Web-to-Print Portal for Large Format Digital Printing

To offer value to your clients is the goal toward which we all strive, and to offer current clients additional services to continue the relationship is a must. Large format digital printing, alone, is not enough to keep those good customers from looking around, though a different method of ordering graphics can advance the goals of the marketing team, which may lead to something. Web-based solutions may be the ticket in the search for value-added services.

How can we change the purchasing dynamics for a sector of clients? Can we drive print business in a way different than the classic bid, send file, proof and print? The answer is absolutely. Some business is better handled personally, and conversely, another style of projects fits the Web portal workflow best. Can a scenario be created so that the client may utilize templates to create custom graphics, thus eliminating prepress and the proofing process? A Web-based solution can add value to the traditional process. Corporate identity and branding is protected by consistent use of logos, typefaces and predetermined design layouts. Now that I sold you on why WTP is a good idea, let's delve into the opportunity.

Web-to-print (WTP) is a term that has been in use for a number of years. The scope of WTP is, at its simplest form, a "storefront" or Web portal from which to purchase static items in various quantities. Amazon is the most noteworthy example, and many printers have storefronts to do the same. Basically, it could be a Web-enabled "project input" site: Fill in information, get a quote, upload your file, and pay for the activity. The ability to view work in process may be possible. At the other end of the spectrum are variable data projects in which clients can choose templates and upload variable information (addresses, etc.) via the portal, to then receive the print-on-demand. This process tends to be used most often in the direct mail industry. Commercial web-to-print applications can include both print-on-demand (POD), or pre-printed materials pulled from inventory. POD documents can have static content or include elements of variable data printing (VDP), a form of POD that is mainly used for the personalization of marketing materials with product or customer data pulled from a database. VDP is geared toward mass customization, whereas web-to-print focuses only on changes order to order. VDP pre-dates Web-to-print,

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although, at that time, the design process was carried out via close collaboration with the printer for documents such as invoices.

Advantages of a Web-to-print system include the ability for print houses, graphic designers, corporate clients and the general public to access a private or public online catalog where real time changes to a prepress template are possible. Within this process, the client can approve the materials without the need for a face-to-face meeting with the printer. Additionally, templates allow print customers to control brand management and content, as portions of a constantly used template can remain consistent throughout a series of print projects. This system is often cost-effective for clients and time-effective for print houses. The disadvantage to this system as it exists today is that small- to mid-sized print houses are limited in their access to software and server system solutions for a Web-to-print service offering to clients. Most proprietary and trade name software that was developed with Web-to-print projects in mind remain expensive for this sector. Additionally, these systems often require the use of digital systems that only larger print houses would maintain. To address the prohibitive cost of traditional Web-to-print software solutions (software, systems, periodic software upgrades, technical staff, etc.), providers offer Web-to-print as "hosted" solutions. This method is called "software as a service," or SaaS. Using this model, application, creation, maintenance, enhancements, technical support, application upgrades and hosting are provided as a Web-based service. Since the software, systems and support resources are spread over a larger client base, costs can be reduced significantly. This makes it possible for any print house to offer professional Web-to-print applications and services with an affordable investment of time and capital.

Models, Provisions and Considerations

Using the SaaS model, application creation, maintenance, enhancement, technical support, application upgrades and hosting, are provided as an outsourced service. The choices and options that a large-format printer may address in their evaluation of Web-to-print SaaS solutions are varied. Some of the major players in the field are Presscentric, XMPie, Pageflex, EFIOPS and Printable. A Web search for "web-to-print" will result in many options with a variety of capabilities. SaaS solutions are generally delivered through a purely online environment, allowing them to take advantage of a relatively low-cost-per-seat, cross-platform compatibility, multi-user collaboration and live database integration for product and digital asset management (DAM). The downside is the challenge that all Web activity will have, as production happens through a browser.

