



Marketer's Primer Series: Web-to-Print

INTRODUCTION

I have been watching the growth and development of Web-to-print applications for more than a decade—since these applications broke out of the “static online print ordering” model and began to transform businesses’ print management and marketing models. Over time, these applications have evolved even further, beyond even highly functional print design and ordering sites to platforms for developing cross-channel marketing programs and centralizing project management. These applications will continue to evolve, so this report should be seen as a snapshot of technology undergoing rapid change. While the observations in this report are not intended to be an exhaustive look at all of the issues related to Web-to-print, they are intended to provide a broad compendium of the issues and areas of most importance and immediate relevance to the average marketer. — Heidi Tolliver-Nigro

How do you think about your printed documents? Design them, contact a printer, figure out how many you can afford to print in order to keep the price down, then hope you didn't order too many? Balance the quality and run length requirements against your turnaround? It's the way designers, agencies, and marketers have done it for decades. But today's Web-to-print (W2P) technology enables you to do much more.

(Increasingly, these are also being called “Web commerce” systems. In this report, the terms are used interchangeably.)

We're not just talking about printing in shorter runs, on demand, although that's part of it. We're talking about revamping the way you think about and manage your marketing collateral, books, forms and documents, and print marketing projects. We're talking about changing the way you approach branding, personalization, and multi-channel marketing.

We're talking about saving money. One Web-to-print vendor claims that the automation in its system reduces cost for procured print in the 25% to 50% range when compared to more traditional procurement methods such as negotiation, rate carding, reverse auctions and spot bidding. According to its most recent white paper, the average experience of its clients (large corporations) has been to achieve a 42% cost reduction.¹

These aren't yesterday's Web-to-print solutions.

¹ Print Management Program Offers Compelling Return on Investment Without Up-front Investment or Risk,” e-LYNXX (March 2010).



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SECTION 1: WEB-TO-PRINT BASICS

When many printers and marketers think about Web-to-print, they think about large sites (exemplified by VistaPrint) for ordering business cards, letterhead, and other corporate identity materials. You go online, pick a template, customize it with your own text, font color, and perhaps stock images, and place your order. It's not glamorous, but it is quick, easy, and inexpensive. This print model is not for everybody, but especially for small businesses that can't afford designers and large runs, it works.

Defining Web-to-Print

But if your understanding of W2P is limited *only* to these types of online print stores, you're thinking too narrowly. The term "Web-to-print" applies to a much wider variety of applications. In fact, the diversity of ways people use the term has become one of the biggest challenges in discussing it. Among the many ways people are defining W2P:

- Static online store (like VistaPrint) for creating corporate identity and marketing documents
- Static online store for creating photo books, mugs, t-shirts, and other specialty items
- Ability to email or FTP files to the printer
- Branded Web portal for creating customized or personalized marketing documents and publications
- Branded Web portal for creating online forms
- Branded Web portal for creating, repurposing, and distributing advertising

Each of these categories has a host of issues, benefits, challenges, and cost structures all its own. In the case of emailing or FTPing files, it reflects the fact that people use the term in such a broad way that it could refer to almost anything related to the Internet, whether it's truly Web-to-print or not.

For the purposes of this report, here is how Web-to-print is defined:

The ability of users to access a dedicated website for the purpose of ordering, managing, customizing, or personalizing documents that are hosted and managed on that site, whether they are originally created there or not.



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SECTION 2: CHANGING BUSINESS MODELS

The implications of the capabilities described here are enormous. W2P can change, not only the way marketers handle print, but the way they think about their marketing, their cost structures, and even develop their business models. Let's look at a few of the fundamental changes marketers often make in their print management, and even business models, based on these capabilities.

Transition to the JIT and the POD Environment

If you are working in a traditional "print mall" environment, the changes W2P offers to your business model may be minimal. If you are working in a short-run, dynamic marketing environment, however, you have some substantial opportunities for change.

The important thing to understand is that Web commerce systems are merely an interface. The output from that interface can be offset or digital. If it's offset, you will benefit from centralized repositories, permissions-based access, managed approval processes, and other workflow benefits; but in terms of marketing, the opportunity for change may be minimal because you will not have the flexibility to produce 1:1 jobs. Likewise, in terms of run lengths, there will still be minimums. If the supplier is ganging jobs with other clients, you may be able to print fewer at a time than in a traditional workflow, however, which can still have powerful bottom-line benefits.

If your W2P provider is outputting on a digital press, however, you will see some real opportunities for dynamic marketing changes because, in addition to the workflow benefits, there will likely be no minimums. You can go online and print one, if you want to. Rather than tying up your capital in inventory, this frees you to do other things. This may not seem like such a big deal until you really think through the implications.

One of the markets where the 100% POD business model is having a radical impact is book publishing (although the impact can be just as great for other types of marketers, regardless of the products or services they are selling). Service providers like Lightning Source allow publishers to use Web-to-print to print books on a one-off and extremely short-run basis, allowing small, self-, and traditional publishers to produce vanity and niche titles, bring back out-of-print titles, and even take their inventory to zero. The flexibility, cost savings, and customer retention/customer service benefits can far outweigh any perceived higher per-piece costs from printing in lower quantities. (See publishing section later in this report.)



