

Article 2 - [Previous](#) [Next](#)

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Cracking the Code

Xyvision migrated to open standards including XML.
Letterpart is first company to try it out

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The books lined up on the shelves in the former townhouse in Redhill that serves as the main office for Letterpart are an eclectic bunch. Among the bestselling novels are statistics and colour catalogues. The common thread is that all were typeset on the premises using Xyvision prepress systems.

That system is now the UK pilot for the XyEnterprise Publication Manager 7.0, the first XML version of the software.

XML, the extensible mark up language, is a relatively new format for the printing industry to cope with. It is an evolution of SGML, the text-only mark up language that offered a means for publishers to create texts and for typesetters to interpret what was intended without the publisher needing to know how to set hanging indents, complex tables or mathematics and chemical formulae. All this continues with XML, but where the flavour of SGML tended to be agreed between publisher and producer, XML is much more open.

It is also open to working with databases and importantly can carry more than typesetting information. XML codes can convey pricing data, production instructions, in short almost anything that can be conveyed digitally.

XML is going to be very, very important in all sectors of the industry, but particularly in the transfer of information from publishers to prepress production houses. It is early days for Letterpart to date, but the early experience with the new version is good and expectations are high for when it begins to use the new features.

The company started in database origination having been formed out of the ashes of an earlier company to provide loose-leaf typesetting for taxation publisher Tolleys. The Xyvision composition system, as it then, was particularly good at loose-leaf work, a strength it has retained, hence the company's decision to stick with the developer.

Complex work

The decision to concentrate on the complex work by Letterpart has acted as a barrier to publishers wanting to bring typesetting in house and as protection against incursion from overseas competition, which concentrates on words and spaces rather than tables, indexing and complex work.

Xyvision's experience since those early days in the 80s has been less happy and has been one of reorganisation and restructuring until it is now XyEnterprise Solutions. The focus is on the new applications using powerful composition and pagination engines on standard applications and platforms.

Once upon a time Xyvision made its own hardware, then switched to Unix and now runs on Windows NT, a move which according to European vice-president Mike Macnamara opens up the market tremendously.

Publishing solution required

He has been touring exhibitions and events around Europe and says the combination of NT and XML is proving very attractive. This is particularly so at XML events where XyEnterprise may be the only publishing systems vendor in attendance. Many of the delegates at some events know XML and realise a publishing solution is required, but do not know how to begin.

The move to NT is certainly a point in its favour for Letterpart where managing director Chris Leggett says that having a single operating system running the professional services and the internal accounts and administrative applications is a definite plus. The support issue is crucial too. Unix engineers are expensive and not readily available, unlike NT support, which is to some extent provided by Dell, supplier of the Letterpart servers.

In its ramp up Letterpart is now putting all its work through version 7.0 and NT rather than Unix, with no impact on customer service.

"XML is the side we haven't started yet," says Mr Leggett, "It's something that's got to be tackled in the next two months mainly because we're looking at a lot of new work."

The switch is timely also because XML is dearly catching on among the publishing fraternity. What it offers is a way of describing both what an element on a page is, giving it a point size and a style, but also its content, whether it is a headline, footnote, table, etc.

For Letterpart where reformatting content to suit a different product is not unusual, moving a hardback novel to paperback or extracting certain parts of a database to use in a niche publication for instance, this is more than useful feature. Needless to say Letterpart does not always let on about how easy it is to create a new product with a different look and feel from the same core information.

Automatically adding pages

The taxation and legal work needs regular updating. Changes are marked on screen and on the printed page if wanted. The pagination engine reformats the content, automatically adding loose leaf pages where needed.

Typical requirements might include output in a Word format for the customer to create CD type products as well as PDF or PostScript output for printing. The company's skills are also leading it into new types of products. Letterpart has always been a composing operation, but the power and capabilities of the software are such that it can easily handle different types of publication. Just how comprehensive the functionality is can be gauged by the carousel in one corner of the room that is needed to hold the manuals.

There's an increasing amount of catalogue work where the software is required to bring in colour images linked with an order number, relevant descriptive and price information. Again output from Letterpart is data on a disk or a stream of data along a communications link.

Much smoother style

The key is in formatting the information correctly in the first place, the role of Publication Manager. The new version offers the same choice of views on the page as before, with coded and wysiwyg options available and the familiar Xyvision interface blocks are retained. The overall dressing however provides a much smoother Windows style modern look and feel. All elements are held in a standard database in the XML format, available not only to XyEnterprise but to other applications as well.

As yet, says Mr Leggett, Letterpart has not begun to exploit the XML features, though he says that publishers are asking about XML more frequently, supporting Macnamara's observations. He explains that the benefits from using the format go beyond pure book publishing.

The format provides information useful to a database and a means to extract information together with information that provides a context which can be passed to an automatic publishing system, whether it be for book publishing or the web. The power of the XyEnterprise software is such that all these elements can be fed to a system with rules on how a page should look, with relative weightings for graphic placement, paragraph styles and so forth, and within minutes PDF pages are generated. These are supplied by Letterpart to printers as PDF on transportable media or as transmitted data. There are no longer any processors on the premises, another plus for the company.

This has allowed it to provide a very comfortable workspace, far removed from the comp rooms of old. This is well lit, nicely furnished and carpeted.

Minimum effort

A handful of operators are engaged in checking, formatting, editing and creating the pages that will be next year's Income Tax update, or the Playfair Football Annual. A change in book format, from hardback to paperback is achieved with minimum effort.

For XyEnterprise too the switch to XML is paying dividends. It has managed to sign OEM deals with companies outside the traditional publishing industry, but which offer computing services and which realise that there is a demand for a powerful structured publishing system.

Summary

- XPP 7.0 is first to be based on implementation of XML
- Letterpart standardising on NT platform in production and administration
- Benefits of XML to come

Here comes the science

XML can be considered a halfway house between HTML, the structured language which is used on the worldwide web and SGML, the mark up language used in technical and academic typesetting.

However XML is far more than this and has wider implications that just a new format for the publishing industry. XML is the first agreed standard for carrying data between computer systems, in the same way that ASCII is the standard way of describing type. Consequently XML is used for linking databases, for placing orders from one company to another (including print e-commerce systems), in short for carrying data in an open agreed way. It does this by using an agreed set of tags which describe the context and as well as the content of the information tagged. A complete set of tags for a document or data set is known as a Schema. Within this is the Data Type Definition (DTD) which is akin to the SGML DTD describing what a document looks like.

The aim is to add neutral descriptors to text, such as <H> for heading, for body text and so on. The DTD is effectively the look up table assigning a value to these tags. A DTD therefore will translate an <H> tag as 48pt Futura Bold Condensed in one context, but for another application the publisher may want the heading to be 24pt Plantin Bold. It is a simple matter of parsing the text against a different DTD.

XML can become incredibly intricate as you delve further into it. The format is the basis of the Job Definition Format that will allow digital linkage between all stages of the printing process for instance. Therefore it has to be capable of carrying out this complex task.

Unfortunately while XML is a standard agreed by the W3C committee which governs the worldwide web, there are many flavours of XML as different industries have tinted it to serve their individual needs.

In publishing however XML will jostle for position with PDF in the near future. Quark 5.0 will make extensive use of XML as Quark Avenue and DMS already do. It is a format that will be increasingly visible within the graphic arts and it is essential to keep abreast of developments with it.