

Easy does it: the key to DAM systems such as Brandworkz's [left] and Third Light IMS [right] is simplicity

Amid the deafening noise of digital and social media, how can corporate communicators hope to achieve cut through and maintain consistency in their comms output?

The answer: by effectively marshalling the brand assets at their disposal. But corralling a vast array of digital assets – including photos, logos, PDFs, PowerPoint presentations and DTP documents, as well as audio and video files – can be a bamboozling task, which is why an industry has sprung up to provide digital asset management (DAM).

Still in relative infancy in the UK, the industry is doing its best to convince heads of communications that they should invest in DAM and add to their long list of service providers. But according to Phil Morton, operations director of Freestyle Interactive, the return on investment is clear. For him, the real task is to explain just how useful DAM can be.

“Most people think DAM is just a logo distribution tool, or image library,” he says. “But that’s missing the point. It is about the sharing of assets. It’s very easy to demonstrate the saving of time and money.”

One company to latch on to its potential is Alstom, the French multinational conglomerate in the power generation and transport markets.

“Alstom is a very large organisation with thousands of employees working across multiple global sites so effective communication is crucial,” says Alstom’s director of internet and brand, Elaine West. “Through our DAM infrastructure we now have unprecedented levels of control and consistency over the way we store, collate and distribute the entire organisation’s digital collateral.”

She describes its streamlining effect as “fundamental to the way we manage, control and make secure extremely valuable content”. At Alstom,

## DAM good

As custodians of an ever-growing array of brand assets, communicators are turning to digital asset management providers to bring efficiency and consistency to the way assets are deployed

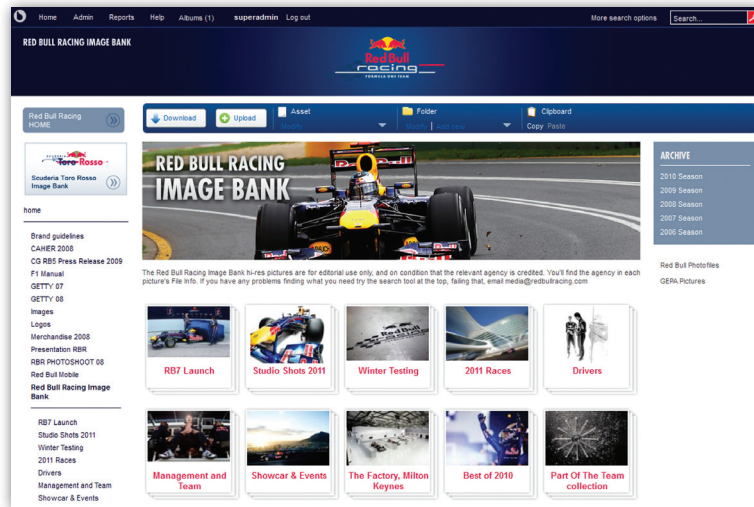
DAM underpins communication operations, saving time and money by speeding up activity, removing duplication and minimising wasted effort.

But, West adds: “It also enables far closer collaboration and sharing between different people across all the different departments and external third parties, like the agencies we work with. Key communication tasks happen quicker.”

Jason Wehling, CEO of DAM provider NetXposure, argues that the best indicators of the value of DAM are the ability to efficiently handle large volumes of data and, often more importantly, to facilitate and improve workflow.

“Today, workflow encompasses not only the creative process,” he says, “but also automated delivery strategies to corporate websites, to social channels like Flickr, YouTube and WordPress, and to partner sites and workspaces that allow secure collaboration, as well as publishing and streaming to distributors, dealers and retail partners.”

Digital agency Bright Interactive has its own DAM tool, Asset Bank, which is used by, among others, BT. Asset Bank implemented and hosts the BT Brand Image Library, a repository of digital assets relating to product, brand and TV adverts. It provides BT employees and trade partners with 24/7 access ▶



Quick smart: Brandworkz says DAM helps to speed up the distribution of digital assets

◀ while a download approval process and clear copyright information ensures that users know how an asset should be used.

Bright Interactive director Martin Wilson believes that the time it saves is one of DAM's key benefits.

"Until a comms team starts using a DAM application, they usually have one or two people managing their digital assets," he says. "These people archive assets as they are produced and deal with requests for assets from other employees. In large organisations, it is often a full-time role. A DAM application enables employees or suppliers producing assets to add them straight into the application, and allows employees needing assets to find and download them directly."

DAM tool Brandworkz also positions itself as a benefit to corporate communicators. "It transforms productivity by freeing up time and resources," says CEO Jens Lundgaard. "Assets are stored and managed in one easily accessible online system so third party users go direct to Brandworkz to download them (using password permissions), not to the corporate comms team."

Password-protection means that journalists can access only the information the comms team wants them to see. Sensitive information stays confidential.

Lundgaard adds: "The Approval Workflow functionality streamlines the production of communication materials and enables those working on projects to see at a glance what they or their external agencies need to do and when. Brandworkz can speed up marketing production times by 80%."

According to Martin Wilson, DAM allows organisations to wring maximum value from their assets. "Many organisations have a wealth of digital material without realising it," he says. "Without a

DAM application to make them searchable, most archived digital assets are never found and therefore might as well not exist. This is wasted investment."

In fact, searchability is widely regarded as one of the chief boons of digital asset management. DAM specialist Third Light has a system of its own, known as Third Light IMS, which is used by 250 local councils around the UK.

"Riffling through thousands of thumbnails is a wasteful practice," says managing director Michael Wells. "Helpfully, though, the underlying searchable intelligence about your files is a rich resource when it comes to reuse, and when you have software that makes it easy to add annotation and history, you build an even better base for your searches.

"The issue with digital assets is their uncanny ability to become fragmented, lost or hoarded," he adds. "It's not just a problem of inefficiency but some genuine cost and risk when digital content starts to sprawl. Keeping track of how the content is used and being absolutely certain about the status of files used is part of every day interaction with the press."

Wilson is palpably excited about the future possibilities of DAM.

"We expect to see automatic tagging and searching of images. At the moment, effective image searches rely on appropriate metadata having been associated with each image. This process is still very human-resource intensive. We expect to see image recognition software and learning heuristics begin to play a much bigger part in commercial DAM applications."

He also foresees a move away from viewing a DAM application as a searchable archive to seeing it as a dynamic tool for discussing, creating, sharing and managing digital resources. "In other words, a merging of some of the ideas from current DAM applications, social networking sites and Wikis."

For Freestyle Interactive's Phil Morton, social media is already a key driver in the development of DAM. "Social, search, content are inextricably tied together – but user-generated content isn't authoritative," he says. "If you want to engage in social media activity, digital asset management has a role. As a brand, you have reams of authoritative content. So we're looking at ways to access content quickly so that brands can respond to trends taking place in social media channels."

Sounds useful then. In which case, all corporate communicators need to do is convince senior management to buy in to digital asset management. Michael Wells knows how to put it: "Digital asset management isn't just an IT project. It's about improving our working lives."