AdAge

In an industry demanding efficiency and ROI, automating creative processes continues to be a growing need

Creative automation: Revolutionizing how ads are made

Creative automation: Revolutionizing how ads are made

While AI grabs most of the headlines (and controversy), automating creative processes continues to be a growing need in an industry demanding efficiency and ROI

Automation promises to transform virtually every industry, including the advertising business, where it has already revolutionized how media is bought and sold. A growing number of marketers believe now is the time to also reinvent the process for creating ad campaigns across all formats, from video and the web to e-commerce and social media.

Anyone who makes ads for a living is aware of the inherent problem in conforming to the creative processes of the past in our digital, increasingly automated age. While technological advancement has reinvented so many other businesses, creating ad campaigns remains hobbled by cumbersome, outmoded procedures, siloed technologies, a host of formats and channels nearly impossible to keep pace with, and disparate teams across a range of disciplines and time zones.

The result is that producing a campaign can be unwieldy and time-consuming, not to mention prone to error. That's bad news for marketers, seeking efficiency and brand consistency through multiple rounds of changes as they aim to expand their presence across a growing global audience of consumers.

Creative automation—cloud-based software for marketing and creative professionals to remove design repetition tasks for high-volume advertising campaigns—has emerged as a solution for many challenges, giving the designers

of campaigns more control of the creative process and helping advertisers scale with efficiency, all the while spinning out the most creative and effective marketing content.

But while it is something numerous marketers and media companies have already embraced, many agencies and brands are just now learning about the benefits of creative automation, likely wary of shaking up the process whereby campaigns have always been made.

Still, more and more marketers are seeing that now is the time to change how business is done, and to incorporate creative automation into their own organizations.

Breaking down the benefits

As those who make campaigns for a living know, unwieldy production processes don't just create massive inefficiency and lots of headaches for creatives. Manual processes simply cannot keep up with the pace the market today demands.

Media moves in real time—and the creative process should do the same. Creative automation promises a production process three to 10 times faster than traditional ways of working.

The need for a more efficient way of doing things is clear. Consider that campaigns tend to be produced by several internal and external teams with an array of multidisciplinary specialties—from marketing strategists to art directors to copywriters and even multimarket expertise. Now, consider that
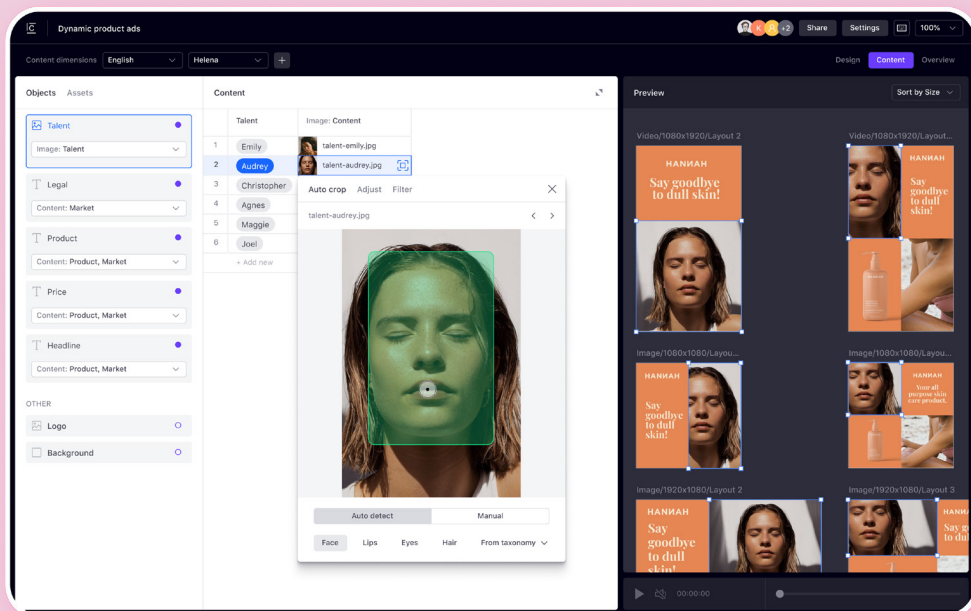
Celtra's platform automatically crops images to fit differently sized creative.

