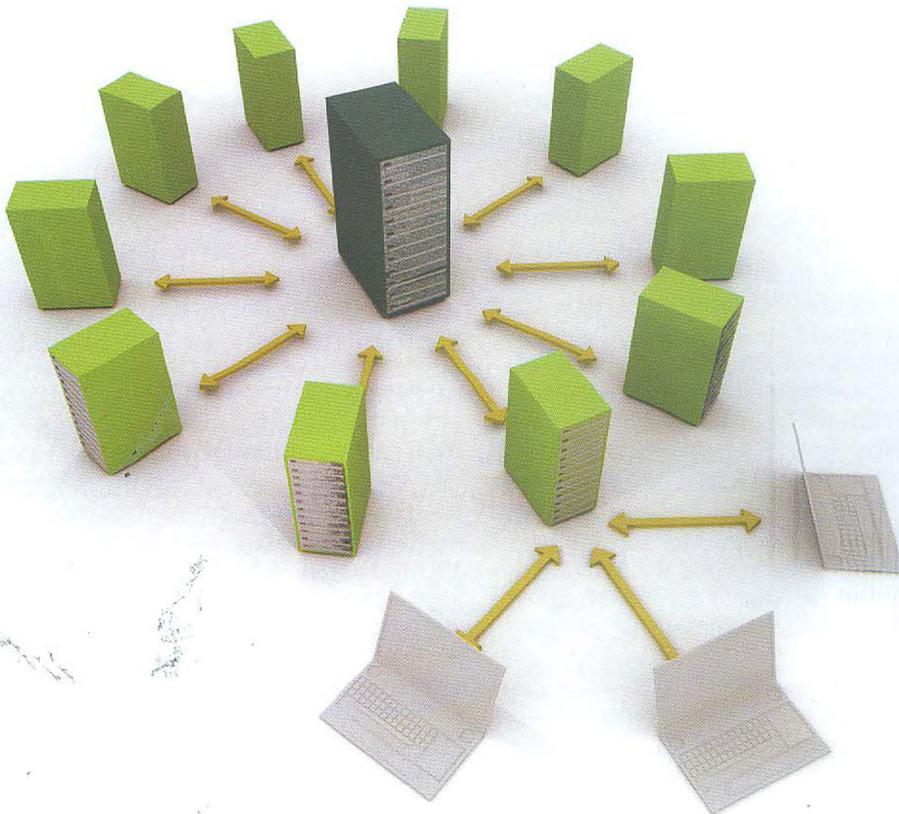


# Using Digital Asset Management as a



Strategic Tool for  
Consistent Branding:  
Implications and possibilities

P. Raj Devasagayam, Matthew Gonnering



## ABSTRACT

*In a marketing climate that demands brand differentiation as a sustainable competitive advantage, brand managers are held responsible to drive the top line in firms. Branding that relies on sources outside the marketing organization often suffers from poor execution, confused personality, and fragmented message content that ultimately lead to erosion in brand equity. This research suggests Digital Asset Management strategies that yield the control of a brand management back in the hands of the marketing manager responsible to drive profitability through integrated marketing communications. This paper discusses the availability of digital asset management tools, their implications for marketing, the benefits offered by such strategies, and points to potential research avenues in the area.*

**KeyWords:** Branding Strategies, IMC, Digital Asset Management.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of a consistent and strong branding strategy has gained significance in the marketing arena through recognizable brands with positive images that are coveted and cherished (Monga and Lau-Gesk 2007, Mitchell 2002). A brand is often defined as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition" (American Marketing Association definition, Keller, 2003, 3). Building a strong brand is arduous and requires commitment of resources, yet is fragile enough to be destroyed by a minor setback.

A strong brand has been found to contribute to bottom lines through substantial and sustainable differentiation, improved customer retention and brand loyalty, premium pricing opportunities, higher margins, synergistic new product introductions, as well as enhanced efficiencies in customer decision criteria (Davis 2000, Keller 2003, Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). "The challenge for marketers in building a strong brand is ensuring that customers have the right type of experiences with products and services and their accompanying marketing programs so that the desired thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, opinions, and so on become linked to the brand" (Keller, 2003). Brands such as Harley Davidson and Jeep have gone so far as to establish brand communities within which customers are enmeshed in a network of relationships with the brand and fellow customers, as opposed to the traditional brand loyalty (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002, Devasagayam and Buff 2005, Devasagayam and Buff 2008).

