WoodWing

Agencies: **Survive and thrive with Content Orchestration**

and slay the content spaghetti dragon

wood wing

The opportunity of Content Orchestration

Summary

This guide is targeted to marketing, creative, and content agency executives who are exploring ways to make their agencies more sustainable and competitive. Specifically, we go into detail about how transforming the way you approach workflow and technology can lead to a range of benefits, helping you:

- Win new (types of) business

- Build stronger client relationships

- Protect your margins

For this research, we interviewed a number of our 100+ agency customers, including APS Group (the Netherlands/UK), Altavia Sumis (the Netherlands), Creative Zoo (Denmark) and Medium Rare (Australia).

About WoodWing

WoodWing is a technology company that helps agencies, publishers, and brands tell their stories. We build solutions that enable teams to efficiently work together on creative output. Originally serving the publishing industry, our solutions are increasingly being adopted by agencies and marketing teams, as their storytelling demands begin to resemble those of traditional publishers.

Agencies face threats on several fronts

The last decade has brought tumultuous changes to the agency landscape. Old business models are no longer future-proof. Channels and platforms have expanded tremendously. Many clients have taken marketing teams in-house. And that was even before the impact of Covid-19.

These trends have put a great deal of strain on agencies. In a 2020 survey by Campaign Magazine (paywall), the following challenges were rated as important to agency respondents:

- The speed at which teams are expected to work

- The volume of work required

- The increasing number of marketing channels

- Client communication

- Adapting to new technologies

- Retaining and supporting creative staff

With this range of challenges, many agencies are understandably struggling. The more successful ones - those that are managing to grow through the uncertainty - are often winning by taking a different approach. In our conversations with agency customers, this is a theme that came through several times - what used to work previously, does not work any longer - and those agencies willing to embrace change will be the long-term winners.

> "The time of only offering standard solutions is over. Agencies that are successful are those who can build a relationship in which they are co-creating with their clients, and using their combined skills and knowledge to bring the right thing into the market."
>
> **Hans-Georg Hansen**
> *Creative Zoo, Denmark*

Beware the content spaghetti dragon

But how to differentiate and develop from here, when your core product is your creative offering?

Every day, agencies around the world create and share countless concepts, images, designs, copy, content, video, and other expressions of creativity. From the freelancer working in their home office to the largest agency, these types of creativity need to be created in one or more software tools, and pass through a workflow.

These tools and workflows can be simple - a small team with a copywriter, designer, account manager, and client, for example, can work together on a Google Doc and Adobe CC to efficiently create any collateral they need. But more often than not, tasks, workflows, and approval processes are ad hoc and involve different stakeholders. Often, agencies will reactively work in a manner that the client demands, even if it is not efficient. Frequently, different tools are used. And even for large teams working on recurring projects such as magazine-style content, different stakeholders or other unforeseen events can disrupt what would otherwise be predictable workflows.
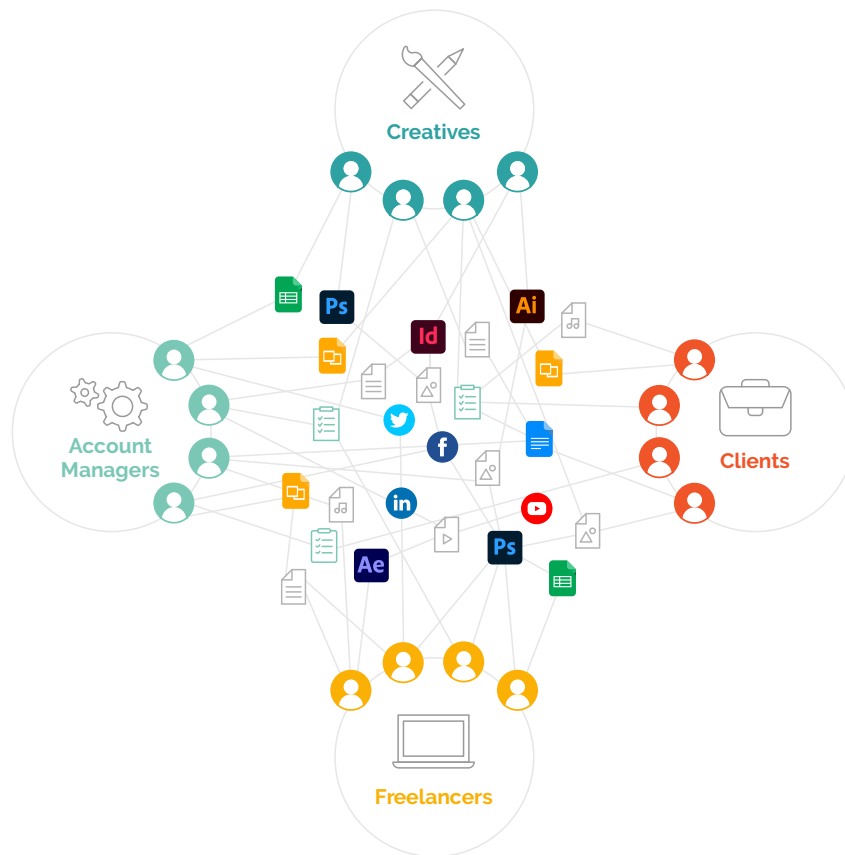
Enter the spaghetti dragon

