

Prepress Firm Instigates Evolution Toward JDF Ad Workflows

BY KLAAS MEELKER

A U.K. repro house's need to automate the ad-intake process elicited cooperative R&D efforts with Vio and Markzware. The result, a JDF preflighting and job-ticketing system, has now been installed at one publisher.

In the chain of magazine publishing, the advertisements play an important and particular role. For the publisher, they are of vital importance for the publication: They are the source of revenue. A mistake in an ad usually is a bigger drama than a mistake in the editorial copy. The publisher loves advertisements.

The graphic arts company has rather mixed feelings. Of course there is love; after all, the prepress or printing company knows that the continuity of the customer depends very much on the income that the ads generate. But, at the same time, the prepress department that has to process the ad files finds itself confronted with an unrivaled diversity in file formats and levels of quality—and a very tight schedule. From a technical point of view, the average editorial page is much more predictable and much easier to process than the average ad page. Often enough, the ads are a considerable source of stress and, at times, are cursed by the prepress operators working overtime on yet another font problem.

Of course there are manuals that tell the ad creator how to make and deliver correct digital files. But in real life, these manuals seldom get dog-eared. It is as if the only thing the creators check is that the ad text is correct. The publisher is usually OK with this approach, because the assumption is that the prepress company will solve any eventual problems. The advertisers are rightly pampered; no one wants to bother them with vague descriptions of prepress problems. And thus the relationship between the graphic arts company and the ad material remains a challenged one.

Opting for custom development

J Jays is a prepress company specializing in magazine production, wanted to improve that relationship. It started on a quest for a method that would generate user-friendliness for the publisher and ad creator on one hand, and reliability in the ad-processing flow on the other. Recently, an innovative method, the fruit of intensive cooperation among J Jays, Vio, Markzware and ROI Distribution, was implemented.

We met with Alan Halls, J Jays' managing director,

and asked him how this project was initiated. Halls replied, "We are one of the few independent companies in the magazine market in the U.K. We're a good prepress company, but there are more of those and probably we would not win a price war with the conglomerates.

"Our asset is optimal service: not just the pursuit of perfect support of the customer when the customer counts on it, but also proactively trying to improve. Always ask yourself: If I were the publisher, what would I expect from my prepress supplier? It is clear for everyone that the ad flow is a big challenge of the production chain. We wanted to serve our customers [the publishers] with a tool for drag-and-drop delivery of advertisement material, including reliable preflighting of digital files. We looked around in the market, but came to the conclusion that there is no off-the-shelf solution for this. Furthermore, we did not want to restrict our customers to just delivering a PDF file; part of our customer-friendliness is that we allow the customer to deliver in the file format that suits him or her best. There were solutions for remote delivery in the market, but they were based on PDF creation by the customer.

"So it had to be a custom solution. We consulted with Vio, an organization that we already had good experiences with. Preflight was important to us. Therefore Markzware joined the team."

The other preflight company that was on the short list at that time was Extensis. However, Markzware seemed more eager to invest in the project. When working on an IT project, the technical specs are important. But equally important is the *vibe*, the feeling that all the members of a project team can work

Markzware and JDF

Partly due to the J Jays project, MarkzNet, Markzware's remote-preflight application, is now able to generate JDF (and thus XML) job tickets. Markzware heads the CIP4 preflight committee. The next major upgrades of FlightCheck, MarkzScout and MarkzNet will all be based on the same software engine and will be JDF compatible. All will be available for both Windows and Mac OS X.

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In Use at Reed

The moment that an ad creator at Reed Business Information drops a file on the “RBI Check-n-Send” desktop icon, the MarkzNet application starts up. The Web browser automatically goes to a dedicated J Jays page that conforms with the Reed Business Information corporate identity. On that Web page, the ad creator specifies which magazine and edition the ad will run in and whether it is a regular ad, recruitment ad or classified ad. Based on these choices, the server sends instructions to the MarkzNet client, which executes the appropriate preflight tests.

If everything is OK, the files are collected into a single, compressed file and sent to J Jays. When the transfer is completed, the sender receives a confirmation and a job-ticket identification. The sender can then disconnect from the Internet.

