

## Ad Portals:

### Revolutionizing ad production and beyond

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## 1 Introduction

Many people view an ad portal as simply an alternative to FTP or email as a method of transmitting ad material from the ad supplier to the publisher. This can be the case, but the potential impact of a correctly executed ad portal can have positive and far-reaching ramifications for both the ad supplier and the receiver of ad materials—especially if the ad materials pick up valuable metadata as they progress through the process. This paper describes the requirements of an ad portal, the functionality it should contain and the ways it can revolutionize the ad production process.

## 2 Executive Summary

There are two distinct processes in the placement of an ad. The first is the purchase of the space, and the second is the delivery of the ad material. There are also two distinct points of view—the seller's and the buyer's. Finally, there are two distinct sets of requirements. For ad suppliers, the confirmation that the ad was delivered correctly is imperative so that they can prove to their client (typically the brand owner) that the ad was sent correctly. For the publisher, the receipt of ad material in a format and physical size that is suitable for immediate placement into the magazine or newspaper is crucial.

Factored into this process is the fact that the production capabilities of the ad creators range from neophyte to expert, with the corresponding match of suitability of the tools that they use. Then there are the requirements of the different publications. They vary from stringent to lax. Some publishers believe that they actually add value to their advertising clients by fixing incorrect advertising, when, in fact, what they are doing is opening themselves to liability by inadvertently introducing errors into the file by opening the files after receiving them.

All errors eventually boil down to make goods—a situation to be avoided if at all possible—because they effect not only the bottom line through unrealized revenue and rebate, but also the top line by reducing the brand owner's confidence that the publication can accurately project the brand message.

A well-executed ad portal will allow ad suppliers to easily and accurately match publishers' file specs and sizes. This costs the ad supplier little to nothing in terms of time and effort and gives them accurate feedback of the secure delivery of the ad material. At the same time, the portal will streamline the ad production process at the publication and communicate with other business and back office systems – utilizing the capture of business information at the source without having to re-key it. This will ensure accurate reproduction, placement and billing of the ad.

At the publisher's site, this is currently a manual, labor-intensive process.

In summary, the desirable traits of an ad portal will result in satisfied ad suppliers and brands because of timely, accurate and correctly-reproduced ad material – positively impacting the top line – while the streamlining the ad production process can reduce staff, remove error and speed the billing process – positively impacting the bottom line.

## 3 The Ad Supply Chain

The key to the efficient implementation of this kind of strategy is to understand the supply chain and move as many processes upstream as possible. This eliminates the time-consuming and error-prone task of re-keying information that appears on paperwork as it moves from enterprise to enterprise.

Until recently, the "Supply Chain" was called "The Ad Reception Workflow" and consisted of the "last hop" from the enterprise that performed the production prepress for the ad file and the ad production staff at the publication.

The process generally entailed the delivery, probably by courier, of a CD containing the ad with its accompanying paperwork to the publication. Upon arrival, it would be opened, preflighted, quality

checked, possibly corrected—or at least have its format checked—sized and then be ready to put into the page.

Once the magazine was run, the ad file might be put on a file server, onto tape, or burned onto another CD. If the tasks were performed by a service provider to the publication, that enterprise might charge a premium to the publication to store the ad for future retrieval.

If we now modernize the view of the supply chain, we see it extending into the ad agency, the agency prepress shop or the advertiser who creates their own ads (the ad supplier). The supply chain can also be extended into the media buyer, with user interfaces into the actual advertiser where necessary.

The ad portal consists of tools that are needed to cover a broad range of applications. Each publisher may require a different set of these tools depending on the level of skill of their advertising community, their budget and their roll out plan for ad portal services. This means that the solution should be modular and scalable.

Additionally, decisions need to be made, at an early stage, about the general requirements for the involvement of their ad suppliers. These issues are discussed in the subsequent sections of this document.

## 4 Branding A Portal

Depending on companies' needs, they should be able to brand an ad portal. Branding is important because it constantly reminds the ad suppliers that "Company X" is providing them with the tools that make their lives easier.

Ad portals should also be customizable in terms of the rules, workflow, messaging and fields in all the job tickets.