These unstructured, complex, or under-optimized workflows are what we at WoodWing call "content spaghetti." We use the term "spaghetti" since it neatly describes loose ends, lack of structure and visibility, and general mess.

Everybody who has worked in an agency has suffered from content spaghetti at some point, whether it be:

- Wasting time looking on desktops or email for an image or other file.

- Feedback paralysis on an article or post where no one is sure whose turn it is to incorporate (conflicting) comments or give sign off.

- Parallel conversations going on across different platforms (email, Slack, phone, Google Docs, in person) regarding the same content or creative.

- Email ping pong with a client over creative execution.

- Unexpected stakeholders appearing in the feedback process.

- Individuals bypassing standard tools because they are too complex or slow to use, therefore imposing security threats or version control issues later on.

In its mildest form, content spaghetti is annoying to the individual person. But on an organizational level, this is a catastrophic loss of productivity and waste of money.

Furthermore, it puts a lot of pressure on people. If we look at the results of the Campaign survey mentioned earlier in this research, speed, volume, challenges around creating for different channels, working with new technology, and even client communication issues are results of content spaghetti. And the pressure it puts on people is one of the reasons agencies have a challenge retaining talent and building a sustainable business.

Slay the dragon with Content Orchestration

On the other hand, solving content spaghetti - or even mildly under-optimized workflow and tooling - offers enormous potential for productivity gains, happier staff, and much more.

But where is a good place to look for best practices and inspiration? Actually, you don't need to look far.

Organizations that have content creation at the heart of their business models, such as magazine and newspaper publishers, have always put a strong focus on making these tools and processes as seamless as possible, and have paved the way for best practices.