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SECTION 3: PRODUCTION & IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

The benefits of Web-to-print are clear, but all applications have drawbacks. What are some of the issues marketers must consider on the other side of the fence?

Cost

One of the things that scares marketers away from any new application is cost. In this case, it is the front-end costs of developing the interface, designing the templates, and developing the central repository, if required. But not all W2P solutions are costly. The range of options is vast, from inexpensive off-the-shelf solutions to highly customized, proprietary solutions.

Not only this, but the more widely adopted these applications become, the more the costs are driven down. This is especially true for marketers whose needs can be met with off-the-shelf solutions. There has been an explosion of W2P software, with each release seeming to continue to drive down prices. If your interface is hosted by your print provider (especially if it's a basic retail/inventory management solution), there may not be any cost at all.

The cost—if any—will depend on the complexity of the system, whether it is a hosted model or an ASP/SaaS solution, and whether you deploy the W2P solution in-house or whether you work with a printing or marketing partner that hosts it. Many of today's solutions come with existing, fully customizable templates that further drive down the upfront costs.

Getting the Buy-in

It's important to remember that the front-end dollar signs are often offset, not just by administrative savings, but by incremental price savings driven by volume. The more sophisticated the solution, generally the higher printed volume that will be run through it. High-volume usage can earn back the cost very quickly. Certainly, in the case of Wells Fargo described earlier in this report, the system was costly to set up. At the same time, for every order of 1,000 books, it was able to drop the cost of its retirement enrollment materials by \$5 to \$10 per book.

Of course, not every company will be able to generate this kind of volume. Even for those who do, the key to ROI is getting the full company buy-in. If you are going to invest in a Web-to-print solution, it is critical to get the buy-in at all levels so that the system gets used.

Among the "best practices" of successful W2P implementers is the implementation of training and incentive programs that get employees at all



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SECTION 4: CASE STUDIES IN WEB-TO-PRINT

To many marketers, the benefits of Web-to-print sound interesting in theory, but they have a difficult time seeing how those capabilities are relevant to their businesses. Now let's take a look at a variety of case studies that illustrate in a fuller detail how these solutions are being deployed and the results they are achieving.

Application Categories

First, let's list the umbrella categories under which these applications fall. Then we will look at several "best in class" case studies for each.

- Short-run printing
- Versioning
- Customized marketing collateral with centralized, online control
- One-off personalized follow-ups
- User-generation personalization & fulfillment
- 1:1 print personalization
- Publishing
- Resizing and repurposing of print ads

Short-run Printing & Versioning

Because digital printing and direct imaging (DI) printing eliminate the high upfront costs of offset, this allows marketers to print in high quality, in short runs, extremely economically. This allows you to keep forms, brochures, books, and other corporate identity and marketing materials up to date, while still printing in four-color.

For example...

- Compassion International, a ministry dedicated to helping impoverished children around the world, needed a way to cut costs and speed turnaround on sponsorship packets, including child information and photographs. Compassion used to print packets as soon as a child became available for sponsorship, but by switching to a digital, on-demand system, it began printing packets only once a child was actually sponsored. This has allowed the organization to use more color. Meanwhile, it has reduced the time to produce the packets from seven days to less than 24 hours. Data entry and manual labor is now restricted to hand assembly of the packets. In addition, sponsors now receive only the most current information.



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SECTION 5: CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Just as with any technology, success with Web-to-print starts with the fact that it is not the Web-to-print technology itself that makes the difference. It's the solution you build around it. That's what's so exciting about these applications. It's the flexibility of these solutions that opens doors for marketers of all sizes, from the smallest to the largest.

That said, if you are going to be folding Web-to-print into your document management and marketing mix, here is a set of "critical success factors" you want to keep in mind.

Learning From Those Who've Been There

1. Change document and marketing management models, not just the ordering interface.

Web-to-print enables you to streamline your print ordering, but if you are *only* thinking along those lines, you are missing the boat. Web-to-print—and, more accurately, the applications it is capable of producing—can actually revolutionize the way you approach your marketing and document production and management. That doesn't happen merely by moving your print ordering online or by printing in shorter runs.

Remember the case of Strong Tower Publishing, which uses its print provider's Web-to-print portal to manage nearly 100% of its book sales? Although the publisher's business model didn't start out using Web-to-print, the printer's development of this model ultimately determined (and drove) the direction of its business. This is just one company, but it illustrates the larger message of Web-to-print. The idea isn't just to change how you order your print jobs. It's how to use the technology to change the way you do business.

2. Take advantage of all the capabilities the solution offers.

You may invest in a Web commerce solution to address a specific issue related to document management, but these solutions are capable of much more. 1:1 printing, personalized URLs, integrated email marketing, social media integration, QR codes, and more. These are powerful tools for creating and monitoring integrated marketing programs. Take advantage of the full range of possibilities they open to you.

Use the capabilities of this technology to maintain tight integration across all of your marketing channels. By creating a common set of design and business rules, you can produce multichannel marketing programs with common branding and messaging quickly and easily. Centralizing the components of your marketing campaign under a single solution not only helps to maintain branding but also minimizes mistakes and saves money.