J Jays routes the compressed file and job ticket to the workstation that deals with the magazine concerned. No preflight is needed, but if there are items needing operator attention, they will have been added to the job ticket automatically. The job ticket can also be interpreted and completed by JDF-compatible software downstream, such as Preps and certain order-management systems.

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fruitfully together. Halls says of Markzware, “They are people that listen carefully and are flexible. The result of this multi-party cooperation is that we now have a solution that lets the advertiser drop the files on a desktop icon and check some checkboxes in a Web site. A message will appear that the files were received well, and that’s it. Or a clear indication is given of what was wrong with the file, *e.g.*, a missing font. Useful and understandable information for the ad creator.”

But wouldn’t all that have been possible just using MarkzNet? Halls continues, “Maybe yes, but we wanted to take it a step further. Thanks to Vio, we achieve a considerable logistic benefit here in our prepress. By using Vio as the file-transfer engine instead of MarkzNet’s built-in FTP client, it became possible to deliver the files exactly on the appropriate spot in our organization. At J Jays, we process a lot of magazine titles, so that is an enormous asset. On top of that, the files get a digital job ticket and can be traced easily at any moment in time. Our internal logistics and communication have become considerably simpler and more unambiguous.”

JDF as safety net. Does J Jays fear becoming technically isolated by employing a custom solution? And will it have to open a new can of programmers when something in the workflow changes? Halls does not feel those fears. “The solution is based on standard applications from Vio and Markware. The information exchange is done in the standardized JDF format. The system is actually restrained by the prepress, as not all software and RIPS, etc., are JDF compliant. It can only get better in the future.” At this stage, the JDF information in the J Jays system is used exclusively for communication between MarkzNet and Vio, and for file-handling by the Vio application. After data leaves the Vio application, the JDF story ends, as there are

hardly any genuinely open JDF-parsing workflows in the market.

Performance parameters

J Jays’ MarkzNet application initially was different from the off-the-shelf MarkzNet in two aspects: the use of Vio’s file-transfer software instead of the built-in FTP client, and the generation of JDF data. Coming upgrades of the Markzware applications will incorporate JDF support as a standard feature. MarkzNet does not parse JDF information itself, but rather generates JDF-tagged data about the job being processed. The tagging is an elaboration of TrueFileSpec, a Markzware-specific metadata format consisting of a plain text file with key-value pairs.

For the ad sender, two factors determine the speed of the J Jays solution. First, the MarkzNet client gathers information about the fonts present on the sender’s computer. This is independent of the number of fonts that are actually used in the artwork that is being processed. Even for a one-font job, the MarkzNet client will still scan the computer for all available font files. Objectively measured, this does not really take much time, but operators generally dislike looking at progress bars. The actual speed of this process is a function of the number of fonts installed on the user’s machine.

The other factor that influences the time consumption is the quality of the Internet connection. In most cases, the PDF version of the artwork is smaller than the native application files plus images and fonts. In the J Jays system, generally more megabytes will have to be transmitted than in a PDF-based system. Therefore, the speed of the Internet connection becomes more critical. As soon as a job is submitted, the client will establish contact with the receiving server. This server will issue the preflight instructions, and with the Internet connection still open, MarkzNet will perform the preflight tests, compress the files and then transmit. Regular use of this system will probably demand a DSL or similar broadband connection—and that is not yet widely available in all geographic regions.

RBI as lead user. The first publisher to employ this new delivery method is Reed Business Information, a Reed Elsevier company. In its experience, it is an excellent system, very comfortable for the advertiser, and the preflight that is done at the moment of delivery avoids errors and delays in production. Halls says that other publishers will soon follow. “This is a chain in which all the elements enforce each other. Ad creator, publisher and graphic arts company: We all benefit from it.”

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About the author

Klaas Meelker is head of meelkermedia, a Dutch company that offers consultancy and training to publishers and graphic arts companies. More information can be found at www.meelkermedia.nl/int/. Meelker can be reached at klaas@meelkermedia.nl.