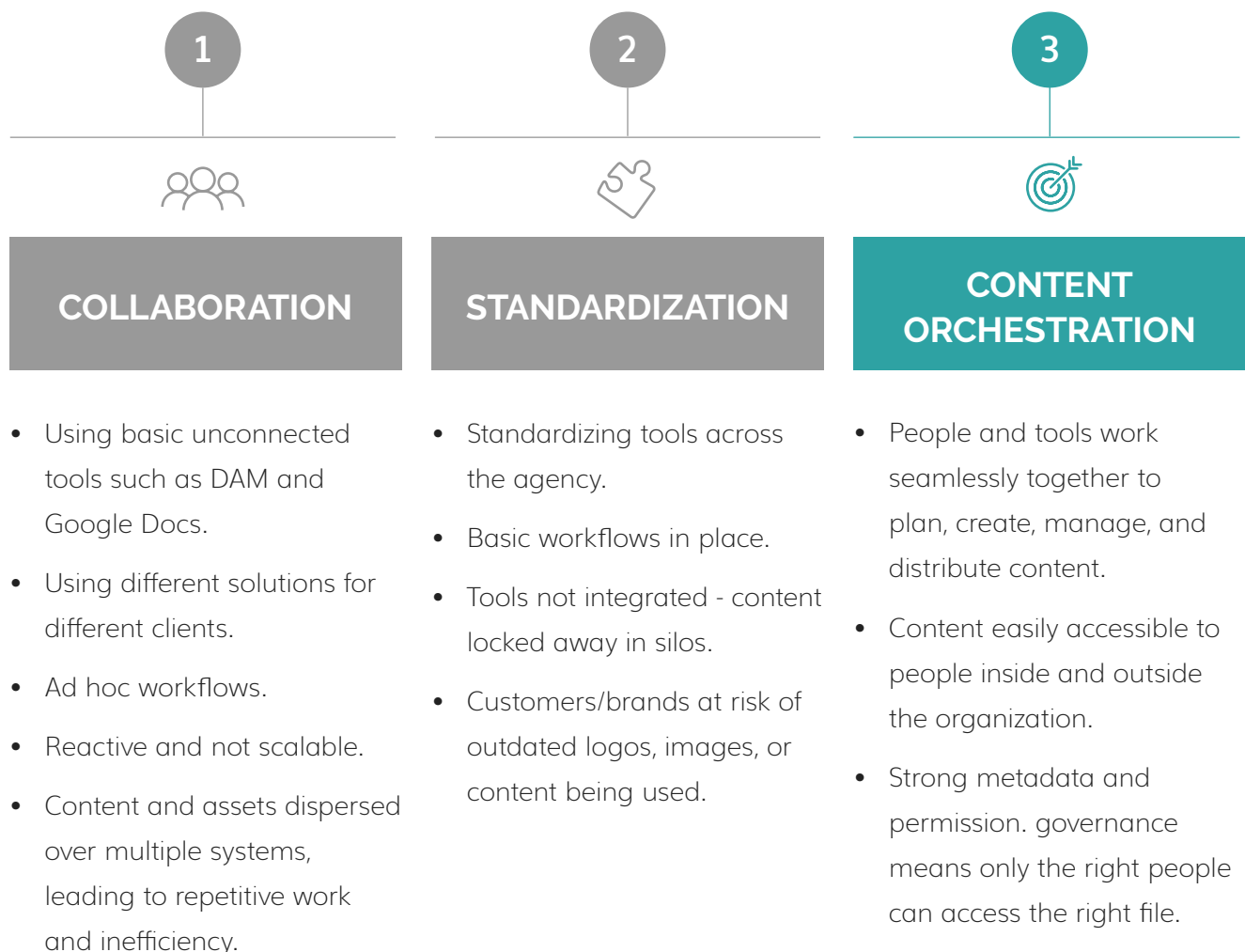Recently, an increasing number of agencies are looking strategically at their workflows and processes to see how they can differentiate themselves and provide greater value to clients - while reducing the pressure on their margins, and protecting people from burnout. Publishing companies are obvious reference cases because creative and content workflows in agencies closely resemble those of publishing - with a briefing, approval process, and design and format. So it makes sense that many agencies could adopt best practices from this industry.

At WoodWing, we have a name for this approach. We call this "Content Orchestration", is people and tools work seamlessly together to plan, create, manage, and distribute content. With this approach, workflows are clearly defined and robust, and creation and management tools are seamlessly integrated.

"Content Orchestration", is people and tools work seamlessly together to plan, create, manage, and distribute content.

A hypothetical system to support Content Orchestration

In this section, we will discuss the set up of a hypothetical system to support Content Orchestration. But before that, it is worth mentioning that just as each agency has its own unique clients, ways of working, and technology requirements, your approach to Content Orchestration will likely be different even to similar agencies, from both a technology and organizational perspective. Furthermore, Content Orchestration is a journey, not a destination. As agencies evolve and grow, new tools come to market, or new integrations create different possibilities, your approach to the technology and processes you use should evolve.

