

Sierra Trading Post: Eliminating Overtime & Maximizing Growth with Digital Asset Management

Sierra Trading Post is an outlet mall that sells name-brand apparel, footwear, home furnishings, accessories, and outdoor gear at discount prices. The company purchases vendor overstocks and closeouts and passes the savings on to its customers. Customers can purchase items using Sierra Trading Post's printed catalogs, its Web site, or at one of the company's three retail outlets.

"We currently produce 70 catalogs a year and are adding new ones all the time," said Sheila Russell, the company's catalog production manager.

Since 2001, Sierra Trading Post has increased the number of catalogs it produces from 43 to 70. Sixteen of the company's catalogs are core books, which range from 64 to 80 pages in a slim-page format. The remaining catalogs range from 32 to 56 pages in a larger page format. The print run for the catalogs ranges between 600,000 to 1.5 million.

Each of the company's catalogs shares assets with other catalogs, according to Russell, and the lifecycle of each product normally extends to only two or three catalogs.

To keep up with growth, the company recently built a new warehouse at its Cheyenne, Wyoming, location, where the catalog-production staff is located.

"We were putting in a lot of overtime to keep up with the workflow manually and had maxed-out our facility," Russell said. "We wouldn't have been able to grow — adding new products — without doing something to cap head-count growth. We just knew there had to be a better way."

Production Metrics

Before installing Quark Content Manager®, the production department used Macintosh® computers, QuarkXPress®, and Adobe® Photoshop® to manage most of its digital content. Each catalog was composed of one QuarkXPress layout, with the exception of the core books, which might contain multiple layouts.

Typically, each catalog requires a four-week production cycle — from initial layout to press — and 30 images are processed each day.

According to Russell, approximately 40 percent of the products featured in each catalog were new, which meant the group needed to create their features from scratch. The remaining 60 percent were carried over from previous catalogs, although these carry-over products were updated with necessary stock changes, such as sizes and colors.

Because the catalogs share 60 percent of their content with other catalogs, production workflows were tedious. Russell and her team were buried under piles of paper that contained hand corrections, which her group needed to incorporate into the electronic documents. Images resided in shared folders on individual workstations and servers, and team members were constantly creating multiple copies of each image or scurrying to locate an image for each new catalog. This diligent group

got the job done, but not without a few late nights, and Russell knew that the addition of new catalogs was only going to increase the complexity.

"Simultaneous production workflows with shared assets are very difficult to manage when designers are using desktop folders to store copy and images," Russell said. She'd recently been to Seybold, where she said she'd learned that digital asset-management systems might be able to help her group manage its ever-increasing assets, but she wasn't sure who had the best design for Sierra Trading Post. She decided to ask representatives at the group's printer if they could recommend a digital asset-management system.

"They said, 'check out Quark,'" Russell said.

Quark Content Manager to the Rescue

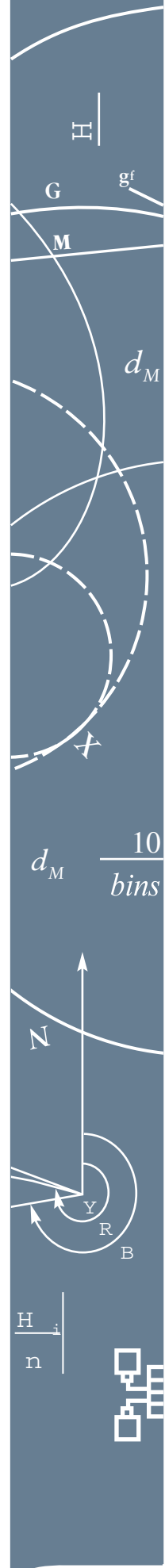
Sierra Trading Post contracted with Deepbridge Content Solutions (a consulting group that specializes in content management for both print and Web products, digital asset management, and personalization) to install a Quark Content Manager pilot with which Sierra Trading Post would produce a single catalog. Deepbridge consultants worked closely with Sierra Trading Post representatives to produce a detailed analysis of the group's current workflow. According to Russell, the current workflow spanned a chart that "covered an entire conference table."

Sierra Trading Post put together a steering committee to work with Deepbridge to develop its asset metadata, which is the definition of the attributes, relations, keywords, and previews used to describe each of the files stored in the system. In an asset-management system, the metadata fields help users track information and assets. Attributes can be user-defined or system-generated.

Members of the committee realized that clearly defining the company's assets was an important first step toward effectively testing the pilot and possibly implementing Quark Content Manager across all products if the pilot showed promise.

