

Merchandising Monster Products in the Digital Age

The Cumulus Solution for Supporting E-commerce on the Web

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2006



A Force in the Consumer Electronics Industry

From audio/video cables to home entertainment

Monster Cable Products is a force in the consumer electronics industry. Founded in 1978 and headquartered in Brisbane, California, Monster produces many of the top brands of high-performance cables that are used to connect audio/video components for home, car, and professional use, as well as computers and computer games.

Proud of its reputation as a Bay area success story, Monster bought the naming rights to the San Francisco 49ers' stadium in 2004, and renamed it Monster Park.

Over the years, Monster has expanded its product portfolio beyond cables and connectors. It also manufactures premium power supplies, amplifiers, and speakers, as well as accessories for Apple iPods, MP3 players, and SIRIUS Satellite Radio receivers. Continually seeking to develop new products for new markets, Monster is now introducing a range of home theater furnishings and sound systems, designed to seamlessly integrate the ultimate music, movie, and gaming experiences into the home.

Monster invests heavily in visual communications to capture the essence of the "Monster brand." It relies on Cumulus from Canto to manage all of product photographs used to merchandise its products.

Focusing on bricks and clicks

In the ever-changing audio/video marketplace, Monster remains at the forefront of product innovation and brand awareness. The company adds 400 to 600 new products annually to its catalog of more than 4,000 items.

Lessons learned

- Make digital photographs an integral aspect of your product merchandising. Build your image repository as you develop your product database and your e-commerce initiatives.
- Ensure consistency. Maintain a standardized way to organize and browse a product data base.
- Be prepared to manage several different photos for each of your products.
- Extend the metadata for categorizing your digital assets. Beyond familiar product categories, further tag and index your product photos by other important and internally adopted field labels
- Be prepared to syndicate your digital assets to your channel partners over the Web. Make it easy for your partners to do business with you. Support their marketing initiatives by ensuring that they can easily access and incorporate your product photos, product information, and other interactive media assets into their promotional materials.

A company of more than 800 employees, Monster counts on both bricks and clicks to merchandise its products. It sells to thousands of retailers and distributors worldwide. Monster also has direct relationships with more than fifty (50) authorized e-commerce vendors on the Web—ranging from consumer giants Amazon, BestBuy, and RadioShack to sites such as Crutchfield.com, OneCall.com, Vanns.com, and BHPhotoVideo.com.

A key touch point

Monster's customers—audiophiles, videophiles, car audio enthusiasts, professional musicians, and recording studio engineers—have a growing need for ever-better product information. Whether they are pulling products from shelves in retail stores or buying online, customers are doing more and more of their research over the Web.

“Our online platform is now a key touch point for our customers to do their research,” says Jim Klar, Multimedia Marketing Monster and manager for the company's e-commerce initiatives. “The majority of our customers are looking to us to provide them with descriptions and pictures of our products over the Web. We want our products to look great online and represent our brand appropriately.”

Photos for selling

Customers want to see what they are buying—such as the form factor of cable connectors, the weave of cables, the design of speakers, and the displays of amplifiers and power supplies. Monster maintains a staff of professional photographers and several in-house studios. It produces all of its own product photos, which it then publishes in its own product catalogs and Web site (www.monstercable.com), and also syndicates to its growing network of e-commerce vendors.

Yet customers are becoming more demanding. “We've had to step up our level of photography to meet our customers' desires and to reflect our own need for asset access within the company,” Klar reports. “We used to produce one picture per product. Now we need five or six shots, reflecting different backgrounds, angles, and perspectives. Our customers want to see more photos of what they are planning to buy.” When they cannot touch and poke the products, customers need to view the product details online.



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*Jim Klar,
Multimedia Marketing
Monster*

Managing the Visual Experience

Adopting Cumulus as part of the e-commerce initiative

Fortunately, Monster has developed its e-commerce initiative around the capabilities of a digital asset management system. Monster adopted Cumulus in 1999. Monster has steadily enhanced its digital asset management capabilities with each successive version of Cumulus.

Monster now uses Cumulus 6.6 Workgroup Edition to manage all of its product photographs, digital videos, and other digital assets for both electronic and hard-copy distribution. Monster relies on Cumulus when developing collateral for its own needs as well as when syndicating photos to its distributors and retailers.

A central repository

Using Cumulus, Monster employees can easily find product photos when designing Web pages, promotional materials, package designs, and product data sheets. All of the product photos are stored in an online repository and catalogued with a predefined set of product-related terms.

No longer do graphic designers and marketers have to search through one set of directories for product thumbnails, another for low resolution screen shots, and a third place for high resolution photos, suitable for print publications. No longer are product photos simply stored in a folder hierarchy on a file server. Rather, Cumulus ensures that company employees can manage and maintain all photos in a consistent manner, organized by product categories and other relevant, descriptive categories.

