Versandhaus Walz GmbH Boosts its Catalogue Production Processes by Implementing a Fully Automated Quark Dynamic Publishing Solution

Versandhaus Walz GmbH is one of Europe’s leading specialty mail-order houses, producing more than 50,000 layout pages per year. The production of each catalogue was a complex and time consuming project with many manual tasks — until Versandhaus Walz engaged system integrator Softbricks to develop a dynamic publishing solution based on QuarkXPress® Server. The new system has shortened the production process considerably, allowing images, texts, and product data to flow automatically into the corresponding layouts. In-house staff and remote employees all have permanent access to the same continually updated content. This saves on costs for Walz while also ensuring a consistent corporate brand.

Versandhaus Walz currently is the largest specialist mail-order house in the Primondo Specialty Group. The company employs a workforce of some 1,800 persons, and runs more than seventy specialized outlets in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Walz operates under six brand names, the oldest and best-known of which is baby-walz, dating from 1952. The company’s stable of brands has since grown to include moderne Hausfrau (Modern Housewife) and the relatively recent additions walzkidzz, sunnywalz, creawalz, and Nuggihuus. Almost a third of Versandhaus Walz’s revenue is now generated outside Germany, with catalogues distributed in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Two key elements in the company’s success are its high level of processing efficiency and its low operating costs.

Goodbye Copy and Paste — Hello Dynamic Publishing
Catalogue production was, until recently, a complex matter at Walz. It involved the never simple task of networking various parties involved in the catalogue production process — including employees in different in-house and external environments, reprographic
specialists, assorted agencies, text translators, and no end of photographers — while keeping them supplied with current and consistent data. The five catalogue areas were run by decentralized management teams, with text and images stored haphazardly at photography, agency, and reprographic studios. The resulting graphics and text followed no discernible standard or consistent scheme; archiving was inconsistent, with documents saved in varying formats and file-naming systems; and image data often failed to meet the required criteria.

When catalogue content was final, the text was manually copied and pasted into a media database for use in future projects — a time-consuming task which was not exactly interesting! Editing a new version of a catalogue often required staff to manually collate and reassemble a variety of old advertising material, images, and text.

The more Walz’s catalogue business expanded, the more apparent it became that they needed a solution that would improve their overall system, achieve optimized costs, and shorter production cycles. One thing was clear from the outset — the system would require centralized process management. The hierarchy of data management had to have Walz — not its external partners — at the top. Walz needed to control who had access, by what means, to what material, and under what conditions.

Quark Technologies Supply the Solution

After analyzing competing systems, Walz chose to implement a dynamic publishing solution based on Quark® technologies. QuarkXPress Server provides the core technology on which the new dynamic publishing solution is based. Quark developed this base technology to combine the high-quality typography and graphics support of QuarkXPress with server-based performance that enabled automated processes. QuarkXPress Server provides system integrators, developers, and customers with flexible technology which enables them to leverage the creative potential of QuarkXPress to create applications and solutions for automated publishing in the following areas: Web-to-print, variable data publishing, automated text advertising, creation of PDF documents on demand, customization, and one-to-one marketing.

Many other systems were considered, but QuarkXPress Server was the one that convinced Versandhaus Walz. “The other systems offered very expensive solutions that could not be customized to meet our specific requirements, and therefore would have required us to change our internal processes. QuarkXPress Server, on the other hand, is considerably more flexible and enabled us to adapt the software to meet our specific needs,” recounts Christian Rast, the head of Walz’s advertising department.

“We used to work with InDesign®, but now we use QuarkXPress exclusively,” says Christian Rast. “Our experience has shown that QuarkXPress gives us a much greater degree of design and layout control. With each version, QuarkXPress has introduced more intuitive tools which enable us to work more efficiently, making this the right software to rely on now and in the future. Furthermore, employees of the reprographic firms that we work with have an enormous amount of

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THE TASK:
- To shorten the production times of catalogues and other communications media while creating publication processes that are more cost effective
- To supply advertising material in various languages to anywhere in Europe while ensuring brand consistency

QUARK SOLUTIONS:
- QuarkXPress Server as the base technology for the platform MediaDB from Softbricks
- The graphic-design capacity of QuarkXPress linked to server-based performance

THE RESULT:
- Over 50,000 catalogue pages produced every year
- Brand consistency
- Enormous savings in terms of time and cost
expertise in using QuarkXPress, as have the various agencies that have been with us over a long period of time. We wanted to take advantage of this expertise. The technical production procedures and configuration settings of our agencies are, thanks to QuarkXPress, fully tried and tested.” Although several agencies had to cut their ties with InDesign and find new ways of doing things, “this was not a problem thanks to the excellent support and training provided by Quark,” Rast reports.

Walz found an ideal partner in Softbricks, an innovative company that specializes in developing software for the media industry. After an exhaustive needs analysis, Softbricks set about developing a permanently available, central platform based on QuarkXPress Server - MediaDB - that follows logical principles to store all product data and product assets. As Stefan Sporrer of Softbricks states, “The performance and stability of QuarkXPress Server are impressive. Thanks to its industry-standard development environments such as Java™, JSP™, ASP.NET, PHP, Visual Basic®, and protocols like HTTP and SOAP, QuarkXPress Server can be integrated into existing IT environments in a totally flexible way. This is what has allowed us to supply not a rigid global system, but rather a set of freely-configurable components in the form of an overall solution containing only those modules that are actually needed.” If needs change, it is then merely a question of quickly adding new add-on functions to the existing system.

