

BEST PRACTICE

Waste Not, Want Not—Why Not?

If we're so smart, wonders entrepreneur Timothy O'Brien, why don't we have a system to capture our creative content? **By Jonathan B. Levine**

ACCORDING TO THE OLD HOLLYWOOD adage, it's cheaper to reshoot a scene than to waste time and money searching for the original film in the studio's vaults. Today the digitization of everything has made Hollywood's headache everyone's business problem. Think of General Motors, where every time a designer changes a car part, all of the documents change as well: manufacturing orders, product specs, assembly instructions, repair manuals.

The staggering growth rate of digitized creative content threatens to make this business-as-usual problem increasingly un-

manageable: IBM estimates that 12% of the information now housed in computer databases consists of multimedia files, and that by 2003, the figure will mushroom to 46%. Wal-Mart already stores 50 terabytes of data—the equivalent of half the text-based data in the Library of Congress—so it can track sales trends. Soon it will install video cameras in its stores to capture qualitative shopper information. For companies, the ability to catalog, search, and retrieve rich content from such information constitutes a major competitive advantage.

Enter Timothy O'Brien, playwright and content manager. As CEO of the five-

year-old San Francisco-based Content Group, O'Brien is on a mission to eradicate creative waste. His methodology, which he has dubbed the "leveraged content model," helps such clients as GM, IBM, and Hewlett-Packard to impose rigorous controls on their creative operations and to build content-management systems that mirror how creative employees actually work. "Business managers rarely look at the creative process," O'Brien says. "Yet its inefficiency is devastating to productivity. It's the most neglected area of business today."

O'Brien, 40, whose first love is experimental theater, came to his vision of content management in 1994, while producing a play of his called *An Object Orientation*. In it, two characters search in vain for a piece of lost information, only to realize that what they were really seeking was meaning, not data. O'Brien has since applied that insight to the work of helping companies find order amid the chaos of data overload. His approach to content management breaks down into four basic principles.

Content Is Money

O'Brien sees a company's content base as the balance sheet of its intellectual property. His argument: You put strict controls on inventory and on key production systems. Why allow your creative operations to get away with anything less rigorous?

Nike, for instance, maintains more than 23,000 videos on its shelves—mostly of sporting events. Many of them are duplicates made when different product groups sent film crews to the same event. Yet the company often can't tell what it has or find what it needs. A system that enabled production managers to lay their hands on desired shots would send savings directly to the bottom line. It could also yield a whole new business: selling clips of Michael Jordan and other stars over the Web.

Create Once, Use Often

Creative content, like any product, has a life cycle. A product photo that was shot for a printed spec sheet may end up on a Web site, in a CD-ROM, or in a magazine ad. But if you don't plan for reuse, adapting the shot

can be more expensive than the initial cost of shooting it. The key to effective content management, according to O'Brien, is to harness metadata—electronic tags that describe and index a creative work's physical attributes, such as sound, color, and size.

Metatags can also integrate the steps in a complex production process, so that a change at one stage prompts adjustments to all downstream operations. That can save enormous costs and reduce time-to-market.

Walk the Talk

"Managing content assets is as much about understanding production work flows as it is about keeping up with advances in technology," O'Brien says. That's why he hires veterans from such disciplines as film, imaging, art, and architecture to help him stay current with the latest production tricks, and to mediate between content managers and content creators. Artists, animators, and other creative professionals all use their own tools and speak their own language. If you want to manage their output, O'Brien says, you need to understand how they work.

Go for the Jugular

Ultimately, content management is less about managing content and more about harnessing your creative assets faster than your competitors do. The main goal, says O'Brien, is to create market differentiation.

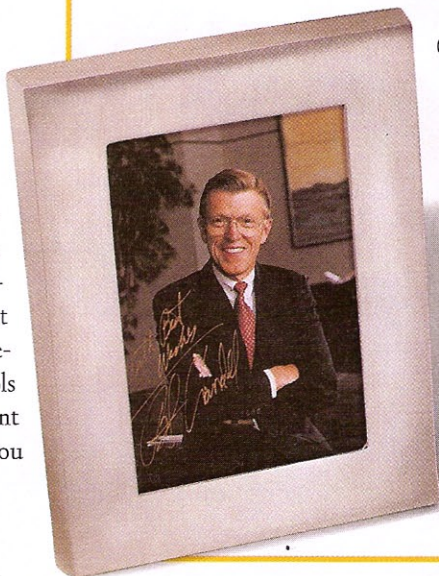
Sometimes the simplest applications are the biggest winners. One West Coast bank recently realized that its share of auto loans placed through dealers was inversely proportional to the length of time that customers had to wait in the showroom for credit approval. So to speed up the sign-off process, the bank set up a system for zapping images of handwritten applications to appropriate departments. As the approval time shrank from 35 minutes to less than 5, the bank watched its loan portfolio double to \$2 billion in only 18 months. "Make the strategic creative," says O'Brien. "That's how you make an impact in the market."

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ICONS & ARTIFACTS

HOW DID KEITH HERRMANN GET SOME OF THE MOST POWERFUL MEN IN THE WORLD to sign on the dotted line? He just asked. The director of new-business analysis at Exide Electronics in Raleigh, North Carolina is the proud owner of what may be the ultimate Dilbert-era artifact: more than 200 autographed photos and business cards from some of the biggest names in corporate America. A few questions immediately come to mind. First, why? Herrmann (herrmann@email.exide.com), whose hobby was launched when the artist Christo sent him three signed lithographs in the mid-1980s, began his latest collection in 1997 because, he says, "I admire people who have made it to the top."

COLLECTOR'S ITEM? AMERICAN AIRLINES CEO ROBERT CRANDALL SMILES AND SIGNS FOR KEITH HERRMANN, AUTOGRAPH JUNKIE.



Second, what does this catalog of suits, comb-overs, and signatures tell us about the nation's leading capitalists? Herrmann has a few ideas. For instance, he notes that the CEOs of the Big Three automakers promptly sent him autographs—but the CEOs of six major oil companies refused. Does that indicate a difference in public-relations savvy?

CEO Autographs

As the signatures came in, Herrmann puzzled over other thought-provoking questions: Why would Delta say no, when American, Southwest, and Northwest Airlines all said yes? What made William Wrigley send six packs of Juicy Fruit gum, but no signature? Why is Andy Grove's signature so small? Is it a sign of modesty—or of paranoia?

Finally, is there any correlation between a CEO's net worth and the value of his autograph? At least one chief executive had an answer. J.B. Foster of the Newfield Exploration Co. sent a note along with his signature: "This and a dollar will get you a cup of coffee."

—CURTIS SITTENFELD

Funny Business Buddy Hickerson



"All those in disagreement with me, signify by saying: 'So long, gainful employment.'"