Integrating Cumulus with Monster's product information management system

Working with a systems integrator, Modula4, Klar has integrated Cumulus with Monster's product database¹. Specifically, Monster manages its products in a structured manner—first by product families, then by product types, and finally by individual product names and SKU numbers. Monster maintains all of its product-related metadata within the product database.

Monster then relies on the scripting capabilities within Cumulus to synchronize the metadata schema from the product database with the categories for the digital asset management system.

“Cumulus is not just an internal organization and archiving tool. It's about getting our intellectual property into the hands of the people who need it. Now that we've carefully catalogued our product photos, we're using Cumulus as a distribution mechanism”

*Jim Klar,
Multimedia Marketing
Monster*

¹ Monster uses FileMaker to maintain the product categories in a relational database.

Cumulus is able to automatically replicate the product categories for digital assets from those defined by the product database, and use them to tag product photographs. When adding or removing products in its product database -- a frequent occurrence in the consumer electronics industry -- Monster can immediately update the categories for digital assets, and ensure that the terms for indexing digital assets match the categories within the product database. Staff photographers, who are responsible for archiving the finished photographs at the end of a photo shoot, launch the script to automatically tag new assets within Cumulus.

Consistent browsing and searching capabilities

As a result, whether they are looking for product information in the database or product photos in Cumulus, graphic designers and content creators can browse or search for content using a consistent set of indexing terms and categories. Once they locate a set of photos based on product-related metadata, they can browse through the group to view photos with different background colors, photo styles, packaging, and cutaways.

For instance, Monster Cable, one of the company's product families, produces different types of cables -- including audio cables, video cables, computer cables, and mounts -- as shown in Illustration 1.

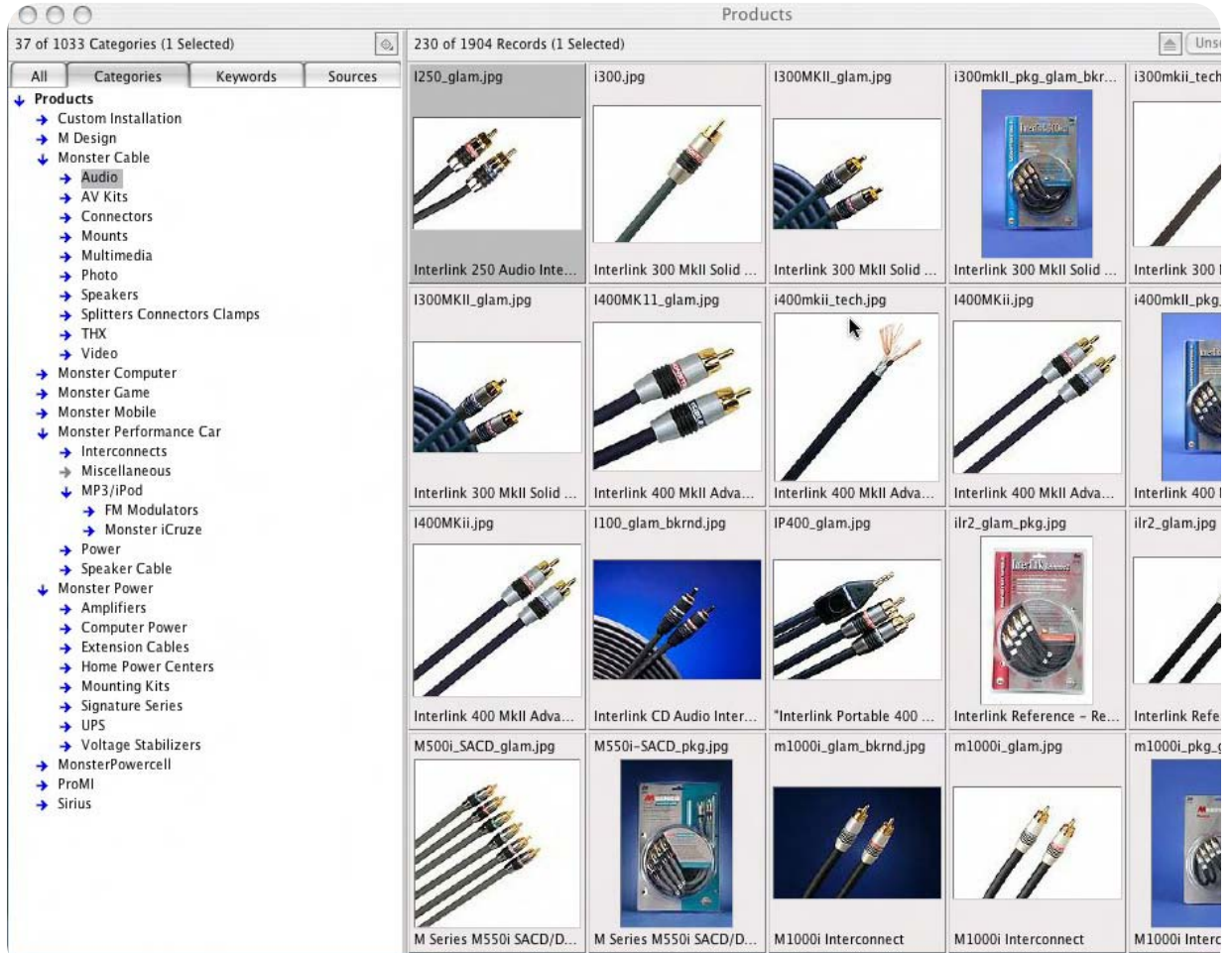
The photos themselves feature different backgrounds, packaging formats, and cable presentations. Graphic designers, Web developers, and others can thus find a range of photos from which to choose when searching for pictures of a specific product.