Auto-cropping for bulk designing digital banners

What problem does auto-cropping solve?
During production, designers often need to prep all raw assets such as background graphics, product images or photography by manually cropping source images for each of their different sizes. This also means that editing or making changes to any image assets will bring you back to redistributing creatives. Celtra recently automated this workflow.

Now designers can upload their source images directly into Celtra's platform. The software will automatically crop images to fit differently sized creative. Designers can then preview crops across all digital banners and manually adjust them if needed.

In addition to saving time in bulk designing, auto-cropping streamlines the entire production process. Designers no longer need to go back and forth between Celtra and an offline design tool to fix, adjust or generate new crops.

With a higher volume of creative production, marketers can easily add variety, new channels and formats to the campaign mix without missing production timelines. Marketers focused on growth, meanwhile, benefit from the ability to scale campaign assets for creative testing. They can also produce more audience-based digital assets with the same team resources. Both can be sure that creatives are customized per channel and format.

CELTRA

all those people work on different apps and platforms. Meanwhile, how those team members communicate over the course of a campaign's production—generally a perpetual volley of emails, DMs and comments across apps—is also stuck in a time warp.

Creative automation simplifies all that. With multi-user access, preview, review, approval and tag generation, workflows are streamlined. With creative automation software, teams no longer have to send assets as email attachments or embed screenshots in presentations. Rather, creative operations leaders and marketers can pull up the latest version of the creative themselves and send feedback or approve changes all in one platform, minimizing human error and eliminating roadblocks like versioning lags.

Consider also how the public's appetite for ads and the types of messages they are drawn to have shifted. Just three years ago, short-form video was still on the rise. But today's changing trends necessitate digital transformation, as video teams have not fully transformed. What used to be very curated branded videos now heavily lean on user-generated content, resulting in marketing messages that are a little more relatable and a little more "human" in their production qualities. That involves different requirements for the producers of those ads, and whole new opportunities for brands. The obvious downside is that creative teams struggle to keep up with the relentless pace of a media ecosystem that's always in motion.

Yet, creative automation is also modernizing video production processes, easing the growing bottleneck of workflow as the form has flourished.

Why the creative process must change

Why automate the creative production process, versus other elements of the marketing process? Because creative production is a foundational driver of cross-channel campaign effectiveness.

As the research firm Forrester pointed out in the 2020 report "Improve Creative Speed, Quality and Relevancy With Automation," commissioned by Celtra, a maker of creative automation software: "Businesses that can improve their production processes and

> "Automated digital creative production has made our workflow faster and our creative more effective, while driving cost savings across the company."
>
> **Nathan Cook, global director of brand communications excellence, Unilever**

produce relevant content will stand out and better win, serve and retain customers."

In its survey of hundreds of digital advertising decision makers in the U.S. and the U.K., Forrester found that 70% devoted more time to ad content creation than they would like, while just 44% agree that current processes are effective. The report determined, "Without the proper technology on hand—and with outmoded processes in place—much work remains manual, confusing and time-intensive." Because of that, only half of advertisers say they can make creative content that keeps up with the speed and volume of their ideas.

When producing digital ads, marketers continue to struggle with such issues as localization, optimizing campaigns and keeping up with the speed of digital growth, Forrester found. When it comes to developing new assets, they grapple with factors like organizing inputs, lack of visibility into how they're used in local markets and slow time to market for campaigns. "When relevancy is hampered and speed-to-market is slow, ad creative quality can suffer as a byproduct," the report determined.

Creative automation has been embraced by leading marketers such as Unilever, whose global creative automation partner, Celtra, has had its creative automation solutions used by clients to produce more than 2 million ads worldwide. As Nathan Cook, global director of brand communications excellence at Unilever, explained, "Moving from manual processes with fixed design to modular and automated

Relative repositioning

Automatic resizing of CTA button

With auto-layout, designers set the rules so that the components and creative elements in the template are automatically resized and repositioned to best fit the space, allowing them to accommodate various layouts in one template.