## 5 At the Ad Supplier Site

Tools can be introduced into a trading partner's site in the process of supply chain management in three basic ways. They are:

- a. **Web based** – This means that the ad supplier enters information into web pages that are executed on a server at the receiver's site and information is fed back after the results are determined.
- b. **Browser based** – This means that the web applications (in Flash or Java, for example) are downloaded from an application server at the receiver's browser and run on the ad supplier's workstation, but are not permanently installed there.
- c. **Application based** – This means that the applications are physically installed on the ad supplier's workstation and run there. Preferably they are managed by a dynamically downloaded control file that forces certain actions.

Pros and cons to each of these approaches exist. Simply stated, web based is not as interactive as the other two. Browser based can work well, but there is a trade off between functionality and speed. The more complex the application, the longer it will take the operator. Application based is the most responsive, but comes with certain problems associated with the ability to deploy the app.

AdSEND believes that the best deployment is application based because it allows the best response to the ad suppliers. This allows the ad suppliers to get real-time feedback on the ads that they are about to submit.

## 6 The Tools

A company may require several tools in an ad portal and this section describes the functionality of each. The tools should be capable of running on a stand-alone basis, but if they are used together they may interact to improve the overall experience and performance of the process.

### 6.1 Sizing

For every ad space purchased, detailed size specifications are associated with it. The ad material is supposed to fit into that space, but many times it is created in the wrong size so that it's unclear how the ad is supposed to "float" in the page.

Note that the ad sizing process assumes PDF as a file delivery. Application files cannot be handled in the same manner as PDF making it impractical, if not impossible, to adequately size the ad file.

An ad sizing tool should show all the possible sizes for the target publication, and preferably the exact size purchased (see **6.4 Booking Management** below).

Once the applicable size is selected, the ad supplier should be able to position the trim and bleed boxes, or live area, over a preview of the ad. This feature will allow the operator to visualize the ad as it will ultimately appear in the target publication.

The sizing application should be capable of scaling the ad, either anamorphically or proportionally, to allow the ad supplier to best fit the ad to the space purchased.

Applying the box settings selected will have several effects:

- a. The PDF TrimBox and BleedBox will be written to the PDF file.
- b. If type safety is set, the application should automatically detect type that is outside.
- c. The application should be capable of either cropping the PDF file to bleed or trim, or displaying the full PDF while still applying the TrimBox and BleedBox.
- d. Bleed may be applied to ads to accommodate those publications that set all ads this way.

Finally, reports such as type outside of safety should have an associated disclaimer that the ad supplier has to acknowledge before the ad can be uploaded.

All of these actions will streamline downstream operations and facilitate other ad portal functions. For example, the fact that TrimBox is set allows the preflighting application (if used) to be able to focus the preflight process to within the live area of the ad, thus preventing any false preflight triggers in the slugs.

### 6.2 Preflighting

Most publications have moved toward PDF as the delivery file format of choice. If a company has not, the preflight engine should be capable of adequately gathering image, font and page layout components of application files (such as Quark® and InDesign®) and preflighting them—prior to uploading.

For PDF files, the preflighting process should involve testing the file against the rules of the destination publication. The ad supplier should be able to view, in real time, what types of errors were found and where they occurred. For PDF files, some errors should be capable of being fixed prior to transmission.

For both application files and PDF files, there should be at least five levels of error:

- a. The file fails with a fatal error.
- b. The file has non-fatal errors.
- c. The file has had fixes applied to it.
- d. The file has no errors.
- e. The file has had preflighting intentionally skipped.

The ad portal should be capable of automatically allowing the user to set disclaimers. For example, if a file had non-fatal errors, the ad supplier could be forced to acknowledge this fact – especially if the condition could effect the ad’s reproduction in the final page.

### **6.3 Soft Proofing**

Traditionally, ad delivery involved sending an ad file along with a hard copy proof. The proof served as confirmation that the creative matched what the advertiser sent, that the publisher received an ad with the correct specs and that the printer had guidance for reproduction on press.

With the advent of color managed, monitor-based proofing (referred to as soft proofing in this document), an ad supplier can examine a proof on a monitor under the conditions that it will be reproduced on press – including the paper color.

The inclusion of soft proofing on an ad portal will eliminate the time and money associated with courier delivery, while ensuring that the advertiser gets a color-accurate representation of what the ad will look like when it is run on press.