Another niche in Web-to-print solutions seen by some as an indicator of things to come is the provision of "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) design support. Products provide such ability by allowing elements within a template to have choices inserted and deleted by end-users following strict rules established by the designer of the system. This WYSIWYG provision, generally supported by Flash or Ajax technology, provides freedom from browser and OS dependency. This type of system begins to blur the lines between desktop publishing applications and Web-to-print systems, and lets non-designers edit and proof customized artwork within a 'safe' environment. You can give your clients choices, while still protecting your brand and graphic look. Clients also find it unacceptable or impatient to make a change and watch a page reload. Visual changes as a result of the choices clicked are expected instantaneously. The newer systems incorporate this advanced page processing.

I found pricing models to vary with the many choices. They range from a cost per transaction, to a percentage of the cost of the transaction, to an upfront payment for an SaaS usage "license." Be careful to look at monthly or yearly maintenance dollars. The costs will also vary with the complexity of the modules you choose. Module choices will range from a generic e-commerce, to complex customization building tools and even social media modules to expand your marketing services beyond pay for print.

My first impression, while sitting through multiple demos and pitches, was that the software providers had less experience in our world of large format (POP and event scenarios), and more familiarity with small format uses (from business cards to posters, brochures, etc.). These items also utilize variable data. File size can be a real sticking point. To the software vendor, large files may fall in the five-megabyte range, while for those who produce large format, that range could be as large as 500 megabytes. This will surprise many of the WTP suppliers. The demonstrations appeared to focus on the e-commerce side of the site: Ordering, checkout and payment processing. Most alternatives have well developed storefront client experiences, though the meat tends

to be in the "prepress," meaning file uploading, manipulation, customization, design tools and creation of the templates.

Web-to-print is growing! There are so many benefits, such as maintaining brand consistency, customized content, and controlled timing and delivery amounts.

Event graphics can be customized, and be delivered to your door the next day for a key event. Remember to address six key considerations before you start analyzing solutions:

1. **Creating a strategy.** Does this fit your current client base? For which client does it make sense? Do you want to hit large brand marketers (Coke or Oscar Mayer) or the smaller brands that could not afford to create this solution? What level of customization will you offer? These questions are directly proportional to cost of the portal. A clear strategy will help you maintain focus on your business objectives, and assist in budgeting. How big are you going to grow your Web-to-print service? Will it be 20, 200 or 2000 templates/clients?
2. **Building the software in house and/or commissioning or SaaS.** A new mousetrap may look cheaper at first, but with the way technology is constantly changing, it will cost more to keep up with it all. You will still have to decide what elements to keep in-house or outsource. If you host software that has been created, an in-house IT department is a must, and you will need to upgrade throughout the year. A customer service group to just deal with the client experience and emails will be necessary. Ask yourself, "Do I want to be a software developer or a graphics company?" Saas may be the ticket, especially for smaller companies.
3. **Dedicated Manpower.** It is important that you have the staff to back this service up. You need someone who has the time to study the software, and to devote functional time to this service. SaaS solutions address some of the IT concerns, though SaaS is software that needs to be learned, too.
4. **Research.** Make sure that you do diligence to figure out whom your target audience will be, and that you select the service modules that fit your target market. Figure out what products you will be able to offer and make sure that your WTP vendors can support those products.
5. **Production.** Remember that Web-to-print is about providing the easiest, most convenient and most competitive order entry system for your customers. Most customers only want to hear how this new service is going to make things easier for them, not you. The light bulb that should go on is that WTP portals reduce order entry, reduce prepress (yes, the printer will still need to do layouts), and eliminate proofing. Then shipping is also entered online, and communication is facilitated through the site.
6. **Content.** Do not underestimate the time, effort and cost needed to create engaging content for your website. Without content, your website will be virtually invisible, and potential clients who stumble upon your site come and go.

Some of the questions to ask a provider of SaaS options are:

- How do you manage the content?
- Monthly traffic allowance?
- Can you add new functionality later (modules)?
- What is the largest file size? (A large format quandary.)
- How much storage? What is the cost for more?
- How long will the file be retained? How is your system backed up and redundant?
- What are the traffic limits?
- Do I receive one unique URL site, or can I brand multiple? Is there a cost for additional branded sites?
- How many users?