1	2	3
COLLABORATION	**STANDARDIZATION**	**CONTENT ORCHESTRATION**

COLLABORATION

- Using basic unconnected tools such as DAM and Google Docs.

- Using different solutions for different clients.

- Ad hoc workflows.

- Reactive and not scalable.

- Content and assets dispersed over multiple systems, leading to repetitive work and inefficiency.

How most agencies work today

STANDARDIZATION

- Standardizing tools across the agency.

- Basic workflows in place.

- Tools not integrated - content locked away in silos.

- Customers/brands at risk of outdated logos, images, or content being used.

CONTENT ORCHESTRATION

- People and tools work seamlessly together to plan, create, manage, and distribute content.

- Content easily accessible to people inside and outside the organization.

- Strong metadata and permission. governance means only the right people can access the right file.

As a (very) general rule of thumb, it is also important to remember the following:

- Creatives and others involved in the workflow including account managers tend to look at the value of tools individually, and how they can be used to solve a particular problem in the flow.

- IT pros are better equipped to think in terms of building an integrated system, where data can be exchanged between tools to ensure a robust and truly seamless workflow experience that gives the productivity gains that really make a difference.

In addition, the business/creative side tends to be attracted to qualities such as tools that offer good UX for people in the content production flow, while IT may be more concerned about security and whether hosting is in the cloud or on-premise.

With these factors in mind, it is highly advisable to assign an owner who acts as the bridge between the business/creative side and your IT department.

Here are a few key components that almost any agency will need, plus some information on what you need to think about it to transform your individual tools into a system.

Task/project management

Task or project management software is used to manage your tasks, help with estimation and scheduling, track dependencies, resources, and milestones, and help you make decisions when changes in priority are needed. Task management tools may also be shared with clients to enable a more seamless workflow. Examples: Wrike, Monday.

Design (Adobe CC)

Every agency needs design software, and the go-to solution is Adobe Creative Cloud. Other tools that agencies may use include Sketch and InVision.

Digital Asset Management

As demand for content continues to soar, agencies need a secure, structured, searchable, and scalable way to store assets. While file sharing services such as Google Drive can work for very small teams, they lack necessary functionality around search, metadata, versioning, integrations, and so on that professional teams need to be successful. Digital Asset Management (DAM) serves as a single

source of truth for all your digital files, providing staff with easy, centralized access to artwork, images, and other types of files, and permissions information and version control. DAM can potentially eliminate hundreds of work hours of wasted time each week, depending on the size of the agency.

If you would like to know more about Digital Asset Management in general, see this post: What is Digital Asset Management (DAM)? Or to read about a scalable and flexible DAM solution here: WoodWing Assets.

Content creation and workflow

Google Docs may meet some agencies' needs, but for regular, long-form content such as magazines or brochures, a more specialized tool such as WoodWing Studio may be a much better fit. Originally built for publishers, Studio enables agencies and publishers to manage workflows and stakeholders, provide a live view on production status, and create content for any channel.

For more information on tools that agencies may find useful, read our post: Guide to project management software for creative agencies.

The secret sauce: APIs

The tools above are quite standard, and your agency may be using some or all of them already. But how you can really move beyond using tools individually depends on how they are integrated.

First, a brief introduction to the technology that enables tools to be integrated with one another - APIs. API stands Application Programming Interface. These are software intermediaries that allow tools or applications to exchange information.

APIs are important for your workflows, because if your tools can be integrated with one another, you can enable your creative and business staff - and even clients - to open tasks, give feedback, share, store, manage, find, and even publish creative and content seamlessly.

If you look at the example below, you could see in a simple hypothetical overview that clients and account managers can create briefs, give

feedback, and approve creative or content in task management solutions and WoodWing, while creatives receive and act on feedback in WoodWing and Adobe CC.

