

THE GROUP OF ANALYSTS

Temel Kahyaoglu, Chief Analyst TGOA, in conversation with

Richard Hunt

CEO Agility Multichannel on Content Gravity



Richard Hunt is the CEO and co-founder of Agility Multichannel, a global software company providing a leading PIM solution, Agility®. He often combines his hobbies of flying and fly fishing and has learned that Centre of Gravity is critical when you're packing fishing gear, a bike and a dog in a small plane and flying off to a remote stream in the US or the UK where he currently resides.

Richard introduces the aeronautical concept of Centre of Gravity and applies it to the way content is managed within a company. ERP stored content produces a tail-heavy centre of "Content Gravity" and content stored in commerce applications causes a nose-heavy centre of Content Gravity. The experienced CEO explains why both scenarios can be dangerous and outlines the advantages companies can gain by re-centring their Content Gravity.

What does "Content Gravity" mean?

Like most company directors, I fly a lot for business. I also fly myself for fun in small planes. In flying, weight and balance are key to optimising what's called the "centre of gravity". Too much weight towards the tail, the plane becomes unstable and risks stalling. Too much weight towards the front of the plane can lead to an irreversible nose dive. The imbalance is more acute in small air crafts but larger ones are susceptible, too, which is why when commercial planes have small passenger loads, you'll notice how they spread everyone evenly throughout the cabins.

Now that we're thinking of passengers as precious cargo, quantified by weight, I'd like to use the analogy to explain how companies sort and manage their product content which, for retailers, distributors, CPGs and manufacturers, is their most precious asset. Companies today basically manage their content in one of two ways: Some manage it in their backend systems, like ERPs. In these cases, Content Gravity is tail-heavy. Others manage content in the multiple commerce or marketing applications everyone needs these days to service customers. In this approach, Content Gravity is nose-heavy. Both scenarios can have serious and dangerous consequences.

Why is there an urgent new need to move the centre of Content Gravity in your opinion?

In the past, the centre of Content Gravity was tail-heavy, centring around all those back-end and ERP systems. Then customers started to get savvy and demanding, and the pressures of personalisation made companies move their Content Gravity to more and more front-end marketing and commerce applications. In my analogy, big front-heavy planes have more time to recover than small ones. In the context of companies with massive amounts of product content, the nose dive may be slow, but it will be painful, and they ignore instability at their own peril. It's not a risk worth taking.

In my view, Content Gravity needs to be centred and stable, right in the middle. With a strong centre, a company can operate „straight and level“. Companies who successfully do this are safeguarding their future and will be far better positioned to easily and instantly deliver relevant content anywhere it's needed at any time in the customer buying journey.

What is wrong with today's centre of Content Gravity?

The problem using ERPs and back office systems to manage content is that they weren't designed for this purpose. They're great at managing factual, structured data but not creative marketing content. I think this is now well understood, and most companies have moved away from it, so far away that they now face this bigger danger. I'll outline two of the main problems that arise for companies who use front-end commerce or marketing cloud applications to manage content:

Firstly, there are so many of them, and they all offer some capability for managing content. At one large North American company, we counted a record of 74 different solutions with overlapping content sources. Now, that's a lot to »

keep up to date! This may seem extreme, but large companies can easily get into double digits of content silos to maintain. This creates a huge amount of duplication of effort and a governance nightmare. Managing content in a nose-heavy environment means it's highly restrictive and is not easily re-useable for other channels and touch-points. This is hardly the best approach when you're trying to deliver an omnichannel experience.

Secondly, these systems aren't designed to manage complex, multiple stakeholder workflows or integrate with many different back-end systems. Using a data management application built into, say, a web content management system may be fine for the creative team, but it's a terrible environment for your merchants who have vital contributions to make. And it's certainly not going to provide portals and processes for your suppliers to onboard information or allow the sharing of content with affiliates.

Companies are starting to realise that siloing content in individual commerce and marketing application software packages leads to siloed processes and departments, and these are actually becoming the biggest inhibitors to delivering a great customer experience. The need to become more efficient at delivering personalised, always-evolving messaging – with the right content at the right time to every touch-point – makes re-centring Content Gravity an absolute urgency for nose-heavy companies.

How can you rebalance it?

To rebalance Content Gravity, you have to decouple it from commerce solutions and silos. You need a neutral "Content Hub" located between the ERP/main systems and all the commerce and marketing solutions. This uniquely straddles and integrates the IT world of operational, fact-focused systems, and marketing and creative solutions. For success, creating the ultimate internal user experience is just as important as optimising the external customer experience. Every stakeholder's interface, from vendor to merchant, creative to content, should be configured to do exactly what their role needs them to do. Often, less is more, and most people don't have the time to learn new systems.

To ensure a collaborative workflow amongst internal and external users, the Content Hub can't work in isolation. The key to success is seamless integration with internal and external data sources and – most importantly – both Digital Experience Management (DX) and commerce platforms. The Content Hub manages the more structured content, like product details and descriptions, while the WCM/DX solutions manage the unstructured content, including company landing pages. The acid test is ensuring content is only mastered once and stakeholders only have one view and system to work through.

What strategic advantages are gained by moving the centre of Content Gravity?

The great thing is the content is no longer trapped. It's now being managed and maintained in a neutral and re-useable way. It becomes future-proofed. Commerce and marketing cloud applications will be much easier to introduce and, if necessary, replaced. There's the ability to truly integrate all stakeholders, including suppliers for retailers, and increase the quality and consistency of product information initially coming in and being delivered to their customers. All of this directly improves the experience customers have with a company's brand and builds loyalty. It enables companies to holistically report on the ROI on increasing the richness and depth of marketing content by understanding the direct effects on sales and margins anywhere the company promotes their products.

Not having to duplicate or repeat huge amounts of effort related to updating and maintaining content in different silos, brings tremendous efficiency benefits, allowing companies to do far more and be far more responsive. This means products get from concept to market far more quickly. Building an endless aisle, with the ability to offer 10 or 20 times the number of products, can become a reality as can the ability to build relationships between products, such as cross-sells, alternatives or up-sells. Simply put, that means orders get bigger because customers don't need to look elsewhere.

What visions do you have on Content Gravity?

We've reached a tipping point where conditions are increasingly making it impractical to have either a tail- or nose-heavy centre of Content Gravity. To date, much IT and business time and attention have been spent on implementing ERP, marketing applications and commerce solutions, and most companies have yet to focus on moving the centre of Content Gravity. So there's a window of opportunity for companies to gain a major strategic advantage here. However, they need to act fast, as I believe that in the next two to three years the majority of companies will adopt Content Hub to bridge the growing divide between highly structured operational ERP systems and commerce and marketing applications.

For us at Agility Multichannel, it's all about wanting great customer references. These early and successful adopters will encourage others to do it the same way. As with other re-engineering excercises, don't assume putting the software in will automatically change people and processes. It won't. Top level support is key, as is alignment around business objectives for delivering the best omnichannel customer journey experience. Then model the process and determine the best Content Hub solution. It's potentially a huge area for strategic improvement, but once a company has their flight plan and is committed, they need to set achievable milestones along the route and they shouldn't delay the take-off. The companies that take the early initiative will soon be flying high, straight and level.

VENDOR

Agility® is a Product Information Management (PIM) and Master Data Management (MDM) solution that puts your most valuable product data at the stable core of a go-anywhere, sell-everywhere commerce strategy. Offices in Chicago, US, York, UK, and Malmö, Sweden, with integration partners throughout the world.

*Agility Multichannel LTD
info@agilitymultichannel.com
agilitymultichannel.com*