



# Canto Cumulus: a powerful tool for Spotlight

**Spotlight** is a privately owned and operated Australian family business which has grown from two brothers helping their parents run a dress fabric stall at Queen Victoria market during the 1950s, to stores throughout Australia, New Zealand, and Asia, employing more than 6,700 team members. Over time, the name Spotlight has become synonymous with expertise in crafting, fabrics and home decorating products, a philosophy that is visually demonstrated in every catalogue the company turns out. With two twenty page catalogues produced in-house every 14 days across the Australian, New Zealand and Singapore markets, it is vital that Spotlight's production team is constantly ahead of the game. The need for a digital asset management system which can efficiently catalogue, organise and reuse any type of digital file, and thereby relieve the consuming part of the digital workflow process, is paramount.

Enter Canto Cumulus - software that simplifies the creation, control and deployment of digital asset management solutions for users, administrators and system integrators and one of which the production team at Spotlight has been using for years.

**Digital Reproduction** magazine's Colleen Bate spoke to Spotlight's Production Manager, Michael Guerin and Automatica's Kai Howells about the system, its merits as well as its pitfalls and how it has evolved with this essential part of the business.

Michael has been with Spotlight since 1994 - an extremely fortuitous move as he landed the position within 12 months of completing his photography diploma. Since those early days, he has seen his position blossom.

"Back in the analogue days we used to shoot approximately 20 rolls of film at a time, walk it up to the lab and wait two hours before it was processed. We were left with a filing cabinet full of trannies cut up to 6x7s, simply put away in plastic sleeves and labeled under different departments. It was often a challenge to find what we were looking for!

"Then, when we made the transition to digital, we would shoot a digital file, put it on a zip disc that would hold an 'enormous' 20mb upload on to our service providers's server and courier it down to them and they would upload onto a server we could access. How times have changed!"

Spotlight started using Cumulus in May 2005, replacing Media Manager.

"That's when we really nussed out what we needed and how we were best going to use it to store all our images in our library," states Michael.

He believes the initial transition to digital was seamless thanks to training received by Show Ads, who were doing all Spotlight's image management back then, and the prepress team, who helped keep everyone up to to speed. Spotlight now utilises the services of Automatica's Kai Howells, who has been involved since initially working for icorp consolidated in 2000. Spotlight was one of icorp's biggest clients and as a senior systems engineer, Kai was responsible for installations, upgrades and troubleshooting the Cumulus and HELIOS (or at that stage HELIOS and Imation Media Manager) servers.

"Spotlight has been a very loyal client, following my services from icorp to Emperor's Mind and then more recently becoming one of my first major clients through Automatica, a systems integration company I started up in June 2009," says Kai, pointing out how he and Spotlight's in-house IT support team put in place a Standard Operating Environment on all Mac workstations with Microsoft Active Directory integration and single-sign-on, Apple Open Directory for group policy and workstation management and a full collection of software such as the Adobe Creative Suite CS4, Office 2008, Cumulus, Universal Type Client, to name a few.

Kai says that the move to Cumulus from Media Manager was a massive shift. "Migrating Spotlight's Media Manager digital asset library was a serious undertaking. Fortunately, due to the existence of an API so that software can talk directly to Cumulus, we were able to write some custom software to export all the relevant

metadata from Media Manager into Cumulus, so the team could hit the ground running without having to manually re-catalogue their existing images.

"When the Cumulus HELIOS Companion was released, Spotlight were quick to adopt this improvement to the workflow, allowing HELIOS to tell Cumulus about new images and have them catalogued automatically as soon as they were copied onto the server. This was so much quicker and more reliable than relying on operators to manually catalogue new images, or for a hot-folder watcher to pick up new images, and it also allowed for a default set of metadata to be attached to imported images," he explains.

Michael has a bit of a laugh when he looks back and remembers how far digital technology has come.

"When I started as a photographer, Spotlight was right at the forefront of digital technology. We were given the first Kodak DSLR 560s - 6 megapixel cameras valued at 60 000 dollars each (he recently purchased one, now regarded as a relic, from the company for a mere 1 000 dollars.)

"During this time I recall writing to Kodak because we were photographing green fabric and Kodak film would not reproduce green tones very well. Although the human eye could see them, digital sensors were unable to detect them. We used to have three pass colour wheel and had to keep the camera really still, shooting one frame, then green then blue and then finally the registration had to be lined up. There was no chance of photographing people this way!"

"We are now using a 30 megapixel camera which takes an 80mb image, providing amazing colour control," says Michael.

Michael remembers being taught by Show Ads about density curves and levels and feeling utterly confused. He now knows that this histogram is an essential part of his photographic life and one which he is eager to tell other photographers about.

