Toward a Less Passive Medium

BY JOHN BRYAN

THE OVERARCHING prepress message at NEXPO® Chicago was "do it yourself." Bob Vila would have been proud.

Consider the group hunkered down in a room on the first floor of McCormick Place. They were putting together proposals, demos, arranging pilot projects, all to further their baby, AdsML, a wacky package of fun code that may one day revolutionize the way computer systems describe ads to each other—from the order entry process to the press, or the Web, or your cell phone.

What was once innocently thought of as "markup"—point size, font, leading, etc.—is just the jumping-off place for AdsML. There will soon be XML tags that describe pages, graphics and every facet—car colors, square footage of houses, jobs, résumés and salaries—of every possible product.

You'd think AdsML's path into the newspaper industry would be strewn with

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David Braslauer, left, and Rande Simpson, far right, of MerlinOne talk shop with Neil Maheshwari and Joe Pennisi of the Daily News in New York City on the show floor.

flowers from the lapels of the bean-counters; such is the return on investment potential for AdsML. But it's actually a hard sell. Why? Human beings.
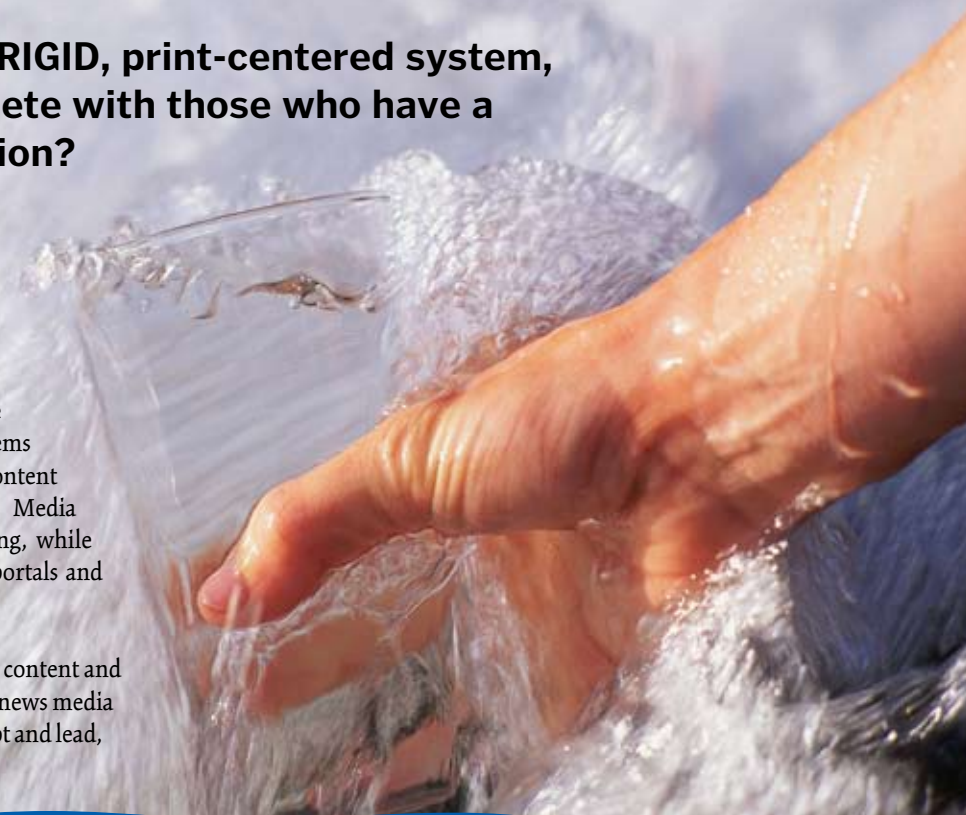
Newspapers and magazines have to buy

into the AdsML vision, then they have to demand their vendors integrate it into their systems. It's coming along, but more slowly than it should.

Power to the People

The customer is always right...especially when he sells himself ads.

This little truism about so-called "Web-order-entry" software was one of the strongest messages on the NEXPO show floor this year.

To understand how it works, try this experiment: Get yourself a Web site. Let your readers type in their own ads: print, online or both. The fact that they type the words in makes them responsible for the content. No more "he said-she said" in the call center when there's a problem.

Tell them they can put in a picture, a graphic, and change the color of the background (we're talking online here). Tell them it'll cost extra, but immediately send them a picture of the ad so they can see it.

Shazam! Self-upselling.

"We have several customers who say traffic is staying the same in their phone rooms but the Web ads are really growing," said Donna Beasley, northeast sales director of Mactive Inc. in Melbourne, Fla.

Does it mean the end of call center ad takers? Not yet. Some people just want that human interaction, or they can't operate a computer. Or maybe they just don't want the hassle. But the PlayStation generation sees it as an advantage.

E–verything Is Beautiful

It has long been newspaper gospel that people love to read ink on paper, or they love to read news snippets on their computer screens. But no one likes to read newspaper pages on computer screens.

Three merchants of phosphor images are trying to knock that hoary assumption flat on its aphorism: MerlinOne Inc. in Quincy, Mass., has LiveEdition, which blends the look of a page with the ability to click on any story and bring it up for computer viewing; Olive Software in Santa Clara, Calif., has its Electronic Editions; and NewspaperDirect specializes in printing out mini-newspapers on demand wherever the reader happens to be.

The companies all start with PDFs supplied by newspapers. They then index the text to make it fully searchable and cleave the pages apart into easily digestible news nuggets. NewspaperDirect will even read the paper out loud—you pick the language.

MerlinOne's LiveEdition, an outgrowth of its hosted e-tearsheet service, actually keeps track of where readers click and how long they are on each story, and can even play back a reader's "session."

At presstime, The Palm Beach Post in West Palm Beach, Fla., planned to launch an electronic newspaper edition in late April or early May using MerlinOne's LiveEdition. The target audience is the 40,000 seasonal subscribers who read the paper when they're in Florida over the winter, but don't get it after they move back north.

"Right now we have several hundred mail customers who have to wait up to 14 days to get their papers," said Dan Shorter, general manager of Palmbeachpost.com. "Now, they'll be able to get it by 6 a.m." ◰