The aforementioned branding tools are effective only if used with prudence, consistency, and efficiency via a strategic integrated marketing communications program (Hatch and Schultz 2001). The need to seek such consistency in branding

often leads to reluctance in customizing the brand for specific target segments. However, it is possible to use technology to customize the brand image to specific target segments without sacrificing the brand personality or branding consistency.

The digital age provides for customization of branding tools to meet the specific needs of a (single) potential customer – in the net savvy customer expects and almost demands such customization. In light of possible differentiation through digital customization of value offerings, more and more companies are moving to digital branding tools (Gray 2008, Hingley 2008, Reese 2007) that are best managed as invaluable assets of a company.

This paper examines the role of Digital Asset Management in the maintenance and retrieval of digital branding tools in order to facilitate such customization of the branding strategy in an efficient and effective manner. Cutting edge technology in digital imaging (video and still) has now made it possible for a salesperson to create and present a value proposition with supporting promotional literature within hours (minutes) of a customer request. The challenge then is to have the branding tools available in a format that are easy to deploy without compromising the overall integrity of branding strategy as a salesperson customizes the value proposition – Digital Asset Management (DAM) might provide solutions heretofore unavailable.

While the DAM industry has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few years, there is a paucity of scholarly research on the impact and contribution of DAM to branding strategy (Rowley 2008, Schriever 2007). This research is an effort to fill this gap. In the following sections we review the literature on branding, devote ink to the scope and size of DAM resources, suggest strategic uses of the technology, and provide insights and implications for appropriate use of the advances in DAM.

## CHALLENGES OF CREATIVITY VS. STRATEGY IN BRANDING

With products being reduced to undifferentiated commodities, brand managers are faced with the challenge of using branding as a differentiator. Branding strategies could be used not only to differentiate products but also to bestow a sense of relevance and esteem upon the product (Aaker 2003, Ind 1997, 2001). Cost considerations make it impossible for products to be relaunched and redefined with additional attributes at the rapid pace that a customer might demand at prices that the customer is willing to pay. However, using branding as a differentiator may yield renewed customer interest and commitment at low costs. In fact, research has shown (Carpenter, Glazer, Nakamoto 1994, Desai and Keller 2002, Aaker 2003) that customers might be willing to pay a premium for a branded differentiator (think Harley Davidson apparel and on Star systems).

Increased competitive activity, shrinking margins, and tighter customer purse strings are driving the need for improved branding techniques. Some scholars are even questioning the rationale and merit of brand management strategies. In his recent book "Branding only works on Cattle," Jonathan S. Baskin makes the case for the notion that current definitions and practices of branding are outdated and irrelevant and should be abandoned completely! His argument largely relies on the fact that customers have ample information on the WWW to be able to compare product attributes rather than buy into brand persona. Additionally, he points to the folly of allowing outside agencies to manage branding decisions based purely on creative and artistic inspirations rather than clearly guided strategic considerations. Boon (2000), D'Innocenzo 2002, Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop (2005) tout the benefits of internal branding efforts that are handled by the organization itself. And, Duboff (2001), LePla and Parker (1999), and McCarthy (2005) point to the ad agencies playing a pivotal role in branding strategies. While outsourcing creative execution of branding might be a specialized solution that adds value to the brand, the outsourcing of strategic management of a brand should not be handed over to entities outside the realm of the brand sponsor. Digital Asset Management technology provides alternative options to brand managers that can actually build on the Web 2.0 capabilities in awarding the control and execution of brand strategies in the hands of the marketing decision makers, where it should belong.

## DIGITAL ASSET MANAGEMENT AS A SOLUTION

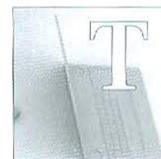
DAM is a catch-all phrase that encompasses an alphabet soup of digital solutions: Rich Asset Management (RAM), Media Asset Management (MAM), Digital Media Management Software (DMMS), Brand Resource Management (BRM), and Enterprise Content Management (ECM). Digital Asset Management may be defined as the centralization, maintenance, and distribution of digitized files and their accompanying metadata allowing permission-based, self-service access to internal and external resources.

Put simply, DAM is a set of software solutions that allows for accessible storage and efficient retrieval of digital media and the descriptive information that it tagged to it. The software solutions could be either hosted and serviced by a vendor or provided as client server based solution. According to some experts the DAM revenues worldwide reached approximately one-third of a billion in 2007 (www.frost.com) with approximately 70 vendors worldwide with no one vendor capturing more than a single digit percentage of the market share.