Monster continues to refine the browsing and searching capabilities of Cumulus. Monster employees can search by product name, product description, model name, and inventory number. Monster also includes the short product descriptions as entries in the keyword field within Cumulus, enabling graphic designers and others to find pictures based on their keywords. "With so many categories and keywords available, it's easy for somebody at Monster to find the product photos they need," Klar says.

The Impact of Cumulus within Monster

Reducing time and costs for developing marketing materials

More photos lead to more opportunities for merchandising Monster products more effectively. With Cumulus in place, Monster can centrally manage the more than 12,000 photos that capture its entire product line. Graphic designers and content creators can readily access previously created photos when developing new marketing collateral. They no longer have to request new photos for products that are released and shipping.



Source: Monster Cable Products Inc.

Illustration 1. Product photos for audio cables can feature white, light blue, or dark blue backgrounds; glam packages or single wire shots; connectors or wire spread ends.

Relying on Cumulus, Monster is able to reduce the time and costs required to develop marketing materials. Monster can produce the photos for a new product as part of the product release cycle, index and store them within Cumulus, and ensure that they are readily accessible to all employees within the company. Graphic designers and marketers can readily stay abreast of Monster's ever changing product portfolio, and easily have the new product collateral available for Web and print-based distribution when the new product is launched.

Distributing training solutions

In addition, Monster uses Cumulus to catalog and distribute its training solutions.

Monster develops interactive training materials and other multimedia experiences for its retailers, stores them within the shared repository, and distributes them on demand over the Web.

For example, when Monster needs to train retailers' sales associates about a new family of high-performance video cables, Monster marketers develop interactive training modules – using Flash and video clips. They can easily find previous recorded interactive media, stored and catalogued within Cumulus. As a result, they can rapidly produce updated training modules, and enable sales associates to learn about the new features of Monster's latest products over the Web.

Building Relationships with Distributors and Retailers

Making it easy to merchandise Monster products

As a manufacturer, Monster is only successful when it moves its products through its distribution channels. Monster needs to ensure that its network of distributors and retailers can easily sell its products to the audiophiles, videophiles, and gamers who value them. Monster needs to ensure that distributors and retailers have easy access to Monster product information, so that they can incorporate the photos and product descriptions into their own e-commerce Web sites and publish them as their own marketing collateral.

Monster's investment in Cumulus has an added business benefit. Now that Monster maintains all of its product photos online, it is able to syndicate them to the retailers and distributors in its distribution channel.

As shown in Illustration 2, here's how the syndication process works.

- At periodic intervals, Monster uploads all of its new product photos, together with the descriptive information (or metadata tags) used to catalog them, to a third party Web site. Monster is relying on Tentoe (www.tentoe.com) to support syndication services over the Web.
- The descriptive information is stored in a standardized format as XML-tagged elements, using predefined tag sets.
- When distributors and retailers need photos and descriptions of Monster products, they connect to the third party site, select the products they want, and download the product information to their own electronic environment.