MediaDB — the Source of Content for all DTP Processes
MediaDB, developed by Softbricks, provides a central source of content for all of Walz’s publishing processes. MediaDB is now linked to the goods-management system that handles all of the company’s product data. MediaDB receives these flows of data along with archived items, old advertising material, and product-related text, sorted by such criteria as product name, description, and pricing, including their corresponding style sheets and product geometries.

MediaDB is also linked to the Xinet® WebNative® database used by a reprographic firm called Christ. This allows all the photographers working on a project to upload their pictures — even while photo shoots are taking place — to a carefully designed image database, and immediately assign each picture to its corresponding page in the catalogue. An image-selection tool allows members of Walz’s advertising department to evaluate the picture files received from photographers and pre-sort them by category.

The Xinet WebNative database currently holds some 20 terabytes of such material, consisting of approximately 1.1 million files, of which about 900,000 are images. As soon as a new advertising concept is finalised, image files are imported from the database to the layout through QuarkXPress Server and MediaDB. MediaDB greatly simplifies the real pre-production of a QuarkXPress layout, making the process much more efficient. Based on text, images, product data, and product geometries from previous catalogues, the entire catalogue layout is automatically structured and pre-configured — in a matter of minutes! Foreign language translations of the text are also handled by QuarkXPress Server and MediaDB, allowing the translated content to flow automatically into the corresponding layouts.
One Single Source of Content for many Output Formats

Data can flow in both directions. While content flows from the goods-management system and the picture database through MediaDB into layouts, it can also automatically flow in reverse from the catalogues into MediaDB. Each time a catalogue is created, QuarkXPress Server extracts the final version of the text, including style sheets, from the catalogue pages and structures them as XML files. These XML files are classified by criteria such as headline, sub-headline, price line, and product description, including the path in the Xinet system where the pictures are stored. The files are then imported into MediaDB, thus ensuring that the latest versions of text and their corresponding style sheets are always available. Catalogue updates can be fed back into MediaDB at any time.

This new dynamic publishing concept allows true automated multi-channel publishing. An entire catalogue layout, advertisements, and other e-commerce materials can be produced from a single source of content. Access to this content can be offered to publishers, partners, subcontractors, agencies, reprographic firms, internal departments, and external or outsourced suppliers (such as customer service or translation agencies). MediaDB allows members of the advertising department, for example, to download image formats required for a specific task, while their colleagues in the Walz online shop department use the system’s text- and image-export features to obtain content.

This in turn ensures that all those involved are working with the same content and talking to each other through standard lines of communication. And brand consistency is assured, regardless of the delivery media.

Time and Cost Savings — Plus Better Quality

“The transfer of final data from our catalogues to the media database using copy and paste sometimes took over a week for complex projects. Thanks to automation, it can now be carried out in just a few minutes,” says Christian Rast. “The question as to whether the system has paid for itself scarcely arises. The cost of the new software will be recovered after the creation of just a few catalogues, thanks to the enormous savings in time and expense.” At the same time, the dynamic publishing solution provides access to all of the layout design features in QuarkXPress, along with all of the application’s creative capabilities. This enables Walz to design high-quality layouts that more than meet the needs of the market, and ensures that the company can remain competitive in the long term.

Another advantage of the dynamic publishing process clearly lies in its standardization of procedures. “We now adhere to our processes even more closely than before,” reports a satisfied Christian Rast. “Procedures are more clearly defined, as is the chain of responsibility. We can clearly establish who has what rights to what content.” Employees have adapted quickly to the new workflow. “Our workflows are now more disciplined, more clearly defined, simpler to trace, and easier to moni-
tor, and our content is saved in a far more organized and efficient manner. The material managed by MediaDB is constantly updated, allowing content to be reused virtually in real time.”

Does Versandhaus Walz have any plans to expand their dynamic publishing solution? Christian Rast is already thinking along these lines. “Yes, we are considering the use of Quark Publishing System® (QPS®) and the QPS Web Hub to manage our translation and proofing processes online.”

Walz is also thinking about expanding their automated workflow using a Web-based page-planning system that would pre-produce a QuarkXPress file of the catalogue’s final layout. The workflow might look something like the following. A product manager, designer, or advertising staff places product previews on pages using a Web browser. QuarkXPress Server then automatically creates a QuarkXPress file that is used to produce the final catalogue, made possible by the bi-directional transformation between QuarkXPress and XML files. This is the dynamic publishing of the future!

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About Quark

Quark’s software enables organizations of all sizes to meet customer demand for engaging, relevant communications when, where, and how they want them. Our solutions combine the power of XML with flexible layout and design to automate the delivery of customer communications to print, Web, and interactive experiences on the latest digital devices. Financial services firms, manufacturers, and governments around the world rely on Quark solutions to elevate customer communications to new levels, reduce time to market, and lower costs.

Revolutionizing Publishing. Again.”