

By **John Parsons**

Making Personal Connections

In An Impersonal, Multichannel World

Outdoor retail giant Bass Pro Shops has an ambitious marketing vision: to connect with the needs of individual outdoor enthusiasts. In an increasingly impersonal, multichannel environment, that vision requires powerful, agile technology—such as Comosoft LAGO.

Marketing professionals have never had it easy. Even when channels were limited to print and broadcasting, it took tremendous effort and creativity to create lasting and positive retail moments of truth for an individual product, not to mention an entire brand.

With the advent of online and mobile technologies, the job became a lot harder. Each new device has made it harder to connect meaningfully with an increasingly busy, distracted audience. And print itself has changed radically. The days of large, general interest catalogs are gone, replaced by highly-personalized retail pieces of varying lengths and levels of complexity, each targeted to meet the needs of a very specific audience. If the marketing effort involves hundreds of thousands of individual SKUs, the level of difficulty goes to 11.

One of the country's major retailers, Missouri-based Bass Pro Shops, has addressed this marketing challenge head-on. With 200 retail and marine center locations plus a robust ecommerce presence, Bass Pro serves over 200 million customers annually, including many in-store programs and family-oriented events. It also offers a mix of specific-interest as well as larger "master catalogs" on freshwater and saltwater fishing, and hunting. With a growing role in outdoor conservation, the addition of museums, education centers and a major resort, and the 2017 acquisition

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of Cabela's, the company is not slowing down any time soon.

In the midst of this phenomenal growth, Bass Pro maintains an ambitious marketing vision, rooted in founder Johnny Morris' connection with his fellow outdoorsmen. With every product line — from fishing and hunting gear to boating and camping to outdoor clothing — the company seeks to connect with individuals. "We try very hard to create a one-to-one dialog and presentation to our customers, no matter where they may live or shop," says Joe Gies, Senior Marketing Manager of Creative and Photography Services for Bass Pro. "With our print catalogs, tabs and inserts, we have increasingly transformed what was traditionally a mass-market channel into a one-to-one connection with our customers."

Regions and Versioning

For a company that sells so many products, the

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process is anything but simple. Gies describes a typical example involving the full-color tabloid inserts delivered by mail or in newspapers. Digital editions are also



uploaded to each store website. These are produced every two weeks and have driven significant sales volume nationwide. Their effectiveness is due in large part to their deliberately customized regional and demographic appeal. While other retailers typically customize inserts by price, Bass Pro also customizes each version according to actual customer interests.

"You've got a fisherman in South Florida who's fishing for largemouth bass," Gies says. "He'll be using a specific type of plug or lure, like an orange-colored worm. But we don't want to feature those types of lures to a fisherman in Wisconsin or Michigan who's fishing for northern pike. To have authenticity in our presentation, we always feature products that are relevant to each geography, just as we hire people in our stores that have local knowledge and expertise."

"With print, we have increasingly transformed a mass-market channel into a one-to-one connection."

— JOE GIES, BASS PRO

To execute on that ambitious strategy, Bass Pro uses Comosoft LAGO system to manage and automate the regional versioning of tabloid inserts. LAGO connects marketing line managers and graphic designers with a third-party Product Information Management (PIM) system. Based on the company's detailed knowledge of local fishing and other outdoor preferences, combined with selections by the merchant, the system makes region-specific products readily available for placement, while giving the designer leeway to create the best possible layout. Complex product information, including images, are imported into the layout. Images and product information (e.g., pricing and other SKU data) is



Bass Pro uses Comosoft LAGO to regionalize their full-color inserts to fit the preferences of their customers, displaying fishing-related products that match regional preferences.

automatically updated whenever the PIM system is modified. (See "How It Works.")

The Bass Pro approach to regional versioning results in an extraordinary number of pages. The company produces many tabloid publications annually, each with multiple versions and inserts. A typical, 40-page retail piece may version up to well over 400 pages. As a result, the Bass Pro creative department must handle thousands of pages, each utilizing extensive PIM data, based on hourly imports from merchant systems. "Comosoft LAGO is basically our beast of burden that helps us manage all that complex versioning and real-time change out on a constant basis," Gies said. "All of our catalog and retail programs run on the backbone of LAGO."

The company's use of the Comosoft system extends to its outside premedia service providers and printers who use LAGO for page production, automation and scripting that manages hi-res image handling for Bass Pro projects. The company also provides printers with the LAGO-generated pagination laying out complete versioning for each market.

Gies praises LAGO's ability to handle third-party PIM data as well as DAM and page layout automation in

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real time. "Although we're large, we're also a very nimble company," he said. "We deal with changing market conditions. If we need to do a last-minute promotion, and include it in a tabloid insert, LAGO helps us do that."

Catalog Control

Bass Pro also produces well over 30 full-color catalogs per year covering its many product lines and specialties. Although not currently versioned like its tabloid inserts, the catalogs range in size from 24 to 600 pages each and rely heavily on Comosoft LAGO to manage the complex PIM data and digital assets required on each page. The print catalogs are also used as the basis for digital editions, with links to the company's robust ecommerce system.

Gies points out that Bass Pro uses many different modules within LAGO and plans to implement others. This includes LAGO's Whiteboard (pre-layout) module. This feature allows merchants to assign products and their information to specific documents within a project, allocating them to specific page positions via a drag-and-drop process, all while maintaining the relevant SKU information.

