, the study focused on their goal and purpose for using a visual asset management system. Researching the users and their feedback is a way to determine the critical aspects of DAMs, because user satisfaction is what makes a DAM system actually successful.

The study followed the workflow described below:

1. Selected five top DAM systems from Capterra's list of best DAMs of 2014 – Selected five popular DAM system providers that have a free trial period. Downloaded the demo to complete the following steps.

2. Researched technical requirements for use – Found out what platforms/ operating systems the program works on. What are the infrastructure requirements, if uses cloud-based service, or local server?

3. Listed the features offered by the program – Referred back to the ten essential characteristics of DAM systems. Created a checklist and compared different programs.

4. Described the user interface – Described the ease of use of the program. How user-friendly is the interface when accessing most common features.

5. Analyzed the main customer base – Listed example companies who use a specific program. Recognized trends in the customer base – the size of the company, needs, location.

6. Described balance between cost and quality – Described a DAM system's cost and packages, versus what it offers for a certain price.

7. Listed the advantages and disadvantages - Concluded each system's features. Described the advantages and disadvantages of each DAM system.

8. Compared the outcomes – Compared the final list of advantages and disadvantages of each system by creating a checklist with all the companies.

9. Described the critical aspects of a successful DAM – Concluded the research by pointing out the main features all best DAM systems offer.

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