Avoid the DAM Value Trap

10 key questions your DAM vendor doesn’t want you to ask
Every vendor promises to solve your key rich media asset challenges: a central place to store and search for approved content, easy access controls, collaboration, and publishing. But most enterprise Digital Asset Management (DAM) systems were architected 10 or 20 years ago. A lot has changed:

- Digital assets have moved to the center of value creation, marketing, sales, and service—everyone needs access now
- Distribution channels have proliferated
- The frequency of market opportunities and threats has accelerated
- The marketing technology toolbox has become increasingly overstuffed, with vendors increasing 32-fold since 2011.

If you’re not careful, you could end up with a DAM system that was good for the requirements of the past, barely meets today’s needs, and will become a giant value trap in the future.

In such a dynamic environment, ensure your DAM system delivers value over the long term by making a choice that makes life easier for your users, maximizes adoption, supports your whole business, and works with your existing tools and systems—as well as the ones you’ll deploy in the future. Ask these 10 questions to be certain.

Adoption

The benefits of the best DAM system in the world will never be realized if no one uses it. The challenge is getting your staff to embrace the new solution and the benefits it will deliver, which often requires changing how they already work. (See below on the 9x benefit gap you need to overcome.) And that means thinking carefully about the costs, benefits, and learning required for your users.

Everyone knows that adoption of a new product requires the benefits of the new to outweigh the costs of switching. But don’t forget that as the change agent, you see what could be more clearly and value it more highly, relative to the status quo.

Your users see the situation in reverse, with the status quo as the point of reference, and fear what they may lose much more than what they may gain. A great deal of psychology research has shown that change agents overvalue new benefits by 3x and users overvalue status quo benefits by 3x, for a total gap of 9x between innovators and the users they must convince.²

² For more on the 9x effect, read “Eager Sellers and Stony Buyers: Understanding the Psychology of New-Product Adoption” in the June 2006 Harvard Business Review
1. How much behavior change is needed to get people on board?

The less day-to-day behavior change you ask of your team, the less they’ll perceive that they’re giving something up, and the easier it will be to get them on board. People will resist changing two things most: where they store content, and how they work with it.

Content stores
Ask vendors how they recommend providing access from the DAM system to content within all the formal and informal stores of content around the organization: existing DAM systems, agencies, cloud storage services like Box, Dropbox, Google Drive, or OneDrive, file shares, and individual PCs. If a vendor can’t show you that their DAM lets your team keep their files where they are now and operates seamlessly behind the scenes, you’ll have an uphill adoption battle on your hands and many assets that never make it into the system.

Working with files
Ask vendors how much users can continue to use their preferred applications to create and edit content. Users should be able to sync content to their PC so they can edit it in any native application. And they should be able to preview any file without needing to download it first and without having a specialized application (Photoshop, for example).

2. Are the benefits enticing enough for users to embrace the solution?

What do casual users get out of changing what they do today? For most users, the core purpose of a DAM solution is to find approved assets, but unless the system is easier to search than a stock image catalog or sending an email request, people will continue buying the same stock over and over and hassling your digital asset managers and agencies for the content they need.

Make sure you dig into the technology running the search. Is it the latest and greatest, with a strong roadmap for improvement? (Search is hard!) How well does it work as asset volumes scale from 10,000 to 100,000, 1,000,000 or 5,000,000? Does it offer facets and full-text search that works? What about advanced search functions like synonyms or misspellings? Or finding similar assets? Does applying permissions slow results to a crawl?

And make sure to ask how different groups of users can access the DAM system in the most appropriate way for their needs. For example, can sales run a search from within the CRM system and provide customers or partners a portal to the assets they are allowed to see? Can agencies automate the bulk upload of high volumes and large files?
3. **How easy is it to learn the new system?**

Many legacy DAM systems were designed in an age where training meant large user manuals and on-site training courses. But today’s users don’t learn that way. Ease of use and ease of learning are critical to adoption in the age of consumerized enterprise software, YouTube, and DIY.