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Bass Pro also uses LAGO's WebProof module for sharing InDesign work in progress with authorized decision makers, and its Transfer Server module for managing data import without the risk of losing or overwriting essential data.

The size and scope of Bass Pro's channel strategy requires a specific and unique approach to data management and presentation. "There are no other systems we have discovered that are able to handle our retail channel needs like LAGO does," Gies said. "We're dealing not only with quantity but also with complexity. Think about a 48-page tab that's versioned for many markets. That means we're dealing with 400-600 different pages, and we have to be sure the right



Bass Pro Shops publish between 35 and 45 full-color catalogs per year, each involving complex SKU data and images that must be managed efficiently.

product ends up on the right page to be read by the right customer. LAGO is the right tool — and so far the only tool — for handling that process satisfactorily." LAGO provides a means of compression, minimizing the number of pages to be produced, while also facilitating multiple, complex versions.

This strategy was successfully stress tested last year with the acquisition of Cabela's, when the number of markets handled within LAGO was instantly doubled.

On many occasions, Bass Pro has also brought in Comosoft analysts to help solve particular challenges in managing complex data sets and communication output channels. "Comosoft has worked closely with us for years to evaluate our workflows, and continually improve our efficiency," Gies said. "They partner with us to help us perform optimally."

For Bass Pro, the challenge is to create a personal experience within a fundamentally impersonal mass medium — the printed page — while also relating the same experience over multiple, non-print channels AND enhancing the in-store shopping experience. For a large and growing company selling thousands of compelling products, that challenge is achievable through advanced, multi-faceted systems, including Comosoft LAGO, and an overriding vision for personal connection.

HOW IT WORKS

Bass Pro Shops uses many of the modules available in Comosoft LAGO and plans to implement others in the near future. Here is a brief overview of the multichannel publishing software system.

LAGO, recently updated to Version 5, is an enterprise software system for product marketers, designers and producers of catalogs, flyers, circulars, inserts and other complex collateral. It consists of multiple modules for connecting creative production software (typically Adobe InDesign and InDesign Server) with simple, web-based tools to plan and produce complex promotional output from a single data source.

The core modules for LAGO include Admin, which provides user management, global configuration parameters, setup and management of product and SKU types, publication versions and repeatable workflows. LAGO Transfer Server controls data import and export configurations and scheduling, reducing the risk and expense of lost or overwritten data. Plugins for Adobe InDesign and Photoshop allow those applications to interact with the LAGO's digital assets and product data in real time.

Bass Pro predominantly uses the LAGO application called Explorer. However, Comosoft also offers a similarly-featured web-based module for preparing, generating and scheduling campaigns, advertising media and their article-based fulfillment. It gives marketing, merchandising and product managers the ability to select products and assign them to specific pages via drag-and-drop while maintaining all relevant SKU and promotional data. The results of this whiteboarding process are specific projects that designers can complete in Adobe InDesign. Users of LAGO Explorer can prioritize SKU usage in a catalog or flyer by multiple criteria, including profit margin, availability, regional or demographic data or promotional circumstances.

The Proof module lets InDesign users generate a secure, web-based file for multi-user markup and approval. All users are notified of Proof tasks and deadlines, and the system can be used to create certified "snapshots" of work in progress.

WebAsset is a full-featured Digital Asset Management or DAM module for finding, importing and exporting SKU-related images, logos and other assets. Each asset's metadata is rigorously controlled to ensure that a catalog entry always coincides with the appropriate, current visual elements. When a digital asset is modified,

the catalog layout for that particular SKU is updated automatically to reflect the new artwork.

Explorer allows for the creation, scheduling and management of projects as well as the products (assets and data) featured in them. Such projects may include multimedia presentations for use online, mobile and ecommerce, as well as management of product information for delivery to print collateral projects. Users can assign products to a variety of pages within each project, enter product descriptions and other content, add to or edit data received from third-party suppliers and monitor the status of individual pages throughout the production process.

The **Whiteboard** module allows users to manage product information as it is assigned to specific documents within a project. Marketing and product managers are able to select products that are to be presented in a media presentation, assign them to pages via drag and drop and maintain all relevant SKU information. Merchandise planning is facilitated in a pre-layout or whiteboarding function. The end results are clear instructions, within existing design templates for the actual page layout process.

The **Digital Output** module enables direct output of marketing collateral to many different online channels. Digital circulars/flyers or e-catalogs are output automatically along with highlight/rollover and URL data.

Squinch is a sales analysis module that reports on the space utilization (in square inches, hence the name) of individual products or a range of products, to determine the optimum composition of a catalog page. Another analysis module, Stickering, gives managers an effective tool for monitoring and verifying complex SKU data during the catalog creation process. As an add-on to both the Whiteboarding and Proof modules, Stickering enables data to be overlaid on the screen, allowing direct comparisons between what's on the page and the data from the system of record. Expanding on this, importing data from other sales-based systems such as forecasting and inventory, empower merchant users with insights that previously required multiple screens.

WebReports, provides system-wide reporting capabilities on virtually every data point and metric in LAGO, enabling users to run pre-defined reports or create custom reports. Combine this with Squinch and some externally sourced forecasting/inventory/sales data for some very unique views into marketing projects.