Auto-layout for optimizing digital banner space

What problem does auto-layout solve?
With high-volume digital campaigns, production needs to manually adjust the layout of components in their templates to make the most of the digital banner space. Previously, each layout would have required designers to build separate templates or bulk-design creative variants. Now, marketers can design a single template that can be adapted for all content variations.

With auto-layout, designers set the rules for the layout so that the components and creative elements in the template are automatically resized and repositioned to best fit the space. Now they are able to accommodate various layouts and combinations of content in one template.

Among the benefits of auto-layout for designers are efficiency, brand governance and quality. Designers no longer need to account for different creative combinations individually, now having more control over how creative components are assembled, and can efficiently produce high-quality creatives for distribution. Auto-layout is particularly useful for designers producing large volumes of content for different alphabets as they can set individual rules across languages.

Meanwhile, auto-layout also aids marketers deploying global toolkits. Multimarket campaigns with different length translations benefit from automation since the user can preserve design quality across languages.

CELTRA

digital creative production has made our workflow faster and our digital creative more effective, while also driving cost savings across the company."

First-rate creative still matters

As advertising and the number of digital media platforms have flourished, the role of the creative has become more important than ever, and the quality of the ad content they produce is elemental to a brand's success.

While in recent years the industry has focused on building the infrastructure for personalization, it has put pressure on content delivery and execution to cover the growing scale of marketing efforts. Dynamic personalization and automated ad delivery are only one half of the personalization challenge; the other is delivering campaigns that are relevant and impactful. Targeting, meanwhile, has become increasingly challenging. Consumers are constantly bombarded with ads, and it is harder for brands to break through that clutter.

In addition, the rise of personalization has created new challenges for content delivery and execution. Personalization requires the creation of multiple versions of ads that are tailored to specific audiences. That means marketers need to create more content than ever before, and they need to do it quickly and efficiently. That can be a daunting task, putting tremendous pressure on creative teams.

Dynamic personalization and automated ad delivery have made it easier to deliver personalized content at scale. These tools allow marketers to create ads that are automatically tailored to specific audiences based on their behavior, interests and demographics.

But such tools only amount to half the challenge when it comes to personalization. It is important to remember that the creative quality of advertising remains crucial. After all, a personalized ad that is poorly designed or executed will not be effective. In fact, it could do more harm than good by damaging the brand's reputation. Personalization and automation are nothing without creative that is relevant, impactful and memorable.

Auto-sizes for bulk producing advertising banners

Producing all the size variants for digital advertising is one of the most tedious and mundane tasks in creative production. Celtra's Creative Automation solution relies on machine learning to automate the process of applying a design across multiple sizes. All the formats and sizes that teams need across digital media channels are analyzed while the minimum layouts needed as a design source are identified. That means designers can create one template design that is automatically applied to additional sizes.

Designers can design for one size and effectively scale that across all the sizes needed in bulk design production, then easily tweak or make manual adjustments for individual sizes if needed. For marketers, complex media plans become distribution-ready assets faster. Auto-sizing can better serve a campaign plan of any scope.
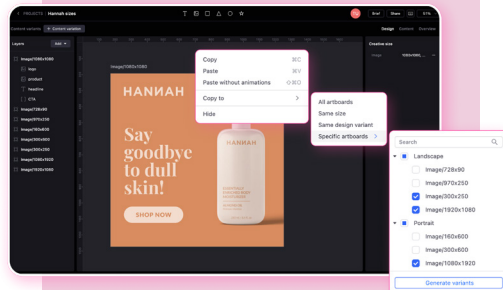
Creative Automation uses machine learning to automate applying a design in multiple sizes.