DAM has found successful applications in variety of settings. Since the digital media could be static or dynamic, still images, video, audio, graphics, CAD, print layouts, text files, presentations, or spreadsheets, the applications of DAM are not restricted to branding and marketing alone. DAM provides an efficient tool to catalog and organize files as a method of identifying what digital media currently exists. The organized digital database may then be available as a searchable digital library to eliminate duplication of files and redundancy of work. Various arms of the marketing organization—salespeople and channel members alike—can then access the library for specific branding needs through self-service interfaces. One might use DAM for effective distribution of files to other individuals upon request with restrictions placed on use and duplication of said files. DAM allows for a brand manager to retain centralized control and administration of metadata, users, and the digital media in the library.

As would be true of any library, DAM based branding tools can be archived by versions and accessed by version numbers, if needed. Routing projects for approval to multiple individuals for simultaneous review becomes seamless in a DAM environment. Potentially a limitless amount of historical archives can be maintained and reused, if needed. Minor modifications and "brushing" of existing images and media is rendered less resource intensive and overall allows for cutting-edge and current digital media presence in marketing messages without straining other resources of the company.

## TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIONS IN DAM



There are two basic options for delivering DAM: installed software on the client infrastructure or using software-as-a-service vendors. The decisions to deploy either option or the conditions that warrant such as choice have not received scholarly attention. In practice, the distinct advantages offered by each method tend to lead a company to opt for one mode over another.

Software-as-a-service model is managed by a vendor without consuming internal resources and therefore free up scarce resources for other strategic tasks. In this system, upgrades are frequent (every 3-4 months), which is important in order to keep pace with evolving technology. This option eliminates the need to install software within internal infrastructure which eliminates the need for routine maintenance and associated staff. In the software-as-a-service model, prioritization of the DAM project is not dependent on internal technical resources and therefore can be deployed without the threat of being bumped from implementation because of high-priority

business applications (such as finance, resource planning). There are economies built into costs sharing across multiple customers. Availability and scalability is not a concern with the right provider using cloud computing resources, which reduces processing time and makes delivery of information upon request.

Usually the software-as-a-service option enables the vendor to control all services within the process, which results in integrated software upgrades, implementation, interface, security, data center, and help desk. This results in considerable cost savings that could then allow the marketing organization to focus on their primary task of strategic branding rather than be concerned about the enabling technology. There are some inherent disadvantages to software-as-a-service option, mainly due to the shift of tasks to the vendor. Typically a browser based application means consuming files internally is done at internet speeds, not network speeds – considering the size of some of the digital assets, this could be serious impediment. Data is located at an external data center, which is perceived as a lack of control just because it is not in the physical space of the corporate infrastructure. Software-as-a-service providers typically have documentation to prove security is much greater within their data center. These issues could then lead to a lack of accountability or finger-pointing in case the strategic implementation is either delayed or flawed.

The installed software option allows for solutions to be deployed within the organization's infrastructure for perceived control and security. Now the files, no matter how large, may be accessed at the much swifter network speed. Additionally, software may be customized by other parties (client organization) not affiliated with the original software publisher (this could also have a negative implication in terms of interface and integrity of functions). However, the downside is that the marketing organization has to maintain a whole host of human (and attendant) resources to manage the IT part of their branding. The upgrades are practically possible only intermittently, most commonly every 12-18 months. Vendors are not always committed to customer support in a timely manner. Also, the cost of the software and implementation could be prohibitive for smaller firms. One needs to realize that in this option internal infrastructure is expected to handle the demand from external users (channel members, for instance), which means it has to scale as demand increase and should have sufficient unused capacity to meet peaks in demand. Therefore, the inefficiency of unused resources in less than peak demand has to be contended with. Finally, software provider only fulfills the software specification, all other functions, such as implementation, integration, upgrades, data center, security and help desk are usually served by partners or internal resources with occasional advice from the vendor.



#### SOME CAVEATS

No matter which option is preferred, the process of implementing and maintaining a DAM system has some cautionary items that cannot be ignored. The process of locating the historical archive of marketing and branding

files has a set of challenges. This may involve going to current or previous suppliers that have handled your digital files to include agencies, premedia organizations, or print service firms. These organizations will charge you for locating and sending these files to you but integrating them into the process going forward means you never incur this charge again. It is the recommendation of most providers to start with your current digital assets and move forward to realize a successful implementation and ROI from the process adjusted by backfilling and backfill with the historical archive as needed.

