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Guru Talk: Melissa Pauna – Gap Inc – Banana Republic

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Some of the best advice you'll hear in the digital asset management space comes from Melissa Pauna. She has learned that derailments should not make one lose sight of the objectives, remaining tenacious and focusing on the big picture can lead to success in less than ideal DAM situations.



What companies/organizations have you worked for as a DAM professional? What was your role at each?

Having worked in a number of positions has provided a wonderful opportunity to understand how digital asset management (DAM) implementation, administration, and prioritization differs between sectors and even within industries.

Getty Center – I was involved in the first DAM roll-out pilot project that started in the Communications department to assist in fulfilling global press image requests. Once we had a handle on the tool and workflow, I met with representatives from around the Getty Center campus: Museum, Research Institute, Foundation, Conservation Institute. Incorporating these divisions was a gradual and systematic roll-out ensuring seamless integration. Metadata was vigilantly updated and maintained for each division as assets merged into a larger, unified, repository. You've never seen so much metadata until you work for a museum/library combo of this caliber!

MGA Entertainment – As the digital archivist for one of the largest privately owned toy companies in the US, I was responsible for distributing and archiving photography. I was part of a talented in-house photo studio team that shot the product lines for use on packaging and also distribution to retailers. My role working with the product photography brought me in contact with designers, sales, and the Hong Kong samples division to ensure images were available and up-to-date to keep Santa's workshop functioning.

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It was here that I experienced my first DAM system migration and data cleanup!

SolutionSet – Originally Haggin Marketing, I was hired to manage a digital asset management team for a well-established Bay-area marketing firm. The firm was largely print (catalog) based when I first started. We set up a DAM platform that was used by internal creative, production, and pre-press teams. Eventually a digital company was acquired to round-out service offerings. My team handled the image asset management lifecycle from start to finish including processing photoshoots, creating FPO files, retouching, and finally distributing and archiving approved photography for print and digital. Because many of our clients didn't have a DAM system of their own, I also set up mini-DAM hubs for our clients to use to access and manage their files, incorporating their brand-specific taxonomies.

Benefit Cosmetics – At this company I was hired to implement a newly purchased digital asset management (DAM) system for the marketing division with the intent to replace an existing system. After reviewing the vendor's exploratory interviews with stakeholders, I advised a slight course adjustment regarding the 'focus' of the DAM and then we quickly set to work. The new system was fully operational in less than four months just in time for a global conference unveil. It included a complete taxonomy and hierarchy build, specialized metadata schemas, branded portal (HotDAM!) that provided assets to over 700 global partners, and also served as an asset share-back platform. After Phase 1, how-to videos were created and uploaded to provide self-serve learning between formal user trainings. Once I was able to hire an assistant, we had the opportunity to further expand the DAM creating a SKU-based search, and finally integrated a weekly newsletter that highlighted new assets and included DAM tips & tricks based on user feedback. The DAM and newsletter also supported an in-house feature film that was created about the founders and shown at the Cannes Film Festival. The film included a global road show, stopping at stores and meeting with press. Production and press assets were easily shared with the masses eager to learn how "Laughter is the best cosmetic...so grin and wear it!" – that is, once we figured how to handle super-sized video files!

Banana Republic – As the global marketing asset manager and creative technology advisor for the brand, I am the advocate for DAM and continually strive to impart the importance of best practices throughout the enterprise. I was the first asset manager hired at Gap Inc. and during my first few months conducted an inventory of the systems being used (there were a few!), noting where assets were being stored (so many places!), and trying to determine how to turn a grass-roots approach to DAM into conversations that revealed to leadership at various levels throughout the enterprise the business critical nature of DAM. At its core my role involves simplifying the asset management process for our internal and external teams in an environment that often involves dependencies between brands and involves multiple legacy systems. Add to the mix a newly purchased crowdfunded DAM system that isn't exactly living up to the sales pitch and an exciting partnership with a third-party rights

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management vendor... It's quite the puzzle and a perfect environment to test anyone's DAM chops!

How do you describe digital asset management to others?

There's the short answer and then the more complex one – it really depends on who the audience is. In my world DAM has involved a lot of inter-related bits coming together to form a whole: project and product management, taxonomy and hierarchy building, metadata modeling, change management, technical writing, help desk and reference desk, QC, trainer, and the list goes on.

I usually start by briefly describing what I do day-to-day by saying I manage a company's digital and marketing assets, which includes images, videos and docs. These materials are stored in a system, then I determine who has access, apply rights info, and ensure assets are findable. At which point some people will say, "Oh, so you're like a librarian!" and then I generally respond with a smile: sort of.

