

How Chorus helps French Connection...connect

When the globally recognized fashion brand initially acquired Chorus, it was to improve how a busy digital studio stores huge volumes of marketing media. A year on, they're using its innovative work-in-progress tools to transform how that content is produced too – and exploring even more exciting possibilities for the wider business.

Now nearing its 50th anniversary, French Connection has weathered a challenging retail landscape where others have fallen by the wayside. It's done this with a strengthened digital presence, renewed focus on positioning as a timeless, design-led brand, and, in the background, improved infrastructure and business tools (which have come into their own after national lockdowns pushed most of its people to work remotely).

When Steve Galloway joined two years ago as an IT business analyst, he was tasked with the latter part, from warehouse management to financial reporting. He says: "My boss, the Head of IT, said: 'Watch different teams, understand how people do things, then see if you can come up with ways to help'. One of the first areas I started with was the studio, because they were under a great deal of pressure."

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Steve Galloway, Business Analyst

First, take a hard-working team

High-quality brand positioning calls for high-quality images – so French Connection's in-house studio is a key contributor to its business goals. Creating most of the brand's visual assets, it produces a range of images for its womenswear, menswear and sibling brand, Great Plains.

For womenswear alone, of which 400 designs a season are produced, each item is captured for lookbooks; in up to seven cut-out shots for eCommerce; at least twice on a model to show movement and scale; and in a wider editorial setting for campaigns and features. The studio handles everything from booking models and styling items to selecting images and retouching them, ready for use.

The brand sells its designs directly to customers via physical stores, department store concessions and eCommerce sites in the UK, Europe, US and Canada, in addition to wholesale business selling to external retail platforms. This means the work the studio produces does double, triple and often quadruple duty for marketing, PR and activation for French Connection and its external retail partners.



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Image from French Connection autumn/winter campaign

Involve future users

Having identified areas for improvement, Steve's first step was to share these with the studio team. "We then worked on a list of requirements," he says, "which included everything they might need a system to do for them, and all the criteria it would be useful to search by. It was slow to begin with as people weren't aware of the possibilities, but as we explored together everyone's minds started to open up. Then once I started seeing what solutions were on the market, this list helped me select the suppliers offering the right solutions.

"My business case had a shortlist of three solutions, but I specifically recommended Chorus – the other two came with some more advanced options but cost five, even six times more. And I could see that Third Light is constantly reviewing things, which I always find is a good thing to do. They've been listening to what customers say and built on that, they don't just leave the product as is."

Map where efficiencies can be improved

Steve mapped a system that has been slowly overtaken by contemporary digital asset management (DAM) technology, so it wasn't a huge stretch to determine that a solution pairing cloud storage with metadata would help people find images better (and keep them safer). "We had around 11-12 terrabytes stored on a physical server, based in our London head office," he explains. "It was labor-intensive to locate or share large numbers of files, and there were gaps in the process around labelling."

"The method we used to organize media was at risk from human error: images of products were being saved using the unique style code of the item. But if someone reads a zero as an 'O' or mis-types a single letter the image is incredibly time-consuming to find. You could do detective work based on the folder structure – which season, is it menswear or womenswear? – but the sheer volume of files passing through the studio meant it was a needle-in-haystack situation. As a very last resort, the studio would be asked to find the garment and reshoot it."

When he sat down with the studio team and showed them Chorus, "it was a big 'yes' for them straight away," he says. "They could see that it didn't just mean they had somewhere to store all their files – it would also help them work more collaboratively across the business."

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Set controls for peace of mind

Steve also configured Chorus to address risks to the business. “With a server there’s always a risk of someone getting hold of an image before it’s approved by the relevant people. Controllable user permissions allowed us to minimize that. It’s quite simple; I can assign the correct access and authority to each person, and they can get on with what they need to do.”

He also established expiry dates to manage usage rights more closely: “If the studio books a model for the day, the standard contract says we have six months to use those images. Once we’d emailed those assets over to a marketing company or a blogger, we had no control over their use after that point. And if an agency spots their model in an image published after the agreed time, they’re legally entitled to charge us a fee for continued use. So pre-set expiries of images was a big tick for us.”

His next customization is centred on reporting. “We’re setting up project status for work-in-progress-files,” he says, “with a drop-down menu that has stages like Draft, Needs Feedback, Signed Off. We’re hoping this helps teams who use the signed-off content stay aware of what’s coming through the pipeline without any danger of using it too early.”

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French Connection edits assets directly in the cloud, via the Project Sync app

Add tools for specific ways of working

With Chorus up and running, some studio members are now editing assets directly in the cloud, via the Project Sync app. “It’s great,” says Steve. “Our retouchers sync an image from the DAM, work on it with their desktop and software, and it updates right then and there in the site itself. It cuts the time – and bandwidth – they’d previously spend downloading and uploading these files, which is especially useful in the current climate with everyone using their home Wi-Fi.”

Having recently added the comments feature, Steve immediately sees its value. “The person who asks for edits and retouches on images used to send these massive files via Dropbox or WeTransfer with their instructions – and the amended images would be sent back to them the same way. The comments module meant the people, their requests and the files in question all stayed in one place; it was a no-brainer.”

Make sure it's simple for everyone

To get the best value for money, Steve had to be sure any DAM would be intuitive enough to suit the widest possible group of users. "Of all the options we looked at, I found Chorus to be the simplest," he says. "I can log on and see people who are new to the system are active in there; slowly building confidence where they would have relied on Dropbox and things like that. And they're enjoying using it."

"I've added a lot of people to the system who've taken a quick look at the little video on there, had a bit of a play and are now searching for files, sharing, downloading – it didn't need this great big training session to get started."

It's also making life easier for people using other tools Steve introduced. "We brought in a wholesale platform called NuORDER, which has already increased off-site sales. We showed the team who use it how when they're setting up a new season in there, they can just go into Chorus, select all the images they need for that season, and drag and drop them directly into the wholesale system. We're now working on how we can use the metadata attached to our media in Chorus to generate product reference documents."

Chorus doesn't just control and centralize your valuable media – it also gives teams the smart tools to turn it into a steady flow of content, too. The digital asset management of choice for many retail brands, it has the power to help any organization capture their stories and share them with the world.

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The specialist's verdict

"With Chorus, we get a really good solution for the money," says Steve. "I really like the flexibility; we get an out-of-the-box DAM, but with all these additional specialist modules to choose from. We just swapped a module we realised we didn't actually use much for the comments one, which we knew would more than pay for itself."

"Our file storage with Chorus has come out as around a third of what we were having to maintain with the physical server. And then I've found the Third Light helpdesk team to be one of the quickest in terms of getting back to me – if you email them you usually get a response within an hour. They're really on the ball."

"Looking back at the original business case, it's ticked all the boxes there and delivered the efficiencies for the studio we'd hoped it would. And we have greater peace of mind now we're able to control image usage through automation. Beyond this, we've got people in marketing, eCommerce, retail and wholesale, all using Chorus to find, use and share French Connection's images – even our third-party photographers are uploading directly into it."

If Steve has any advice for new Chorus owners, it's to keep thinking flexible as one goes along. He says: "Rollout was a process of discovery for me as well as the people using it. As you use Chorus so many potential ways of working will occur to you, so just keep it simple to begin with – there's no harm in going back and reviewing it."



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