The steering committee identified more than a dozen attributes — but in practice, the group found that the company used Name, Stock Keeping Unit (SKU), and Additional SKU most often.

As the steering committee identified attributes, Deepbridge engineers created forms for attribute entry and pre-built queries to optimize the system for Sierra's workflow. The committee was able to closely monitor the development of the overall design, and because the committee was composed of representatives from



the various stakeholders in the company, the cooperative development served to familiarize Sierra Trading Post representatives with the concepts underlying the system's implementation. This knowledge later proved useful when the system was rolled out into production.

The pilot system was installed in April 2002, and Sierra Trading Post put the system into full production in June. After staff was trained and the new workflow had been ironed out, Sierra Trading Post was poised to take on new projects without expanding its staff or adding overtime hours.

New workflow process

For each new catalog, Sierra Trading Post's workflow consists of three smaller workflows that fall outside the overall workflow:

1. The buyer generates a "plan," which is a list of SKUs, for a new catalog. The plan contains approximately 40 percent new items and 60 percent carryover items, which are items that were published previously.

2. Design workflow

- a. The designer creates a new catalog project in QuarkXPress and checks it in to Quark Content Manager, where it can be checked out and in again by the designer or other members of the designer's team.
- b. The designer creates the catalog's design elements in Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator® and transfers those files to color correctors, who check them into Quark Content Manager after final approval.
- c. The designer drags carryover content, which includes text blocks and images, into the new catalog from the results of a Quark Content Manager query. For new items, the designer creates copy blocks (which contain elements for both text and images) and places them into the appropriate catalog. These copy blocks contain information such as product name, SKU number, and pricing. The designer names each copy block using its SKU or Additional SKU, then the designer checks each copy block in to Quark Content Manager, where they will automatically update after copy has been written.
- d. Designers query the Quark Content Manager database for photos and place them into their layouts.

3. Text workflow

- a. As soon as a product sample is available, copywriters check out the copy blocks the designer created and fill in the content. The copy blocks automatically update with the new copy after the copywriters check in their text.
- b. The copywriters print out and physically route the text blocks to buyers and representatives in quality control, who make edits to copy and specifications. The edited paper copy is returned to the copywriters, who incorporate the edits and check in the text blocks to Quark Content Manager, after which the text automatically updates within the QuarkXPress project.
- c. The designer saves each new or carryover text block with an extra two-letter code in the asset name that defines it as belonging to a specific catalog title. For example, an asset in the Sierra Shoes catalog might be coded as "12345 ss." This naming convention helps to ensure that specific inventory updates

made to an item in one title are not made in another title that carries the same product.

4. Art workflow

- a. Photographers obtain product samples and shoot the photos.
- b. Original photos are routed through maskers and color correctors outside Quark Content Manager.
- c. Buyers, designers, and color correctors identify images that need to be updated during the layout process. The photographers reshoot these items, and the images are submitted to the maskers and color correctors for approval.
- d. Upon approval of the images, color correctors check the final EPS images into Quark Content Manager and name them based on the product's SKU.
5. Before the catalog is finalized, layouts are printed and proofed by buyers, copywriters, designers and color correctors. Copywriters make changes to text blocks and check them back in. Color correctors make changes to images and check them back in. These changes are automatically updated within the Quark catalog layout.
6. The catalogs are printed and distributed, and a Quark Content Manager workspace and action folder are used to route finished copy blocks from each catalog to the web department for online publishing.

Fewer Errors, Significant ROI

According to Russell, the new Quark Content Manager system means Sierra Trading Post generates fewer errors. For example, copywriters don't need to write and edit copy as separate assets any longer; instead, they can create the copy once and check it in to and out of the system to make changes.

The company also realized a "huge savings of time" when processing images, Russell said. Instead of making and circulating multiple copies of images to each group, members of each group can simply use the system images.

Russell estimates that in 2003 Sierra Trading Post produced 40 percent more pages than in 2002, yet overtime decreased 35 percent. During that time, Quark Content Manager helped Russell and her group manage their assets without working weekends.

Because new catalog items can be added or removed up until a few days before the catalog goes to press, buyers have some flexibility for including new acquisitions in the catalogs at the last minute.

Overall, Russell said she was excited about how well Quark Content Manager has worked out for Sierra Trading Post. Since the installation of Quark Content Manager, Sierra Trading Post has added more than 14 new catalogs to its list of publications, and Russell said she is preparing to upgrade to Quark Content Manager 3 within the next few months.



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