Early on in my career I managed library divisions and agree it does encompass some overlapping principles, and because I'm detailed-oriented (and a long-time fact-checker on the side), I know 'librarian' isn't accurate or what I consider myself, even if the analogies can be helpful.

Digital asset management is an emerging new discipline. Just as there are many ways to manage assets, there are many ways people enter into this work. The longer one is in this space and experiences different methodologies, workflows, etc., it becomes clear that what one person considers digital asset management can vary greatly. Another fun question: What is a digital asset management system? This too can be tricky as I discovered while serving as a member of DAM selection committee.

How did you learn DAM? Any recommended sources?

My career in DAM began just as it was emerging. I have a multi-disciplinary Master's and was studying interactive media in the 90s while working for archives and museums digitizing their collections. It was a highly innovative time when two worlds were merging and quickly evolving. Digitizing physical pieces and seeing them translated into digital files, and then taking those digital files and creating a digital experience was exciting. Largely, there weren't any rules for how to manage this 'new' media.

In the professional space, museums, and later libraries, were taking the lead ensuring the information about their newly created and ever-growing digital collections was properly recorded, grappling with issues around standards and long-term permanence in both worlds. Meanwhile, in the creative space, artists and designers were at ground zero trying to figure out a number of potentially confusing topics: naming digital files, handling versions, verifying quality and proper format. Then there was storage and backup considerations. Processing digital files was often taxing for a computer which resulted in frequent crashes, hard drives filled up much faster than they do now, and for good or for bad, there weren't clouds.

I started exploring the born digital space playing around with Photoshop and Illustrator, then experimenting with digital video, creating websites, interactive... It was a natural progression to take the knowledge I'd acquired with my hands-on

physical collection experience using the organizational practices I'd developed through academic training and applying that to digital collections. I've found that having a creative and technical background turned out to be the perfect synergy for giving me a solid well-rounded foundation for understanding where this field came from and where it's headed.

So even though I've been involved with DAM, or what it started as, for a couple decades, I stay inspired by keeping up with the latest technology trends, etc. This can be done via webinars and conferences. There are monthly webinars on a variety of topics – everything from the basics to vendor-specific product-focused sessions, all of which provide a way to make DAM less of a mystery. Whether attending a webinar or conference, fundamental best practices in DAM, many of which haven't changed much in the past decade or so, are usually highlighted.

Attending a DAM conference can be a good way to network and interact with vendors. I never tire of the best practice reminders and always enjoy hearing war stories from peers, which provide a lot of great learning in themselves.

If you weren't doing DAM as a career, what would you be doing?

Not have DAM as a career? It's hard to imagine not being a part of this field in some way since I love organizing, managing, developing, advising... I'm passionate about the arts & cultural heritage. If I was no longer in the DAM space, front-and-center, I'd most likely be involved in something that incorporates my background and interests, such as protecting our architectural and cultural heritage, preserving our past, supporting the arts and artists.

What is your ongoing greatest challenge with DAM?

My answer to this would have been slightly less emphatic, but overall it's keeping perspective! Currently I'm helping to identify short and long-term options as my team ponders the question 'Is the juice worth the squeeze?' with a new platform that was recently purchased enterprise-wide. Some of us saw early on in the RFI/RFP process that there would be significant challenges with the tool and vendor with the red flags now proving themselves. However, remaining tenacious while working through day-to-day challenges, always keeping the long-term goals in mind helps shake off frustrations. Not allowing derailments to make one lose sight of the objectives is what I advise others. After a year into a murky situation I try to remember my own advice and know that this too shall pass. The silver lining is truly great learning can arise from a less-than-ideal situation.

What was your biggest success with regard to DAM?

Partnership development has brought me great satisfaction over the years. Good partnerships are the key to a successful DAM experience at the most basic level whether it's criteria gathering, implementation, or user adoption. At a larger level, engaging with vendors on their product roadmaps, working through system challenges together that lead to optimizing their system or service and improving the DAM experience at some level for the larger community, it is so much fun and extremely rewarding.

Recently I discovered a wonderful company that is pioneering the way rights management is handled in the DAM space. I met them at a DAM conference last year and was thrilled to see what they were up to given my background and

vigilant interest in this topic. I could see they had an interesting model in place that would benefit many industries and was eager to chat with them about the product. A couple months later they reached out to see if my organization might be interested in piloting their product. A few months after that we participated in a Q&A session at Adobe Summit where they received recognition as one of the 'Top 10 hottest DAM features for 2016'.

Learning and sharing is what keeps DAM interesting for me. So if there's a way I can educate and also advance DAM to the next level, that's success to me.

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