This is a simple use case, but there is so much more. An integrated system supporting a robust workflow can pay enormous dividends through version control, audit trails, access rights, streamlined feedback, and faster collaboration. If your clients' assets need to be published across different channels, you will always be in control of the seemingly limitless volume of assets. And if you have multiple offices and/or many clients, your speed-to-market will increase dramatically.

Think about what solving all these issues means for a moment. Instead of multiple (unstructured) workflows dictated by the preferences of the clients, you can add value, save time, and improve productivity tremendously by offering them a fast, robust, and reliable way of working.
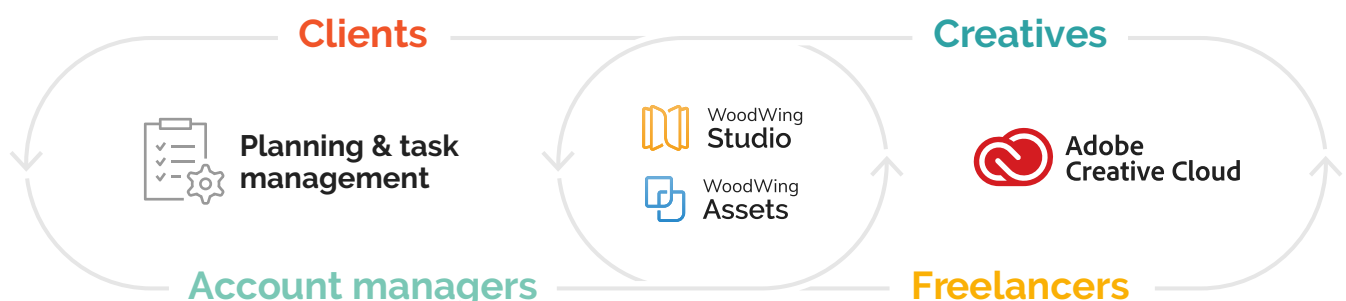
A simple technical setup to support Content Orchestration

Five surprising benefits of Content Orchestration

The most obvious benefit of a Content Orchestration approach is productivity gains - removing time wasted in content spaghetti. This also helps overcome a number of the key challenges in the Campaign research discussed at the beginning of this white paper. Obviously, it helps the speed at which teams are expected to work, and volume of work required. Implicitly, it should also ensure better client communication, enable agencies to effectively create and manage collaterals for many channels, and retain staff due to less pressure.

But actually, these are just the beginning of the benefits of content orchestration. Here we look at some of the key benefits mentioned by agencies interviewed for this research.

1

Strengthen your pitch

Agencies are using Content Orchestration during the pitch process to reinforce their creative offering. In most cases this means selling what the technology and workflow can achieve for the client in terms of time to market and seamless collaboration, rather than pitching functionality. Bringing Content Orchestration into the conversation is helping agencies such as APS Group differentiate their offerings and win pitches.

> "
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> "What is interesting is that we can come in and pitch our creative ideas and talent, but not only that, a trusted environment to work in, all the workflow and tooling, and equally, I can't even begin to tell you how important that whole audit trail and connectivity between our systems is to a client."
>
> Keith Welsh
> *Studio Operations Director, APS Group*

2

Diversify your business and build stable relationships

Some agencies are adopting Content Orchestration specifically to diversify their businesses with new offerings and more durable relationships. Creative Zoo is one example. Traditionally focused on brand and design, the agency has branched out into co-creating regular content with clients, such as magazines, brochures, reports, and so on. This type of work offers the potential for longer, more stable relationships and revenue streams.

"We are working with clients such as member organizations, manufacturers, and a few other segments to help with their content needs - specifically regular, long-form, highly designed content such as magazines, product brochures, and so on."

Hans-Georg Hansen
Senior Adviser on Communications, - Creative Zoo

3

Protect your margins

Offering a smarter way of working means being more productive. And being more productive means being able to protect your margins. This is a crucial advantage in a competitive industry, where an important secondary factor (after quality of creative work) is price.