In many ways, this technique is superior to the traditional, hard copy proofing process, through which ads are represented on stocks that are significantly whiter than the paper on which they will be printed. This traditional method may give advertisers and brand owners false expectations regarding the reproduction of their ad.

As with all the modules discussed so far, the settings for the soft proofing application should be dynamically downloaded to accurately reflect the color reproduction requirements for the target publication.

In addition to proofing the file, the application should be capable of capturing items like:

- a. The calibration status of the monitor on which the proof was approved
- b. The viewing and set up conditions under which it was viewed
- c. The total area coverage of the inks (TAC)
- d. The fact that any specific area is out of gamut
- e. The fact that the proof was created from the same ad file as is being delivered

All of these conditions should be delivered as metadata that accompanies the ad file as it is delivered.

Included in that metadata should be a disclaimer that an ad supplier agrees to, say, the fact that the maximum total ink coverage has been exceeded.

### **6.4 Reconciling the Booking to the Ad Material**

In conventional workflows, once the publisher receives an ad, the production staff manually matches it to the booking for the ad space to determine the ad’s position in the book and that its size is correct for the space purchased.

Adopting digital methods, the process can be automated and moved upstream.

Provided that it’s known who will be delivering the ad material, a booking system can supply the ad portal with digital booking metadata that carries the target publication and all other information (such as size, issue date, etc.) related to the booking.

The portal should include a log in feature that identifies the ad supplier so that the booking can be associated to the correct company.

Armed with this information, that ad portal will present the ad supplier with all the current bookings for the target publication that he or she selected. By choosing the booking, the ad supplier triggers the rest of the workflow process. The applications use the booking metadata to preset their processes and pre-populate as much of any electronic forms as is possible.

A good example of how the receipt of the booking metadata can effect other applications can be seen in ad sizing. The booking contains the actual, physical dimensions of the ad against which the ad file will be run. This, then, eliminates any user error from manually selecting the incorrect file size.

Once the ad has run through its proscribed workflow, the ad file is delivered with the booking metadata to the target publication.

## 6.5 Insertion Order Management

While not generally recognized as an integral part of an ad portal, some publishers consider the digitization of the order process to be important. This is outside the scope of this document, but suffice it to say, when looking at this process, order taking, acknowledgement and copy chasing should all be considered.

## 7 Handling Exceptions

In all processes, there are exceptions that need to be handled. The ad delivery process is no different, and an ad portal should be capable of handling these efficiently.

Brand owners and ad suppliers may have their own specialized method of checking and delivering ads. In such cases, it is not unusual for the ad supplier to insist on a specific delivery mechanism. If this occurs, the ad portal must be flexible enough to receive files from these other delivery systems and present them to the ad production team in single, unified user interface.

Emergency situations may also come about and they have to be accommodated as well.

In general, the ad portal is configured to ensure that ads follow a specific workflow prescribed by the target publication. As this is generally over the Internet, it is not uncommon to find an ad supplier that is having difficulty with network access privileges.

The ad portal should be capable of allowing temporary access to delivery methods that can bypass the workflow and simply upload an ad file utilizing the simplest of protocols (http through the ad supplier's browser). These types of access are typically referred to as "back doors."

## 8 Workflow Management

The portal should guide an ad supplier through the desired workflow as defined by the publisher. However, even for a specific publisher, the workflow may vary from title to title, or even section-to-section within a title. This means that the portal must be flexible.

In addition to guiding the ad supplier through the workflow, the management tool must be capable of issuing notifications (email, SMS or other) to any specified sender or receiver, or any proxy of the sender or receiver. A good example of this occurs when a publisher has its ad production performed by a prepress service provider. In these cases, the system must be flexible enough to deliver the ad material to one location, while delivering the metadata to a completely different one.

Similarly, the portal must be capable of delivering statistics regarding the exchange of ad material and a user interface that can iconically show the "status-at-a-glance" of the ad files that are, for example, targeted for a specific title.

## 9 Integrating Metadata

As mentioned in **Section 8 Workflow Management**, the portal can deliver payload and metadata to different locations and systems. The business metadata collected through the portal should be delivered to the business system(s) while the production metadata should be delivered to prepress systems and the ad files to the appropriate work in process server (or even an ad database).

In this way it is possible to use the ad portal to automate business processes that require input from production systems. Historically, this would have had to be performed by a person re-keying the received information into one or more systems.