Overall ease of use for casual users can be reasonably assessed in a POC, but you should probe on the administration and configuration steps, too.

**Here are some key things to look for and ask about:**

- Extensive public documentation. Can your team search Google for answers?
- Video-based, self-paced training and certification courses
- Freely available trial downloads to explore and come up to speed
- Workflows and automation that non-software engineers can configure
- Rapid deployment and launch with minimal coding and easy-to-use configuration tools
- Ask to see an implementation plan: Is it possible to start with a small set of requirements and users to show quick wins and successes, and grow use cases and users over time in an agile fashion, instead of exhaustive requirements gathered up front?
Scale

The scale to support end-to-end, omnichannel needs across the entire enterprise

Just as important as user adoption is the ability to incorporate all the assets those users might need. As your business and DAM solution users scale, there’s a danger that systems become inflexible, silos choke collaboration, and customization cripples innovation.
4. How quickly and easily can the DAM system add support for new content types?

Snap is pushing circular video, AR is here, VR is around the corner, and who knows what will come after.

Whatever new content types become important to your business, will your DAM be ready, or will you have to manage them outside the system because it cannot support the file type, extract the right metadata, or preview it seamlessly?

Ask each vendor to add a new content type they don’t currently support as part of a demo and see how long it takes them (or if they balk). If they can’t add that support quickly, ask them when it will be delivered on their roadmap.

Make sure they demonstrate not just ingest and storage, but useful previews (for example, 3D content needs to be rotatable and videos need storyboards) without download and a sensible user experience (for example, peering inside a zip file and downloading only specific files).

5. How easily can the DAM system add new distribution points?

It’s great when a DAM gives you multichannel publishing capability to post videos to YouTube or Facebook. But don’t be fooled. Your content has 10, 100, or 1,000 end points, from the web to mobile apps to digital signs to print shops to packaging. Permissions must travel with the content, and insights should flow back. You have to look beyond what’s available out of the box.

Any enterprise DAM system that isn’t built to make it easy to add new distribution points, associated workflows, and automation will limit how well you can monetize your assets, or cost you enormous customization resources to achieve it.

Ask your DAM vendor for the distribution points they support out of the box, then ask them to configure a new one and gauge their reaction.
6. How easily will the DAM system adapt to changes in my business?

Your business is dynamic. Some parts are growing quickly. Others are shrinking. You may be on an acquisition or divestment spree (or both). New business models emerge and old ones fade.

This dynamism works in your favor if your team and the tools you rely on can quickly adapt. Unfortunately, the architectures and hard coded customizations in legacy systems are brittle and complex. The simplest changes—adding or changing a descriptive field, for example—to a production system can require a lot of advanced planning, system downtime, and careful testing. These costs of change create fear and delay. Can your business afford to be immobilized?

Ask the DAM vendor you’re considering these questions:

• Can you add new descriptive fields, or change existing ones, in a production system with zero downtime?
• Can you add new vocabularies or taxonomies without disrupting existing ones?

7. Will this DAM system reduce or reinforce the silos in my business?

Most large enterprises have 10, 50, 100, or more content silos (we even worked with one that had over 1,000!). There are three main reasons for the proliferation:

1. Each department wants unique functionality that’s too hard or slow to create using the enterprise system, so they buy their own.

2. The enterprise system (where it exists at all) is too inflexible to support multiple groups using it in their own unique ways, with their own workflows, branding, vocabularies, or taxonomies.

3. The system can’t manage the scale or speed required by the amount or complexity of the assets and their metadata, or perform across a globally distributed user base. (We worked with one company that kept a large physical photo archive because their DAM was at capacity—adding additional assets slowed performance to a crawl.)

Check how quickly the vendors you’re considering can ingest thousands of assets across different locations, without massive infrastructure requirements. Check how many simultaneous downloads they can support across different locations. And check how easily they can segregate use cases for different teams across suppliers, marketing operations, sales, services, and customers—all operating off the same assets.
8. Will the DAM system underpin or undermine my digital transformation?