"We pass some of our savings onto our customers, which helps us stay competitive. But the efficiency gains also offer us some protection on our margins. So along with the faster and more convenient ways of working there is a positive impact in a business sense."

Mark Verschuuren
IT Change Manager, APS Group

4

Leapfrog competition

Orchestrating content with a smarter, technology-enabled approach is helping agencies such as Altavia Sumis win business not through a traditional pitch process, but through being able to drastically scale productivity compared to other agencies. Altavia Sumis works with Rabobank to produce its member magazine - a complex process that involves 1,500 layouts, 85 editions, and 300+ editing users creating four issues per year. Prior to Altavia Sumis, another agency was creating the magazine in a traditional agency structure with minimal use of automation. This involved a larger number of people, with a lot more communication, and was inefficient and expensive.

"

"With this very complex and large scale collaboration with Rabobank, we are managing it with only a few people thanks to being able to adapt technology solutions to scale our workflows and help us work smarter. It's the only way to go."

Robbert Jan Blekemolen
Product owner of client-facing IT tools - Altavia Sumis

5

Improve consistency and quality of work

The tools you use may already be very suitable to create high quality work, but an integrated system to ensure (client) feedback and internal processes are correctly followed can have another benefit - consistency. This will minimize the chance of unnecessary prolonged rounds of feedback or misunderstandings in the relationship, leading to greater client satisfaction and longer lasting relationships.

"

"On the quality question - we can be sure the content looks the same or meets the same consistent standard every time. Consistency is also a measure of quality."

Hans-Georg Hansen
Senior Adviser on Communications - Creative Zoo

Tips for success

Content Orchestration offers many benefits, but also requires a mindshift for agencies used to following the lead of the client when it comes to workflow. Here are a few tips for Content Orchestration success.

1.

View technology as an ongoing investment

Many agencies traditionally see technology as overhead, rather than an ongoing investment that drives a return. But as mentioned above, taking a Content Orchestration approach can drive cost savings, increase productivity, and even help open up new revenue streams. But to support this, technology is critical. And furthermore, the system that supports your approach to Content Orchestration will not be static - as new technologies or tools become available, individual parts of this system may be upgraded or swapped. To ensure success, technology should not be seen as a cost but as an investment, with KPIs attached.

2.

Leverage your hive mind for efficiency gains

According to workflow expert Kilian Schalk, "most organizations don't take advantage of the resources and knowledge they have within their own teams. A huge amount of expertise regarding workflows and how to improve them goes untapped if there is no structured way to get it out of people's heads and into practice." Speaking to people with their hands on the work, and getting their insights into where workflows

break down and how they can be improved, can already provide a number of ways to streamline and strengthen your creative processes.

3.

Test small-scale ways to improve before rolling out to a wider group

You may consider working with one team or unit to test out new tools, gather feedback, and identify best practices before rolling out to the wider organization. This will give you the opportunity to iron out kinks before large scale deployment. But there is another advantage. Your users will generate word of mouth buzz internally that will inspire enthusiasm and buy-in prior to rollout.

4.

Talk to experts in the field

An expert can help if the concept sounds compelling but you are uncertain how to implement it. For the technical side of things, WoodWing has a global partner network with a great deal of experience collaborating with publishers and agencies on solving these challenges. You can find the right partner for you here: woodwing.com/en/partners

Get in touch

If you'd like to talk directly to WoodWing about your challenges around Content Orchestration, please don't hesitate to *__contact us__*.

Related reading and resources

How marketing agency APS Group is winning with Content Orchestration

Agency interview: How Creative Zoo is orchestrating content for a new client segment

How agency Altavia Sumis is orchestrating content for Rabobank

How Content Orchestration can help marketing agencies win and retain business

Four reasons DAM should be the cornerstone of your agency's CX strategy

Five ways your agency can survive and thrive with DAM

Easy to implement, intuitive to use: six simple steps to implementing DAM software

Guide to project management software for creative agencies