Reusing Content Without Starting From Scratch

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Pervasive XML-based management may be years away, but McDonald's is making the most of more conventional forms of content

By Michael Voelker

Some companies seem to have multiple-personality disorders. Their print ads and product literature say one thing, their Web site another and their call center operators are oblivious to it all. Just as organizations struggle with data inconsistencies across disparate applications and data stores, the same problems crop up when content is developed and deployed in a spotty, uncoordinated way.

Organizations should be creating content once and reusing it wherever possible. Think of it as a "master content management" or "content hub" approach that provides a single source of internal documentation, training materials, graphics, product photography, marketing and sales messages and more. The strategy not only instills consistency across all forms of internal, partner and customer communications, it saves time and money on content creation, approval and translation.

XML-based management has the potential to put reuse in high gear, but as detailed in "Content in the Age of XML," page 24, until recently this nascent technology was largely confined to technical publishing applications. "It's only in the past two years that content management solutions that support multichannel publishing have really expanded on their XML support," says Kyle McNabb, senior analyst at Forrester Research. "[XML-based] content management is still in the early stages of adoption, even among the Global 2000 companies."

XML isn't the only route to labor- and time-saving content reuse. McDonald's, has learned that the real payoff in content management is in leveraging the content as well as the management platform.

McDonald's is Lovin' It

To reuse content you first have to find it, which can be difficult if you have multiple document, Web content and digital asset silos. In fact, 78% of companies have more than one content repository and 43% have more than six, according to Forrester Research. Many companies have eased access to multiple content sources through portals, yet users may still have to search across and drill down into multiple portlet windows.

Content integration software does the portal one better by providing a management layer above multiple content repositories. You can search, view and download
content (within your access rights) from several different sources within a single interface. In some cases users can even check out, update and check content back in with all the security and version controls of the native management system—a big advantage over simple search-based access.

The AccessMCD portal also provides integrated access and searching to separate document management systems.

Part portal and part content integration layer, McDonald's "AccessMCD" gives 1.6 million users in 119 countries access to two core document repositories, hundreds of different intracompany Web sites and thousands of product images and logos. Before deployment began in 2002, the fast-food giant struggled to provide consistent product images and information to its corporately owned restaurants, independent franchisees and business partners worldwide.

"We had a phenomenal amount of content replication," says Steve Wilson, senior director of global Web communications. "Not only was content being developed in isolation, but each platform was different. For example, our owner-operator extranet was straight HTML while our corporate intranet was in Domino. We had all these competing platforms [and] documents, and literally thousands of points of replication."

Because McDonald's lacked a common repository, the same products would often be photographed countless times by franchisees around the globe. When users did share images and documents, network bandwidth was taxed, e-mail stores were swamped and version-control problems surfaced.
The AccessMCD Media Asset Center has helped McDonald's save $1 million per year through global reuse of approved product imagery.

Many of AccessMCD’s core features are built on Communiqué, an enterprise content management (ECM) and content integration system from Day Software. Using the software's digital asset management capabilities, McDonald’s built an AccessMCD Media Asset Center (see screen capture below) that connects users to images—everything from point-of-sale signage, packaging and marketing materials to newspaper and magazine advertising. “As we establish a global brand image, it’s very important that we’re using the same approved images and logos,” Wilson says.

AccessMCD was deployed to four departments in July 2002, encompassed the corporate intranet by early 2003 and was extended as an extranet in mid 2004. Communiqué’s content integration component gave AccessMCD a common front end through which employees, franchisees, suppliers and business partners could access legacy content management systems. Day’s licensing model is based on CPUs rather than the per-seat licensing common with many ECM systems. According to Day, pricing starts at $42,000 with no concurrent-user license limitations; the number of CPUs required varies depending on data complexity and usage patterns.

Day's content integration interface provides access to three centralized content repositories: a FileNet repository managing McDonald's legal contracts and licenses, an Oracle database managing electronic documents and the Communiqué -managed Media Asset Center (see screen capture above). In addition, more than 100 intranet
and extranet "micro-sites" and the Mcdonalds.com Internet site are managed by Communiqué. The intranet serves nearly 15,000 users daily while Mcdonalds.com draws more than one million visitors per month.

McDonald's created a global taxonomy to overcome regional language variations, such as the fact that a sandwich might not be called a "sandwich" in a literal translation to another language. The taxonomy has 17 categories and 255 subcategories that drill down to the "piece part" level, differentiating content about buns, for example, based on whether or not they have sesame seeds. The company deployed two-level search: a Verity-based application that performs federated searches across AccessMCD and a second system from Day to let users search within microsites.

Translation is an important issue, too, so the system automatically routes documents to hundreds of translators and approvers across the globe when corporate authors indicate the need for translation at check-in. Those translators also localize content for regional customs and menus. Customers in India, for example, can buy "Maharaja Macs" (Big Macs made with chicken instead of beef).

Wilson wouldn't divulge McDonald's total investment, but he says the Media Asset Center alone has eliminated contracts with several third-party image hosting services around the world, saving $1 million and delivering a four-month ROI on that phase of the AccessMCD project.

Serving as a single source of corporate information, AccessMCD brought business benefits that are hard to quantify. The portal had been in place in Canada for just seven weeks when mad cow disease first made headlines in that country. "If someone had a question at the counter [in a restaurant], they were getting the same information that we had at corporate headquarters," Wilson says. The system has also cut franchisee costs. For instance, a photo shoot typically costs $10,000, but the franchisee advertising cooperatives can now download imagery paid for and approved by McDonald's.