CELTRA

A focus on localization

Creative teams are used to handling high volumes of local market asset requests, something that is a workflow challenge, to say the least. With creative automation, teams can design principal templates for regional counterparts, then resize, reformat and personalize the creative according to their needs in the local market. That allows for consistent branding and localized messages. Ultimately, creative automation enables a global market reach that would otherwise be unattainable.

With all the benefits of creative automation, why hasn't it already become the norm in the industry?

According to the Forrester study, only 24% of marketers state that their localization operations are mostly automated. At the same time, 83% predict a positive or critical positive impact from creative automation on improving and increasing localization efforts.

Again, it's apparent that brands are skittish about converting their knowledge into action. But those brands that adopt creative automation earlier will be able to outperform their competitors.

Financial services company Kasasa, a Celtra client, was able to scale its marketing program due to creative automation. While Kasasa helped clients remain flexible and resourceful, its creative team needed an automation boost to remain ahead of production volume and stay nimble across workflows when tackling ad hoc changes. For every marketing campaign, Kasasa's creative team had to produce and execute social ads using its bespoke layouts and designs. "It took hours to process any change, especially if there was a change in the company's flight dates," said the company's digital marketing specialist. Doing so was time-consuming and introduced potential errors. With Celtra's solution, the turnaround speed of creatives to clients was reduced by one day, and eight hours of work were saved per month.

For another client, a global sports apparel marketer, Celtra was charged with coordinating creative efforts and ensuring brand consistency across local markets, creating synergy across the organization and enabling local teams to deliver customized content at scale. The challenge of the assignment was systematically scaling global creative direction across markets. With Celtra's global toolkit, the client was able to achieve creative scale faster and more efficiently for a holiday campaign, producing 10 times the creative volume as before (from 145 to 1,511 unique creatives), cutting the work required to produce creatives by 71 percent and sending creatives to market 35 percent faster.

Integrating automation across teams

The problem of silos, whether among internal or external teams, is an obvious drag on segmented workflow. The more stakeholders who are involved, after all, the harder it is to achieve cross-collaboration and efficiency.

Adapting team processes and talents to facilitate cross-function collaboration is a leading priority for marketing organizations, and another benefit of creative automation. The centralization of the creative process for digital ads ensures that branding and messaging are intact across multiple creative iterations, channels and marketing aims, including localization and personalization.

By centralizing work around the campaign, all stakeholders can work together and build on the same foundation. That means deliverables can be turned around quickly and repackaged, while teams can work more effectively. Agencies can look to automation solutions that offer a range of collaborative features to help centralize work around campaigns.

Innovating production workflows

Campaign production as we know it simply doesn't keep up with the demands of the industry and clients. While certain software and workflows have been improved, the work remains segmented. In short, a team must wait for another team to finish one part of the production process before the next can get started, and the cycle repeats.

Automation technology enables clients and other stakeholders to operate as a single team. By shifting to cloud-based production, disparate teams come together to work collectively and achieve results faster. Using automated solutions, agencies can maximize

Automated text treatment for displaying digital banners

The headline is the first and perhaps most important impression a campaign can make on a prospective reader. Yet in digital advertising, text handling has been a painstaking process. For example, with manual production, headlines may need to be laid out differently in vertical formats compared with square or landscape. A creator wants to ensure the brand or product name is displayed properly. Certain words must be on the same line for the headline to make sense. One also must figure out how different alphabets appear in the content. Automation is the answer.

Celtra's Automated Text Treatment includes a built-in library of standard line break rules that help designers efficiently adapt designs across multiple languages. For example, designers can automatically manage text rules for "orphans," "widows" and "always together" across creative assets.

The tool is particularly useful for designers working across multiple alphabets for international campaigns. It simplifies the process of designing across high volumes of unique digital advertising assets. Designers no longer need to manually adjust the layout or text for discrepancies in content or localization.

Meanwhile, marketers can maintain more control over content and ensure that all creative iterations adhere to brand guidelines. Automated text treatment simplifies the quality assurance and approval process because there are fewer exceptions to consider.