"If you are a digital photographer, you need to understand what the histogram is telling you. It is vital to read the histogram to discover occurrences such as over exposure etcetra."

He also admits that the team is exceptional when it comes to colour management, as they work closely with printing company AIW who print most of their catalogues.

"They actually supplied us with an Epson proofer and we run their profiles on our proofers. We try to get everything as accurate as possible before it leaves here."

Michael says that when Cumulus was initially introduced to the team at Spotlight, there were a number of issues to sort out. "One that sticks out in my mind is the way in which we assigned names to products, particularly when it had



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**- Kai Howells, Automatica**



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**- Michael Guerin, Spotlight**

multiple shots attached to it. For example, you would assign a label with the letter N, followed by a numerical value to an object such as a cup. It did not make sense at the time but this alpha numeric system has now stuck.”

In the last few months the team has created a filing hierarchy that is extremely simple – files are saved onto the server that are catalogued per event and department, inside Cumulus. The photographer then processes the image into the relevant folder.

Michael also points out that there were some teething problems when it came to matching up the same metadata in Capture One to Cumulus.

“We had to do some trials as the way we assigned certain categories of metadata to Capture One, was slightly different in Cumulus - for example, to add the photographers name in Capture One, one would have to assign the metadata to a category named ‘credit’, yet in Cumulus, this category was referred to as ‘photographer’, so we had to marry up the categories. It took a bit of trial and error before we got it right.”

Additionally, server space is always a challenge.

“We have over 95 000 images in our library and are constantly running out of server space. Many of the images stored are no longer needed so we are now in the process of deleting them. This can be troublesome because in some cases the image could have been inserted into a catalogue by the designer prior to its deletion and by the time it reaches the production stage, records a missing link prior, delaying the workflow.”

The legacy of one of the former owners, Ruben, who passed away in 2009 is to ‘thrive on chaos and trust one’s gut.’ Michael says that this philosophy has become quite addictive within the team culture, and having the benefits of Cumulus at ones disposal helps control this chaos, keeping everyone accountable, particularly with regard to metadata input.

Now that everything is in line, the production cycle at Spotlight is flourishing. The process flows smoothly – an event calendar reveals an annual count of approximately 20 catalogues to cater for the new season, mid season, end of season or clearance season. Buyers introduce their products to the marketing department and confirm the number of pages allocated to the planned catalogue.

A concept meeting is then booked in with the photography team and designers, art directors and head creative. Once the products are supplied to the photography team, layouts are drafted to the designers and passed on to photographers to institute mock layouts.

Photographers then shoot according to the layout – an immense volume when one considers approximately 1000 images every 10

days are shot for the whole department!

It is at this stage that products get labeled - a vital part of the whole process. It is also at this stage that metadata is introduced.

Once everything is photographed and named, the photographers add the metadata in Capture One, the software of which Michael describes as “robust, with great raw processing capabilities and good metadata options.” He also likes the fact that it allows photographers to build templates, complete with previously assigned metadata.

From here the image is processed on a server, observed by companion software which tells Cumulus to create and file the image. Additionally, it also provides details on enhancements that may have been made to the image together with its name, catalogue, even the magazine ad that it is intended for.

“Photographers must add metadata to their images, including details such as code, name and event so that

Cumulus can create an aspect of the image and at the same time, record these descriptions in the metadata for ease of use when searching.

“Writing the metadata is the crucial part. If you don’t do it properly its just a jumble to find it later,” he says, pointing out that although Cumulus has many searchable variables, the team only use five percent of what is on offer.

“Once the data has been added, designers can immediately start searching for it, then access it from the server and drop it into a document. It is not finished art - but they can place it for the purposes of sign off,” he explains, adding that Cumulus allows users to record production status updates using descriptions such as ‘progress’, ‘raw file’, ‘contoured’, or ‘complete.’

“The prepress guys can then search via that criteria and change the status accordingly, letting the designers know when the image is completed and ready for design. Designers will also add their own notes to the image during the process.”

Michael emphasises that the prepress team are an essential cog in the wheel, adept at keeping the photographers and designers up to speed.

“Prepress is the final step before it leaves us. So we need to know from that back end what technologies we could get to help that process faster.”

Michael says that if the team at Spotlight did not have Cumulus it would be impossible to carry out all the tasks necessary in the kind of reactive time frames they have to work.

“We would be lost without Cumulus - its unique image management ability is a powerful tool and one of which we have only just touched the surface.”



“Spotlight is one of our most progressive users of the Cumulus and HELIOS product suites. I do think that picking the right products is important, but in the end it all comes down to the team work to make the solution work. Spotlight has an excellent team of dedicated professionals plus one of our best system integrators to help. Hats off to the team at Spotlight!

**- Ricky Patten,  
DataBasics (Canto  
Cumulus Distributor)**