Metadata is also a challenging task related to a DAM project. Metadata is typically the textual data that describes the asset and may include fields such as description, keyword, and brand. Metadata may be located in other systems, embedded in the file, spreadsheets, catalogs, or not at all. Migrating metadata is easy when it exists in one central location, but if a central metadata source exists the DAM system can take on this responsibility but it becomes time consuming to enter the information. This time consumption is not typically something a DAM vendor can impact because this is detailed information about the client products and services and requires a level of expertise in that field. Therefore, administration may be heavy at times and needs to take place frequently or the system will not perform as desired. DAM vendors can provide a method of reading the properties of files and posting that information as metadata or importing a spreadsheet of metadata to help streamline the process. Overall, lack of metadata leads to the inability of the user community quickly finding and downloading what they need, one of the main objectives of a DAM solution. The ongoing administration is tedious at times but is necessary to a successful experience.

Another contributor to a successful DAM experience is the education of the user community. Ongoing education programs should be mandatory and is another time-consuming exercise that the client administrator must take. The DAM solution will only be as good as the users interact with it and therefore requires attention. Some DAM providers have implementation programs and regular training sessions to assist with a training initiative but it still needs to be allocated to make it successful.

A final caution to DAM is during the vendor selection process. DAM vendors without financial stability and/or product roadmaps should be flagged as concern. Without financial stability the vendor can no longer invest in the development of infrastructure, and service resources to sustain their current offering. Product roadmaps without significant upgrades contribute to a community of legacy applications that no longer serve the original purpose. These vendors will meet the initial demand from the client but will quickly fall behind as the requirements evolve.



#### CONCLUSIONS

The state of the DAM industry is detailed in a report from the research firm Frost & Sullivan and summarized here. For the entire DAM market including both the software-as-a-service and installed software models,

total market size in 2007 was over one-third of a one billion in revenue. The market is expected to grow at a percentage in the upper twenties reaching nearly two billion in 2013. Isolating the software-as-a-service market alone, the market revenue in 2007 was less than 5% of the total market and is expected to grow at an annual compounded rate of over 30% each year until occupying over 10% of the total market revenue.

The key drivers of growth in the DAM industry include an increase in the creation of digital media to support digital marketing strategies. The popularity of more complicated and higher impact formats such as video require special file management attention because of their sheer size and distribution challenges. Another driver of growth is the adoption of other applications requiring the use of enabling technologies such as DAM. The overall adoption of communication technologies like wireless and personal devices also drive growth as the demand for digital image and video messaging continues to rise. Restrictions to the DAM market growth include applications that are custom built by a non-DAM vendor that is meant to provide DAM functionality. These custom built applications serve the original purpose but do not benefit from the advancement from the overall market.

In the foreseeable future a significant demand shift is underway toward software-as-a-service technologies as a result of internal I.T. teams being consumed by other projects and the sizeable cost advantage. The explosion of digital media and the popularity of complicated digital media types like video indicate the rising and massive need for digital asset storage, retrieval, and distribution. DAM is and will continue

to evolve as a platform to deploying other applications. DAM needs to be deployed prior to other technologies to enable these other technologies to reference the DAM whenever a digital asset is required. The foreseeable future also taps the power of cloud computing to scale infinitely to meet digital asset demand at peak times.

The literature in branding is woefully behind the technology being employed by advertising agencies that have had primary branding responsibilities. Most ad agencies have successfully adapted the DAM resources seamlessly yet have managed to keep the technology shrouded from brand managers. As we have demonstrated, the technology lends itself to being effectively used by marketing professionals with limited technological proficiencies. A quick understanding of the DAM possibilities and potential, yield creative and strategic control of a brand back in the hands of the brand managers, where it belongs. This is not to suggest that DAM companies and agencies have outlived their effectiveness, it is more to indicate how synergies in the area can yield better results for all parties. Marketing would benefit from a study of relationships that are based on shared technology, such as DAM.

The issues of trust and satisfaction in such technology-based interorganizational relationship is worthy of our time and attention. Further, the conditions under which the degree of creative and strategic control is maintained with participants in the relationship will also enrich our understanding of interorganizational relationships in general. This research is undertaken as a first step to alert marketers to potential research avenues that would lead to effective and efficient branding strategies.