By adopting a well-designed ad portal, the entire data entry process can be totally avoided. Key to this design is the selection of systems that work with industry standard file formats and metadata.

Good examples of these are PDF/X, JDF, AdSMIL and ICC color profiles. The adoption of these types of standards will ensure the longevity of systems, and when the time comes to upgrade, mitigates the inconvenience of re-coding input and output schemes.

## 10 Implementation

Ad portals should be modular and scalable so that companies can customize them the way they want according to their own time frame. This will allow a company to add more titles and features as required.

Experience dictates that the best place to begin is with branding one's portal and starting with sizing and preflighting. The next step is to add soft proofing, if required, followed by booking and insertion management.

The logic behind this approach is to minimize impact on existing systems and reduce the risk of confusing one's ad supplier community by changing too much all at once.

## 11 Value

AdSEND has been installing AdPORTAL since 2000. In that time both magazine and newspaper publishers have benefited from the installation in many ways. Interestingly, most of them cite the fact that the service is managed and has 24/7 support as the key values – that, along with the fact that AdSEND AdPORTAL does not require any dedicated hardware at either the senders' or the receivers' sites. With capital expenditure and staffing as two major business focuses, that is hardly surprising. Everyone is trying to do more with either the same or less.

After those two common elements, the reasons for implementing AdPORTAL are as varied as the publishers that install them, the advertising communities that they serve and the countries in which they live.

The fact that AdSEND solutions address the quality of the file (be it sizing, preflighting or soft proofing) before the file leaves the sender is key for both the sender and the receiver. For the sender, it gives them the security that the file that was just sent is OK and they won't get calls about it. For the publisher, it can streamline the reception process by knowing that the file is OK and it has arrived to exactly the "in-box" it was supposed to.

Somewhat ironically, it is after the file has arrived that the *real* variety begins. Some clients want to have their prepress service provider receive the files and process them, others want to automatically feed the files straight into an asset management system, yet others want to integrate their page layout, booking and AdPORTAL to automatically populate editorial pages with ads. In all these solutions, though, there is a common thread – **management and automation of more than simply the process of receiving ad files.**

## 12 Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this document, an ad portal can be so much more than just a replacement for your current ftp "ad drop-off point." Instead, it can become a fully integrated system that streamlines the ad reception process in a production department in ways that didn't seem possible.

The correct selection and implementation of an ad portal can revolutionize the reconciliation to ad material to bookings and allow faster, more accurate billing. Plus, ad suppliers appreciate tools that make their jobs more accurate, predictable and reliable. (See **Appendix I** below for a checklist of features).

All of these items will serve to increase top and bottom lines while the integration of the business metadata into back office systems can only increase cash flow by improving the speed and accuracy of invoicing.

Ad production is often overlooked in the publishing business. Interestingly, it is also one of the few remaining areas that have not received scrutiny because the processes it employs have not radically changed in more than 15 years. With the advent of fully featured ad portals and the introduction of electronic insertion orders, this department can now be reviewed and updated.

## Appendix I – Feature Check Sheet

The following table lists the key features that you should be looking for in an ad portal. Simply check off which features you require and then see if your potential vendor has the feature:

Feature	Required?	Available?
Managed service with no hardware installation		
24/7 support		
Branded, customized portal		
Ad sizing		
Application file preflight		
PDF file preflight		
Color-managed soft proofing		
Application-based sizing, preflighting and/or soft proofing (the file is checked <u>before</u> it is submitted)		
Server-based sizing, preflighting and/or soft proofing (the file is submitted to a server and the results are returned to the sender)		
Automated reconciliation of the booking to the ad material		
Automated reception and management of electronic insertion orders		
Automated copy chasing		
Digital capture of the process in industry-standard metadata		
Integration with other systems		
Integrated asset management solutions		
Disaster recovery (holding ad files outside of your enterprise)		

## Appendix II - Glossary of Terms

**Ad Supplier** – the group that supplies ads to the Publisher. This could be a prepress shop, an ad agency or even the advertiser.

**Rate Card** – this document is published by the magazine or newspaper Publisher and contains information that is pertinent to advertisers like the price of the different sized ads (per insertion, or for multiple insertions in several of the Publisher's titles). It also contains the physical size (in local units) of the different ad descriptions (e.g. "full page" or "half page").

