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general

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Beside the seaside

A first application of JDF has eased the transmission of ads to a Southend origination house. By Gareth Ward.

Defining the problem was simple: how to get all kinds of digital files from an advertiser from receipt into a state usable by a printer with as little intervention as possible. The solution appears simple as well.

The advertiser gets an icon on his desktop, the file is dropped onto it and that is it. E-mail confirmation proves that the file has been received and in the subsequent issue of the magazine, the ad appears as intended.

Behind the simplicity however, lies a great deal of work, rather like the elegance of the swan drifting along the river while in fact paddling hard beneath the surface.

The advertisers are those buying space in Reed Business Information magazines, a group of business to business titles that encompass a sophisticated computer literate advertiser base on the one hand and a perhaps less so truck dealing advertiser on the other. RBI wanted to move to all-digital ad supply, achieving efficiencies and better control. Its prepress supplier of long standing JJays in Southend supplied the solution. Or more accurately it worked with Vio Worldwide and Markzware, through UK distributor ROI Distribution to build the solution.

Digital workflow

That solution is a website through which ads can be submitted to appear in the RBI titles on the system at the appropriate date. The solution includes perhaps the first practical application of a JDF solution for this purpose. For the separate MarkzNet and Vio applications are linked into to a single Check and Send entity by embracing the JDF formula.

Alan Halls, one of the three owners of the Essex origination house, says: "It is the way forward in support of a completely digital workflow. It's about a more effective way of receiving digital files and getting them into an accurate state so that it's like receiving film which we could see immediately whether it was correct." For JJays, the human file checking step is being eliminated.

JJays opened its own website including Vio's Send to Me button at the start of this year. This opens a Vio job sheet which the customer fills in and then

Prepress

News
Colour control
Computer to plate
Digital workflow
Data handling
General
Networks
Products
Rips
Plates

Publishing

Digital printing

Presses

Finishing



attaches the relevant file and clicks the send button.

The file passes into Vio's managed network which tracks it to the point of delivery, a factory unit on the Temple Farm industrial estate.

Room for error

However there is room for things to go wrong. The job ticket and file may not match and of course, there is no quality control over the file being sent, as this had to be done at the typesetter.

In the way of these things, a file is apt to sit like film until that magazine goes into production. Unlike film where a quick check early on can assess its suitability, the unusable digital file can sit invisible until late in the day with little chance of correction.

"What we needed was the next generation of delivery system," says Mr Halls. "As magazines were going to ctp, we were receiving more and more data." In other words, this was an issue that needed to be addressed. JJays is already one of the most sophisticated in the country as far as communications are concerned with Vio and Wam!Net servers, ISDN and FTP delivery and of course files coming by e-mail. Managing this could easily become a major headache.

Not surprisingly, JJays wanted to move responsibility for ensuring that files sent were correct in every way up stream to the advertiser. It might have imposed an "nothing but PDF" rule as some printers have, but this would have caused too many problems.

Nevertheless, RBI wanted to roll out ctp across its stable of titles while working closely with its prepress supplier. It categorises ads as display, classified and recruitment to cover the spectrum of material received and the sections of each magazine to go to.

It would also be receiving files in a huge range of formats, Quark naturally, but also Corel and Word created on both Mac and PC. E-mail was a simple way to send, within the expertise of all advertisers, but there was no management control over the files being sent. It was ruled out.

MarkzNet, the chosen solution, provides a downloadable applet which preflight checks a file according to the parameters set by the receiving end. Only files that meet the standards can be sent, all others fail, flagging up an explanation as to what went wrong. While MarkzNet will check PDF, it will also check almost every file type created. This offered the way to control the file transmitted, but what it lacked was the method of managing that transmission. Enter Vio.

Globalisation working

The discussions began at Ipex and work has gone on throughout the summer. It has been an exemplary study of how globalisation can work. Vio has engineers in Hertfordshire and Tel Aviv, the latter working Sunday to Thursday (allowing Sunday for any testing); Markzware's head office is in California, its European office in Holland and it runs software engineers as far afield as New Zealand. In the middle sat Mr Halls, who almost regrets asking to be copied in on every e-mail sent, such was the volume of traffic.

