



Possibilities

Russ Stanton

Before moving into Information Technology, Russ Stanton had developed a professional resume that encompassed radio production, producing and directing commercials and longer formats for television. He was the recipient of 13 Addy Awards and one Gabriel Award. In the late 1980s, Russ chose to move away from TV and radio and jump into the IT movement. In IT, he has successfully developed and managed enterprise business applications for top entertainment and publishing companies and has produced various interactive learning websites. His two careers merged into one by successfully implementing the Digital Workflow for TV, Print and Radio production at BBDO. Batten, Barton Durstine & Osborn. On a more personal note, Russ enjoys football, dancing and a good joke. He lives outside of Philadelphia, PA with his wife, two sons and a daughter.

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Abstract This is a tale of six photographers in 20 cities in almost every continent of the world, at the same time mind you, taking on the major task of creating a global photo Library for General Electric. Without giving away too much of the story up front, let's just say that digital asset management and the internet saved the day because this was a critical project for both GE and their global creative ad agency BBDO, and had to be completed in record time. You can only imagine the enormity of such a task, not to mention the pressure. It's also the story of having the right people in place at the right time.

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THE OPPORTUNITY

In reviewing their 2004 budget and the one for the upcoming year, General Electric (GE) determined that in terms of art costs, they could actually save money if they created a custom image library that all of the GE businesses around the world could share. Their initial idea was to employ 13 different photographers in various parts of the world, take these pictures traditionally and put them on some sort of CD. But the folks at BBDO, the people who would come to coordinate this project, had seen some interesting technology used on "America's Next Top Model" that bore some investigation. I'll get to that in just a minute.

IN THE OLD DAYS...

Imagine if there was no such thing as Digital Photography or even the internet. Jd Michaels, VP, Director of Print Services for BBDO described for me how a project like this used to be done.

They would have shot film traditionally...the film would have been sent to different labs for each photographer and some of them were

international photographers so the film would wind up going to Japan, Germany, Sweden and Britain. Once the film was developed, a contact sheet would be made and each photographer would review those with an agency art director. The art director would then review the contact sheet with the account team and then they would go to the client and make final choices as to which frames they actually wanted to work with.

At that point, we would take those frames and decide what changes we wanted to make to the frames with a high-resolution scan for digital purposes. The high-resolution scan would then be sent via mail all to New York City, where we would compile them on a server and then one-by-one begin to go through and re-touch them with all of the information in the retouching being sent either through email or over the telephone.

So everyday there would be a mass mailing both to and from the agency to get things done. Now, keep in mind that developing film takes about 2 days to do at the professional level. All of the back and forth of the film lead to certain unavoidable risks, such as losing the film, damaging the film or not being able to control

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what would have ended up being, over 300 rolls of film flying around the world.

The challenge with this project was that it was slated for 2004. It needed to be completed by the 1st of January and we started this basically in August of 2004. Doing it the oldway was not an option.

HOW'D THEY DO THAT?

In brainstorming on exactly how this project would get done in the time frame required, Jd's group thought of many things. Some of the things included having a central lab in Europe do all the film processing or having day and night shifts to handle submissions around the clock, given issues with various time zones. He continues

That meeting just precipitated tears and headaches. So after the end of that we went back to our own offices and at about the exact same time we each met in the hall and said, 'Oh my Gosh!! We could use that Xinet thing and we'll do the photography digitally.'

Xinet is a suite of products dedicated to pre-press, workflows and digital asset management. One of the main attributes that captured Jd's group's attention though was the uploader/downloader functionality that allows for the transfer of files over the internet and the ingestion into the Xinet system.

The uploader is almost an applet, Jd said, a specific program that sits on the desktop of a PC or a Mac that allows you to drag and drop images directly from your desktop connected at high-speed anywhere in the world into our firewall protected server.

The trick was could we program the applet to put them in a specific place and tag them with XMP data (metadata)? This would allow us to sort through them in any number of ways on the database without having to have someone here to administer every photo that came in.

The answer was yes. The images go into this applet, they are instantly tagged, stuffed or zipped, transmitted, unstuffed on the other end and placed in the correct folder for each photographer. Once they open on the Xinet server, previews are instantly made and it is searchable both by its name, its location, and its XMP metadata instantly.

So if we wanted to search for the import date in the date field, we got to see all the things that had come in for that date. But could it get implemented in time?

Jd continues

Because our groups were considerably smaller and they were a regional team we had to pull from various groups. So, we had the IT person who was excited about trying to pull the technology together and making sure it didn't conflict with anything else. You had Kari Nouhan, who was the art person, who was very excited about being able to get all the images in and making sure that they were a high enough quality in terms of making sure the digital photography was there. You had myself who wanted to make sure that when they came in, we could organize them and get them from place to place. And then we had Alaina Collins, who was very excited about programming it and making sure everything was running smoothly from a moment-to-moment basis.