A successful digital transformation initiative requires enormous executive commitment, willpower, and energy to transform people, processes, products, and platforms. Even the most advanced packaged DAM products will only meet 80% of your needs. You’ll spend thousands—or millions—on customizations to close functional gaps and train users. Inevitably, as your business changes or software releases are introduced, the customizations you’ve built will get harder and harder to maintain until they start undermining the transformation itself. Don’t let your software lock you into an out-of-date way of doing things.

Questions that can signal trouble down the road:

• Does the DAM require a lot of customization, rather than configuration, to work for our business?

• Do analysts and reference customers report complex, long, and expensive services projects to get the DAM working?

• Do most customers run out-of-date versions, indicating painful upgrades?

Look for systems that are fully configurable through an intuitive graphical interface—content models, views, workflows, automations, permissions, vocabularies, and branding. And look for configurations that keep working when you upgrade.
Integration in a fast-changing technology ecosystem

No IT system lives in a vacuum, least of all a Digital Asset Management system ingesting assets from a large variety of sources and distributing them to a large variety of users.

Thinking in advance about how to leverage accelerated DAM innovation and about the role of DAM in your wider technology ecosystem will pay enormous dividends.
9. How easily can this DAM system take advantage of emerging cloud capabilities?

Many of the capabilities that DAM systems provide have become available as discrete and elastic cloud services. For example, Amazon Elastic Transcoder for video, Google Vision and Amazon Rekognition for autotagging images with machine-learning algorithms, and Google Docs for collaborative editing. And that’s on top of essential backend services like cloud storage. These capabilities deliver enormous value and massively accelerate the pace of innovation a DAM system can deliver by leveraging the investments and scale economies of the internet giants.

If your DAM isn’t already taking advantage of these, proceed very cautiously. It’s a sign your vendor doesn’t have the architecture to support plugging in cloud services, or the vision to recognize the value these can bring to their customers. Ask about the roadmap to integrate these. Ask how easy it is to swap one for another, because innovations are only accelerating and you don’t want to get locked in to the second-best offering. And look for evidence that it’s already been done multiple times.

10. How easily will the DAM system integrate with my current and future marketing stack?

The number of marketing technology vendors has grown 32x from 150 in 2011 to nearly 5,000 in 2017. Almost all of them tie into content. Every DAM system you look at will tout integrations into other tools of one sort or another.

But don’t let yourself be wooed by integrations with a particular commerce engine, web content management system, or analytics platform. You need to ensure you’ll be able to integrate with whatever systems you’ll need next year and the year after that.

Find out how strong the API is. How deep, how fast? (Hint: if the product itself isn’t built on the API, it’s probably not great.) Ask your short list of vendors to deliver an integration they don’t have today as a Proof of Concept and see how they react. Can they do it in a week? Or is it just a vague future roadmap promise?

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Conclusion

Investing in a Digital Asset Management system can be a huge win for your business. It can accelerate your speed to market, increase marketing’s impact, and boost productivity while giving you back control of your content and reducing spend.

Or it can be a nightmare journey through expensive customizations that don’t work, functionality that doesn’t scale, and a system that can’t adapt as your business changes.

Picking a system that can meet your needs today and into the future is essential to getting the value your business needs and avoid the nightmare you fear.

Caveat emptor!
Nuxeo, developer of the leading, cloud-native Content Services Platform, is reinventing enterprise content management (ECM) and digital asset management (DAM). Nuxeo is fundamentally changing how people work with both data and content to realize new value from digital information. Its cloud-native platform has been deployed by large enterprises, mid-sized businesses and government agencies worldwide. Customers like Verizon, Electronic Arts, ABN Amro, and the Department of Defense have used Nuxeo’s technology to transform the way they do business. Founded in 2008, the company is based in New York with offices across the United States, Europe and Asia.

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