Technology platform

Hardware

- Dell PowerEdge 2850 with 3.2GHz Intel Xeon processor
- 3GB RAM
- 6 136GB hard drives (2 RAID 1, 4 RAID 5)

Software

- Cumulus 6.6 Publishing Server Solution
- Apache Web Server 2.0
- Windows Server 2003

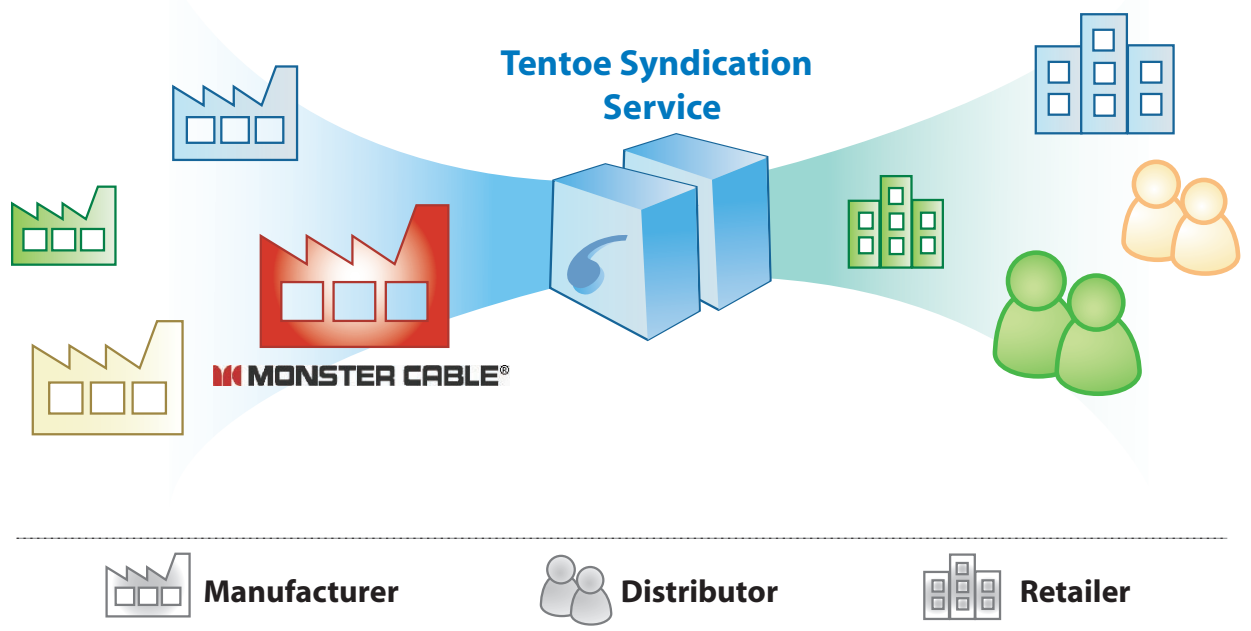


Illustration 2. Monster distributes its product photos through a syndication service on the Web. Thus Monster's customers - network-savvy retailers and distributors - can easily access all of Monster's product information and incorporate it into their e-commerce environments.

As a result, Monster is able to ensure that its distributors and retailers quickly receive new product photos and the related product information for their own product promotions, as well as stay abreast of changes. Moreover, Monster only needs to publish to a single destination on the Web. The syndication service then redistributes the photos to others who want them. For example, Radio Shack and Crutchfield can each find just the Monster products they sell on their own Web sites and retail outlets. When Monster produces new photos, Radio Shack and Crutchfield can then incorporate changes into their e-commerce environments on their own production schedules.

As a result, Monster not only produces the product photos for its own internal use. Monster is also able to electronically distribute them via various sales, training, and promotional channels. Monster is able to ensure that these businesses can easily and accurately merchandise Monster products.

Cumulus as a competitive distribution mechanism

In the end, Monster relies on Cumulus for merchandising its products in the digital age. "Cumulus is not just an internal organization

and archiving tool,” Klar concludes. “It’s about getting our intellectual property into the hands of the people who need it. Now that we’ve carefully catalogued our product photos, we’re using Cumulus as a distribution mechanism.”

In a continually changing industry where value-added content and differentiation is the key to success, Monster and Cumulus are a winning combination. By building its e-commerce initiative on Cumulus, Monster is able to successfully merchandise its product portfolio, gain market share, and stay ahead of its competition.

Contact

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About Canto

Founded in 1990, Canto (www.canto.com) is the leading supplier of Digital Asset Management products and services, with more than 12,500 client/server systems installed worldwide. Canto’s business focus is to deliver world-class solutions at a very competitive price to creative arts, publishing, and corporate communications groups, as well as to other industries.

The core product, “Cumulus,” is designed to manage and archive all types of digital assets used in production, publishing, communication, and other workflows. It offers cross-platform and Internet capabilities that scale from easy-to-install and low-cost archiving solutions to globally hosted DAM systems.

About Bock & Company

Geoffrey Bock, Principal of Bock & Company, focuses on business strategies for content management and collaboration. An analyst and author with over twenty-five years industry experience, he tracks how organizations create, organize, and manage business information to sustain profitable relationships.

As a consultant and thought-leader, he advises software companies, end-user organizations, and government agencies in areas of business planning, technology innovation, and operational excellence. Geoffrey can be reached at geoffbock@gmail.com.