

Picture this

Karl Cushing looks at how a picture library overhauled its storage and delivery systems

Having an effective system for retrieving documents is important for any company with an extensive archive. But when that archive is the basis of your whole business, it is vital.

This was the situation that faced Pictor International, a London-based picture library that supplies images to the publishing and marketing industries.

To improve access to its image library, cut delivery times and open up new markets, it has developed an online strategy, adopting a novel storage method to support the delivery of images via the Internet.

The company began offering access to its images via the Internet at the beginning of 1999. The problem was that the original images were scanned on to CD-Rom and stored at a scanning house in Hong Kong. So although low resolution copies of the images were available on its Web site, customers wishing to purchase an image had to have the high resolution file delivered from Hong Kong.

This meant the service was very limited. Customers could request images on the Web site but the company had to locate, scan and e-mail



Global market... Pictor's digital photographs can be sent anywhere in the world thanks to a new archiving system

the images to the customer manually. And because the file transfer protocol server and all original images were stored in Hong Kong, any problems there could lead to delays. Staff in Hong Kong had to provide 24-hour cover to make sure that images

were delivered on time.

"That was the intermediate stage," says Pictor's IT manager Kevin McGroarty. "But it was still a lot quicker than the old stage."

McGroarty says the main purpose of the Web site was to show that the company had an online presence. In practice, the human element and the labour-intensive nature of the fulfilment process resulted in delays. And when the volume of business increased, it started to look unsatisfactory.

"It gave the illusion of a fairly seamless system but it did have flaws," admits McGroarty.

However, despite its limitations, Pictor stuck with the system, based on "fairly clumsy manual fulfilment

from CDs", until the beginning of 2001.

To improve the image retrieval system and increase the speed of delivery of high resolution images, Pictor moved control of its online archive in-house. But this raised issues, not least the question of storage.

Pictor could not store the images on its main server as they would take up too much space. And if the server went down, customers would be denied access to the images.

The company wanted to introduce a system that was scalable, in line with its long-term goal of storing all images digitally. It had three main options - CD, DVD and optical. CD was cheap but offered limited storage capacity. Optical offered high capacity but was expensive.

DVD offered suitable capacity at an affordable price.

Having chosen a storage medium, the company still needed to choose or develop a system - a problem that was solved when it saw a demonstration of a jukebox system at a trade show in London. "We didn't really have an option," says McGroarty. "It was the only way to go."

The installation process took six months. McGroarty says that consolidating all the images, converting files and reorganising them so they could be retrieved quickly was a massive task. Pictor also had to design the retrieval system it required.

"We were one of the first companies in the market to use the jukebox for this purpose and the software wasn't available," explains McGroarty. "It was a case of developing and evolving as we went along. It hasn't been easy but it has been worth it."

The company chose storage management software from QStar to control and manage data on the jukebox while the retrieval software was written by ObjectView. The bulk of the images are stored in a logical directory tree structure, whilst frequently used images are stored in QStar's cache to provide faster access.

Now the system is up and running, newly processed images are put straight onto the system after being retouched. And these images are archived automatically.

the process from submission of an image to sale and delivery is conducted via digital workflow. Human intervention has been removed.

The high resolution original of the image is taken off the system after a month to be stored offline on DVD in a rackling system. But the high resolution "deliverable" image, which is sent to customers, is kept online.

The Pictor jukebox has a storage capacity of 1.2 Tbites of DVD-Ram. And because the system is separate, it does not interfere with the daily running of the business.

The system has resulted in cost savings. The company is not paying staff in Hong Kong to back up the old system. But McGroarty explains that it is an investment. "It has given us the opportunity to expand into other markets and perform more efficiently on our own," he says. "Before, it was all done with smoke and mirrors."

Whereas previously it could take more than an hour to get an image to a client, it now takes a few minutes, claims McGroarty. Customers simply log on to the Web site, purchase and download images on the spot.

"It is scalable and will grow with our company - it is absolutely 100% central," says McGroarty. "We've got the proper back-end delivery system we always needed."

System benefits

- The company can track photographs in and out of the building more easily
- Film clips and images can be duplicated quickly
- The system is scalable and flexible
- Consolidation - everything is in one place
- Instant delivery to customers without human intervention.

Picture-perfect e-business

THE PROBLEM

Picture library Pictor wanted to bring control of its online archive in-house but was faced with the problem of storing its images effectively

THE SOLUTION

McGroarty developed a DVD storage system based on the D480 jukebox from Plasman, using storage management software from QStar and image delivery software from ObjectView.

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