**Mechanical Specs** – when a Publisher originally sets up the magazine or newspaper, they consult with their printer to see what mechanical tolerances of the manufacturing process. Armed with these, the Publisher sets the Mechanical Specs. To get to the full mechanical specifications of an ad, the Ad Supplier has to typically read both the Rate card and the Mechanical Specs on a Publisher's web site, or on SRDS.

**Full Page Ad** – an ad that resides on one whole page of a magazine or newspaper.

**Spread Ad, Double Page Spread or Double Truck** – the spread ad is an ad that resides on two facing pages in a magazine. A "Double Truck" is the same ad, but in newspaper parlance.

**Gate Fold Ad** – an ad that is larger than a spread and involves the folding of the excess area back into the ad page. Gate Folds can be four pages or more and tend to be handled individually because of manufacturing issues.

**Fractional Ad, or Display Ad, or In Classified Display** – an ad that resides on less than a page. In magazines the ads generally referred to as "half page" or "third page" and may be referred to as "third page vertical" or "third page horizontal" to describe the aspect ratio. In newspapers, the display ads are generally referred to (and sold as) "column inches" (in the UK and US) The "columns" are the width of the ad; the "inches" are the depth of the ads.

**Bleed Ad** – this typically refers to a full page ad whose image content extends past the physical page boundary of the magazine or newspaper. It is the responsibility of the Ad Supplier to ensure that there is enough image to allow for any mechanical tolerances in the trimming (bindery process) that the magazine may go through (this dimension is typically .125 inches in the US).

**Bounding Boxes** – In the specification of PDF/X-1a (ISO 15930-1:2003), the bounding boxes are defined as follows:

### 6.8 Bounding boxes

Each **Page** object of a PDF file includes a **MediaBox**. Each **Page** object in a conforming PDF/X-1a file shall include one, but not both, of **TrimBox** or **ArtBox**. The **MediaBox** may be included by inheritance.

If the **BleedBox** is present, the **ArtBox** or the **TrimBox** shall not extend beyond the boundaries of the **BleedBox**. If the **CropBox** is present, none of the **ArtBox**, the **TrimBox**, or **BleedBox** shall extend beyond the boundaries of the **CropBox**.

NOTE 1 Some industry practices may require the use of the **BleedBox**. Appropriate trade practices should be followed.

NOTE 2 The use of the **TrimBox** is recommended over the use of the **ArtBox**.

**The Trim Box (TrimBox)** – this is the bounding box in a PDF file that indicates the size of the ad as it will appear in the magazine when the pages have been finally trimmed in the binding process (for Full Page Ads) or with all extra bleed, crop marks and Furniture removed (for Fractional Ads).

**The Bleed Box (BleedBox)** – this is the bounding box in a PDF file that indicates the *minimum* amount of image that extends beyond the Trim Box. This is used to compensate for any tolerances in the manufacturing process. It can also be used to crop information outside the Bleed Box if data volume is a critical consideration in the process.

**Type Safety** – if there is type on an ad, the Type Safety is *minimum* distance between the extremities of the type on the ad to the physical edge of the ad (the trim box). It is generally expressed as “a Type Safety of an eighth of an inch,” which means the type should come not closer than .125 inches from the Trim Box. This is to compensate for any mechanical tolerances of the manufacturing process. There is no PDF bounding box that refers to the Type Safety.

**Live Area** – In newspaper ads, the pages are never trimmed, therefore the ads “float” on the page. The ads themselves are made to size of the floated area; this area is referred to as the “Live Area.” There is typically no Type Safety associated with newspaper ads, but there can be. The Live Area is the coincidence of the Trimbox, the Bleedbox and the MediaBox.

**Furniture** – at the bottom of many proofs supplied for ads there is a table to show a human readable record of the ad specs and the approval process (i.e. who approved the different steps. This table is outside the Trim Box. In the United States, this is referred to as “Furniture,” and all major ad agencies put Furniture around an ad. This information is generally of no use to the Publisher except when settling disputes, where it can be a useful audit trail. This can also be referred to as “Slugs.”

**Composite Ad Size** – if an ad is to be delivered to several titles with roughly the same trim size, but all are slightly different, a “generic” ad size is created that allows all publications to use one physical ad. The Composite Ad Size is set to the largest bleed size and the smallest trim and type safety size.