Early on, it was obvious that the integration between Vio and Markzware should be dictated by JDF. However as this part of the specification had not been written yet, but as representatives from the two organisations chaired the workgroups on file transmission and preflighting, here was a living example around which to build the protocols.

Mr Halls' overriding aim was to make the whole application seamless and usable to those that could not understand any programming language.

"The user interface had to be made easy and could not be cumbersome," he explains. It also had to cover every conceivable situation.

The result is a dedicated RBI website for its advertisers. A first time visitor clicks to download the icon and associated software file. This covers the MarkzNet applet and Vio job ticket, customised to meet JJays and RBI's requirements. To send, the user selects the target magazine from the pull down menu and the type of advertisement being sent. This opens up the appropriate job ticket (and magazine logo), which is completed in such a way that the file acquires data to match the naming conventions for JJays' internal systems and which avoid duplication or wrongful insertion.

Foolproof instructions

This done, the instruction from MarkzNet would have been Send, but for Mr Halls pointing out that the user would think the job finished at this point. It was changed to Continue as the file passes seamlessly into Vio's control.

"We've tried to cover ourselves for people at all levels of experience," he says, "making it as idiot proof as possible. Even so we still get questions. Our task is to be helpful, not reject them." There is a full set of instructions showing screen grabs with the action to follow clearly ringed, all at JJays' insistence.

At present, the flight check is set to allow all files through flagging those that need attention for JJays to fix. In future users will be guided initially and gradually so that those files which need further work will be blocked. The checking procedure either provides a green tick to pass, a red cross to indicate a fundamental error, such as an attempt to send an ad without fonts or in the wrong colourspace.

Others may flag that the file is not absolutely correct, but that it should print. All these are definable and easily changed. Mr Halls recalls an instance where an advertiser contacted him saying that the file could not be sent. "We changed the settings and the file arrived," he says. The user will also be given an option of how to send the file should it exceed the size normally entrusted to FTP. The route also sidesteps corporate file walls which may impose file size filters on e-mails.

Hassle-free workflow

Once the file arrives at JJays, it triggers an e-mail cascade sending messages to the advertiser and to the sales manager at the relevant Reed magazine giving full details of the file sent and when it was received. All this is extracted from the Vio job ticket, which complies with the JDF format and presented in Html so making it easier to understand than a raw text file.

In Southend, the ad can be sent automatically to the correct area for the ad type and magazine and it automatically acquires the file name that the prepress operation assigns to it under its internal naming convention.

It took an immense amount of work to reach the stage now where RBI is introducing it across its titles. Checking has gone well as did the first live transmission, which the publisher allowed without telling JJays. The advertiser was equally impressed.

The gains are clear. For the advertiser files are easy to send without hassle. In working at its end, Vio had to devise a downloadable file which did not force the advertiser to reboot his or her computer. This was simple for the

PC, less so on the Mac, says Miranda Clegg, Vio's managing director of marketing.

For the publisher, the system marks a straightforward move into digital ad supply without imposing any cost on the advertiser for making the move. For JJays, the receipt of files becomes a controlled manageable process.

Everybody gains from the systematic data collected about the file, its movements and how it is being handled. There is no longer a black hole into which an advertiser sends his artwork and which the publisher hopes will end up in the right place on page. The same information set could easily feed into a management information system or database. JJays already operates a database of ads for another publisher, allowing the magazine's editors and managers to browse PDFs of made up pages and rebook ads from those already processed. This might become a next step for RBI or other publishers.

Mr Halls adds: "It's all about the sharing of information. This is the way forward. We have moved our Internet presence from a dead website to one where we can manage the sending of files in around eight months. That's a huge step."

Different relationship

It is still early days and there will be a lot of phone support given to RBI's advertisers as they come across things that JJays has not considered. This alone, acting as the publisher's help desk, puts the typesetter into a different relationship to its customer than the traditional master and servant.

It is a modern approach to a modern problem, and proves that JDF is not just an application operable within the four walls of a print shop, but one that really can link different applications from different suppliers to meet a specific challenge.

Further down the line, the job ticket information will become available to the printers as a JDF file, but that's another story.

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