Your search should focus on usability. Ask a friend unfamiliar with printing and publishing to fill in the form, and play with the templates. Most quote request forms are way too complex even for seasoned print buyers, while the common visitors to your portal are marketing or sales people, at corporate or in the field, with custom graphic needs. It is ease of access for the marketing and sales people that can make WTP so powerful. Potential customers will not even try to get a quote from you if the form looks complex, let alone work with the templates, commence with the order.

The cost of template generation should be no more than the cost of making a design. In reality, creating the templates should not be a design task, but a workflow/production activity. Though most SaaS

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providers do not have a method to create the templates within the software, many are cumbersome. Custom graphics should be a smooth throughput, and not a large impediment to the basic cost to the client. Presscentric has an efficient InDesign plugin that intuitively understands areas that are static and layers that will be variable. Populating each changeable area of the template becomes just an upload function. Consider a few other workflow and usability thoughts:

- How much work do you need to do to turn a design into a template?
- If you make changes to the design, do you need to start all over with the template, or is there an edit function post template production?
- How many different applications do you need to prepare a template? Is it only InDesign, or a layered PDF or an Illustrator file?
- What are file size limitations on the template? Does large file size create issues while the client builds the graphic?
- Templates need to have a certain level of flexibility for user input variations. Corporate designs require constraints to preserve the branding.
- On the other hand, making the rules too strict will mean lost business for you in special cases when the rules do not apply, because the system will not accept the data and the user will give up.
- Automatic formatting and validation: Phone numbers, emails, Web addresses
- Drop downs with predefined values. People want to see the image that is described in the drop down menus. A visual image bank that appears creates a more positive client experience versus word descriptions.
- Will the rules and constraints stay if the template is re-uploaded?
- Automation of pre-flighting the uploaded files. Advanced systems have a module to evaluate PDFs before you spend the time and money.
- Many of the SaaS vendors allow only two gigabytes of free data storage, and keep the files on their servers for a year. On the other hand, one uses the Amazon cloud to store all files, and all data is kept indefinitely.
- Online design tool limitations may sound great, though caution is needed. While it is possible to have very advanced features in the online designer (e.g. layering, transparencies drop shadows etc.), it is prudent to use them very carefully. The reason for this is that Flash Plugin is client- and not server-based, therefore all calculations are performed on the clients' local machine (inside their Web browser). There is a danger that very large, complex files can crash Web browsers or cause delays due to long loading times.

Print questions of the software to consider:

- Do you have full control over color spaces and spot colors?
- What choice of PDF versions and features do you get?
- Can you go beyond simple business card designs with straight lines and rectangular images? Most simple Web-to-print systems have very limited design capabilities. The business card demo may look good, but advertising designs are complex.
- What parts of design can you make variable?
- Can you use gradients, transparencies, drop-shadow, custom outlines (basically filters and effects) and other essential design techniques for the variable part? Design agencies are creating the graphics, and these effects are part of their repertoire. Does the software get upgraded as Adobe upgrades?
- What are the maximum and minimum canvas sizes?

Fonts are an issue in any environment, and Web portals are no exception:

- Can you upload your own fonts?
- Do you have to pay for uploading your font or purchase as you go?

Some software is made smarter than the users. It will not let the user do something it thinks is wrong, even if the user is right. For example, it wants to see all phone numbers as (*area code*)-*phone number* and the user wants to enter *1-800-number.* You should be able to also set up "rules" to create the best graphic look.

The main limiting factor for Web-to-print expansion is centered on the affordability of this solution, and the software and hardware companies' abilities to merge desktop graphic tools with server technologies designed expressly for a Web-to-print goal. While specific software set the stage for major print houses to offer Web-to-print services to corporate clients and to the general public, other software companies have nudged into this business to offer small- to mid-range solutions.

Challenges in the pay-for-print sector are generating differentiators to clients and prospects. A Web-based graphic process is one method that displays technologically advanced solutions, and offers unique marketing applications in a means to pull in the grassroots efforts of sales staff in the field. WTP truly unites marketing's wishes with the needs of the sales team. WTP solutions do assist the print house — less real-time prepress for the print provider — though understanding the man-hours needed to build, maintain and provide customer service becomes the pivotal element toward success or failure. A well thought out plan, and surrounding your company with the right expertise will go a long way to help accomplish your goal, and create value added services for your clients.

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