Left-to-right text flow **Right-to-left text flow**

Automated Text Treatment includes a built-in library of standard line break rules that help designers efficiently adapt designs. Designers can automatically manage text rules for "orphans," "widows" and "always together" across creative assets.

Default line break **Optimized line break**

CELTRA

their team capacity and increase efficiency all in one platform. By doing so, they can:

- **Unlock visibility.** Creative, production and media teams have a shared look into both media and creative, providing transparency of the production and process. That means more integrated conversations that lead to increased strategic work.
- **Prepare for cultural transformation**. With manual production, brands can't move quickly enough to produce relevant content when something big happens in the world. Creative automation allows for brands to act swiftly, produce content quickly and adapt content in real time so brands can react to cultural moments fast and stay top of mind with their target audiences.
- **Cross-pollinate learnings.** Having all teams connected in one centralized platform means insights can be shared easily among all stakeholders. That leads to more strategic conversations and a higher quality of work.
- **Eliminate the bottleneck.** No more waiting hours or even days for feedback and approvals. Collaborating in one space, in real time, means creative teams can maintain momentum and get out campaigns in record time.

AI delivers more streamlined processes

What would any conversation around the future of the industry be without a nod to artificial intelligence?

The advent of AI can bring on many new opportunities for content creative development. With the right guardrails in place, brands can embrace and leverage AI and automation to amplify productivity at critical stages in creative production processes.

AI can lend itself to the creative process in several different ways, most immediately by accelerating task automation. A good example is a designer who is tasked with creating 10 iterations of an ad, working with a centralized team serving six regional markets. Clearly, to create 60 versions of an ad would be laborious. But with AI, an image can be easily repurposed automatically across numerous iterations.

> The advent of AI can bring on many new opportunities for content creative development. With the right guardrails in place, AI and automation can amplify productivity at critical stages in creative production processes.

Meanwhile, AI-enabled text generation, which promises to revolutionize virtually every industry, is becoming an integral part of creative automation as well. Using text generation, and based on specific prompts, a creative can add placeholders into a design. This way, creatives can create more realistic placeholders by proactively designing certain modular templates for different use cases, mindful of guidelines like breaks and spacing.

Using creative automation tools, marketers are able to expedite the creative ideation and iteration process, vastly reducing support times when new content ideas are generated and allowing for quick turnaround when it comes to factors like market testing, shifting the scope of a campaign or expanding a brand push into additional markets.

As AI dominates conversations around technology's role in business, marketers continue to explore its potential with enthusiasm, even as there is increasing urgency around the need to establish best practices and guardrails around how AI is implemented.

That said, automation and AI are clearly the future, and marketers will continue to pave the way for better, more efficient and more effective ways of creating campaigns.

Ad Age Studio 30
Ad Age Studio 30 helps your brand connect with an influential audience actively seeking new partners, solutions and products. Through original custom articles, thought-leadership content, events, research, webcasts, white papers, infographics and more, our end-to-end solutions help your content reach and resonate.
Studio30@adage.com

Staff
Writer **Tony Case**
Design Director **Jennifer Chiu**
Senior Designer **Natalie Skopelja**
Editor **Christopher Hosford**
Copy Editor **Brian Moran**

Contact us
James Palma
Senior VP, Sales
and Client Partnerships
jpalma@adage.com

John Dioso
Editor, Studio 30
jdioso@adage.com

Deana M. Lykos
Director, Activations
deana.lykos@adage.com

Cassandra Hom
Activations Specialist
cassandra.hom@adage.com

Celtra
Celtra helps businesses transform with creative automation. Our cloud-based software solutions empower brands, media owners and agencies to leverage creative automation technology to drive the efficiency, speed and quality of their digital advertising production.

From scaling digital advertising content to global toolkits, performance creative, and building and activating premium ad suites, businesses can do it all with Celtra's creative automation solutions. Our customers include some of the most creative companies in the world, including Adidas, Spotify, NBCU, WarnerMedia and Unilever.

Visit Celtra.com for more information.

Celtra