By having all of us together as a first team, the only ramp-up we needed was that all 4 of us came together and understood what was going on, because we had taken, responsibility for the project working.

THE LOGISTICS

So after some discussions with the Xinet integrator, NAPC (New America Platinotype Corporation) we decided to give it a shot. We still didn't have the kind of time that you'd typically require for this undertaking, but we had made a commitment. So, we had to streamline everything and make every moment count.

NAPC gave us specific training for 2 days on how to set this project up educating us on skills we needed to know to create uploaders, create actions on the server, create a hierarchy on the server, make new volumes, naming conventions, tag the information correctly (metadata) and administer names and passwords.

Once we got those lessons down, then we were able to work the program and make it actually do what we wanted it to do. So we really created a machine, and that's all we wanted to know about it.

As time went on, we realized the production people could work from home saving more

time. They could work from anywhere and do complete administration of any file through the administration feature.

The amazing part is that all this happened in a 2 week period; a record implementation according to NAPC. Jd Michaels says,

They only sold us the system because we made a solemn promise that we were going to take complete responsibility for this and not expect them to staff us with someone. We just had the right combination of people to make that happen. It's just a box, but it's a box that responds extremely well to enthusiasm and ideas. That's the greatest thing about it.

So, off we went creating uploaders for each photographer, pre-programming the folders into the uploaders. Each photographer shot the equivalent of over 2–3 rolls every day and there was 4–6 weeks of shooting depending on where the photographer was in the schedule. All total there were over 15 — thousand images before all the choices were made. We ended up with 800 prime images that they use, with another 400 that were considered seconds. But the 800 that we had were retouched and put together and color-corrected uniformly.

The client could even see the previews online and they would say, “those 4 don't have the angle we want its that one” so we saved a great deal of time and a great deal in prints, which kept their cost lower.

The client became so used to the WebNative interface, that after awhile, we were able to have them review the pictures at their own site with their own computer.

The art director would be here on the phone or they could go on and choose the ones they wanted and as they chose the ones they wanted, we could go on and then look at the basket that they had made and then say OK these are the ones that they want. It started being a really fun way or working.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DAM IN ALL THIS

In the beginning, the digital asset management piece was the one thing that was simply the way that they found the few images that really

needed to be retouched and moved, out of 300 images per day. So the initial metadata was file name and photographer plus the day that it was put into the system. The initial fields that were put in were very simple.

A lot of it came out of PhotoShop. The cameras that they were using gave a great deal of information instantly and just came right into the database through the XMP data. So they really only needed to put those custom fields in so that they could search. Jd continues,

When we had the final images, we went into them and then custom tagged them to who shot them, where they were shot, also, the client gave us metadata they wanted added in for businesses that each one represented or the angle they wanted to put on it so that their people could find it easier.

When we needed to add fields specific to the client, that's when we manually added it. Everything else we had worked to make sure fields were basic and NAPC worked to make sure that their program was going to work to pull the images in the right place and then make sure that all the metadata that was involved was in the file. Also, a comfort was the fact that our IT guys had everything backed up and protected behind our firewall with only limited access from outside. Otherwise, this would have been impossible as well. We had to make sure that these million-dollar images, floating in cyberspace, were protected, and that the system was redundant so that if it went down, it could come up quickly with no time lost.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

According to Jd, If Xinet was a solution tool that gave you a workflow that was preplanned, it would have been useless, because we didn't need a solution, we needed a tool that they could build something with.

We needed a Lowes, where we could just go in and pick stuff and build something. That's what this was like for us.

The mixture of relief and pride was truly legendary with all of us. We had never gotten to work with a technology before that was so up in the air. It was like a box of crayons. The box of

crayons doesn't tell you what to draw with it, and this was what this was like. Normally, everything comes with directions, instructions or even suggestions, but it worked with out imaginations.

What I learned was that you can take pretty high-end technology and with good people that understand the basics of each aspect, put together a super group that just enjoys making things work and enjoys seeing things happen.

I think that I really learned in business, the boldness of your plan and your players is directly correlated to your success. Anybody could have bought the software, anybody could have said, 'we're going to do it', but the boldness of not

being afraid of an 800 page manual, just speaks to the type of people between BBDO and GE. That boldness is what really made the project work to the client; to say 'OK this is going to be fine with us'. It was extremely successful, I was extremely proud of it."

At the end of the day, going back to the old way of doing things as I have described earlier is now never an option, not only because of the time, although that was major. But, according to Jd, if we had done it the old way it would have cost 4½ times as much. Now that is the kind of success you can literally take to the bank.