

Amway's Data Central: A Global Media Archive as a Tool for Corporate Communications Strategy

by Linda Folland, Senior Global Media Archivist & Imaging Team Leader, Amway Corporation

Michigan Reaches Out to the World

Amway, a privately held company founded in 1959 by two friends is a singular phenomenon. In just 37 years, Jay Van Andel and Rich DeVos built a six billion dollar global conglomerate that now operates in over 65 countries. The two philanthropic founders are now recently retired, and have turned over the corporate reins to their children. At every opportunity they gratefully acknowledge their good fortune in not only achieving the American Dream themselves but for also being able to help others do the same.

With more than 12,000 employees and a network of more than two million independent distributors, Amway manufactures some 400 home and personal care products as well as goods for health and fitness, home technology, and commercial settings. Via unique direct-sales partnerships and mail order catalogs, the company also markets a variety of services and more than 6500 items branded by other companies - practically everything needed for daily life. But they didn't have an archivist.

Taking Care of Business

While many companies were cutting back their archives in 1995, Amway continued to expand, hiring me to work in the Communication Division's Creative Services department. Formerly responsible for Special Programs and Collections at Herman Miller, Inc., I was brought on board at Amway in July to develop a digital archive of the photography and art for print publications that would be accessible throughout all of Amway's world operations. Why is

the need for image control so crucial at Amway? Since most of the corporation's business is conducted through catalogues, Amway has created one of the nation's largest in-house printing operations - which in turn has generated an image library with over two million photographs.

A Change in Strategy

My information management background, research in emerging publishing technologies, and in-house technical situational analysis soon led me to recommend a broader scope archives that would also incorporate video and sound elements, templates, text blocks, and completed digital designs. In short, I recommended creating a Global Media Archive (GMA). The GMA as envisioned would operate as a central finding system for multi-use elements that could be requested and transmitted as data, film, disk, tape, etc., for use in print or multi-media projects anywhere at Amway.

Amway believes such an archive is necessary to ensure the clear and consistent corporate voice that a large organization needs to speak to its many diverse audiences. Having key communication elements centrally accessible also encourage fuller use of expensive, resources. Take photographs for example: even with a staff of 15 in-house photographers, a major photo shoot can cost thousands of dollars. A GMA can maximize the return on that investment by facilitating the reuse of those images.

Moreover, a GMA can improve information exchange and

enhance creativity among internal, geographically disparate design staff. This kind of data-based operation, though difficult to configure and connect, can streamline the publishing process. It can also help the organization to meet the needs of its target audience with the media of choice - say via the Internet or by CD.

New Combinations of Old Archival Principles

To fully understand the concept of a GMA, it helps to consider it from both an intellectual and a physical perspective. To maintain intellectual authority over the collection, a controlled vocabulary, accessible on-line with pop-up directories, will be used in conjunction with a natural language, full-text search engine. This combination is essential to guarantee effective access for hundreds, maybe thousands of users. For now, the finding system will be English based, with global language differences to be worked out later.

Physically, magnetic-or optic-based data are not preferred archival storage media. So the digital central finding system, from which low-resolution images can be positioned to mock up designs, will be supported by image repositories on film and an intricately designed back-up system. Eventually users will be able to request what they need right on-line after viewing and selecting it. Printing processes will use automatic picture replacement technology to switch the low-resolution images with their stored high-resolution counterparts just before printing.

The Staff Gears Up

Apart from setting the communication strategy for the project and figuring out the technology itself, a big part of the job has been to get Amway's technical staff aligned behind the undertaking. The work includes collaborating with technical experts outside Creative Services and helping develop a new, self-directed cross-functional work team of archivists, lab technicians, digital prepress operators, and a host of others. This has been a formidable task because the work team is functionally-diverse - we are essentially creating a new business paradigm.

In addition to maintaining a demanding schedule of traditional archival activities, the new imaging work team has in the last year, developed a vision, mission, guiding principles, and goals for its new operations. The team is now producing Gantt charts and workflows in support of the GMA project and another project to set up a digital prepress operation. Many of the work team members have attended formal, external training relevant to these two projects. To assist the team, I have compiled an extensive glossary of technical media terms, now numbering 100 pages and growing. I have also developed several archive models, first to garner the support of Communications management, and then to help other archivists and technicians to see how they fit into the overall picture. Standard-setting and work-instruction writing is also underway, and is based upon information gleaned from ANSI, ISO, and other relevant professional standards associations. Likewise, systems requirements have been written, vendors scrutinized, and a selection made.

Most important of all is acquiring

reliable software, hardware, and integration services so that staff can be trained and the system tested. Installation of the system is now underway, and testing will begin in the Fall of 1996.

User Interface: Making the Connection

Working with management, I am designing a user-interface plan that includes a network of professionals across the company. A crucial and necessary part of the GMA network will be the assigning of key representatives to serve on an advisory committee. I will involve corporate leaders in the selection process to ensure that the committee's membership adequately represents the diverse interests of Amway's global management.

Next steps will be conducting interviews, compiling and analyzing data, and preparing results reports. Then come domestic and international site visits, holdings inventories, appraisal and transfer of materials, and finally organizing and entering the material into the system. It's a process that will likely take years to unfold.

The intended outcome is to create a systematic means to acquire reusable elements from across the company and make them globally accessible to key communicators in a timely, accurate, and technologically convenient fashion. Such a system will create cross-functional synergies and cost savings that will produce long-term benefits for Amway. Continued collaboration among the work team and whole-systems planning will be essential for the permanent success of the Amway Global Media Archive, as will staying on top of developments in technology and archival practice.