

Best Practices for Utilizing Web-to-Print Technology

Where the Science of Successful Marketing Happens | by Kurtis M. Ruf

How do you think about your printed documents? Design them, contact a print provider, figure out the volume you can afford to print in order to keep the price per piece 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.

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, kits, and print marketing projects. We're talking about changing the way you approach branding, personalization, and multi-channel marketing.

Current status of Web-to-print

Most marketers think of Web-to-print (also called "print commerce") as being able to order static or even customizable documents from some kind of Web-based portal, whether an online store or proprietary site. But it has become so much more. Web-to-print can do everything from monitoring print branding to

driving full-blown database-driven personalization to helping marketers to manage and deploy sophisticated cross-channel marketing campaigns.

There are a number of key marketing benefits of Web-to-print-based applications. In a nutshell, by centralizing all of the components of your marketing, corporate identity, and other documentation, this will give you complete control over your branding, messaging, images, and production. Many of these systems also drive database-driven personalization, offer marketing dashboards for monitoring campaigns, simplify multi-channel marketing, and more.

Web-to-print can help you achieve significant cost savings, as well. These include:

1. Time savings

There can be tremendous time saved by using the template-based structure of these solutions to create, re-size, and repurpose documents.

2. Reduction in fulfillment errors

Especially in a high-volume corporate environment, fulfillment is often handled manually, so error rates can be very high. By moving to an automated system, errors can be all but eliminated.

3. Reduce errors and duplication in design

Design agencies, regional offices, and others are often working with outdated materials and duplicating their design efforts, with each location paying to design its own flyers, brochures, and other collateral. By centralizing templates and design, the savings achieved by eliminating duplicate costs and content errors can be tremendous.

4. Savings in print and postage

Print and postage costs may be slashed, as well. Volumes may drop because orders are occurring only on an as-needed basis. Why pay for printed documents that will only be thrown away? Large corporations may also benefit from ganging (combining) orders.

5. Faster response time

What is the value of your time? Consider the extra revenue generated as a result of faster responses to inquiries or faster time to market.



6. Improved marketing effectiveness

All of these benefits don't even address the impact of more effective marketing. By personalizing and customizing documents, these marketing communications become more relevant to recipients and have far greater impact. Thus, W2P-generated applications can not only reduce costs but generate more revenue.

7. Administrative cost savings

Strong integration with back-office systems means that Web-to-print can solve operational problems associated with indirect goods, not just printed materials. That means savings in cost.

One multi-site manufacturer with 8,800 employees was creating 11,000 orders per month using multiple, disjointed internal ordering methods. By switching to a Web-based procurement, the company has saved enough money to re-deploy four data entry positions to revenue-generating roles.

“Greening” your printing

As marketers move to the print-on-demand environment, they get a secondary benefit—their print programs become greener.

Reducing inventory, minimizing waste, and reducing or eliminating warehousing are great bottom-line benefits, but they are “green” benefits, as well. They mean less wasted ink, paper, and energy. If your output is printed digitally, you can tack on the environmental benefits of digital presses. These include reduction in make-ready sheets and elimination of film, plates, proofs, couriered disks, and (in most cases) solvents.

Lessons from the field

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. 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.

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. The idea is use the technology to change the way you manage your marketing.

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

You may invest in Web commerce to address a specific issue related to document management, but these solutions are capable of 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 multi-channel marketing programs with consistent branding and messaging quickly and easily. Centralizing the components of your marketing campaign under a single solution also minimizes mistakes and saves money.

3. Use the tracking and campaign monitoring functions of these solutions.

Many Web-to-print solutions include "marketing dashboards" that allow you to track the components of the campaigns in a centralized location. You can watch response rates in real time, compare the success of different channels, different lists, and different test groups, then tweak and refine your campaigns based on what you learn. You can even do it in real time. These are powerful tools, use them!

4. Think about pricing, not in terms of individual project cost or per-piece cost, but how the entire solution impacts the bottom line.

If you think that investing in a Web-to-print solution is too expensive, you may be thinking too narrowly—about short-term investment rather than long-term gain. Or about the initial outlay and not bottom-line growth.

Think about Tiffin University, which switched from 9x12-inch folders with preprinted inserts to slim, highly personalized booklets printed on demand and dropped its printing and postage costs by 50%. It sounds counter-intuitive to spend more on a per-piece basis and still end up reducing your overall costs, but it happens.



These applications typically have upfront costs (such as the cost to develop and deploy the portal), so the true ROI has to be determined over time. If a financial company gains 100 new clients through a marketing campaign, it can calculate the ROI of that campaign the first month, but the true value of that campaign goes beyond the initial investments. Those clients could stay with the company for years, even a lifetime, which is why you may hear companies talk about lifetime customer value, or LCV.

5. Take a holistic approach to support your investment.

If you are going to make an investment in a new way of managing documents, extend the commitment with additional changes that support this decision.

Disney Destinations, for example, revamped its marketing collateral to be 100% personalized, generated on demand by CSRs when prospects contact its call center. Along with this change, Disney made some other substantial commitments to support this investment. Among them, it has begun following up with prospects who received customized brochures and who have not responded to call or book an event. Having access to the personalized information provided for the brochure makes it easier for the sales person to talk about their current needs. The sales staff also contacts past clients to find out what their current needs are and whether they have any upcoming events.

It is this kind of companywide, strategic initiative that helps Web-to-print succeed. Web-to-print is an important tool, but just as even the most function-rich construction equipment can't build an office building by itself, W2P can't carry the load by itself, either.

6. Plan into the system future needs, not just today's.

When anticipating the kind of Web-to-print solution you will need (in-house/outsourced, functionality, volumes), keep in mind what your needs might be, not just today, but one year or five years out. If your goal is too narrowly focused on keeping down costs, you might end up with a system that is too restrictive and cannot grow with you. Low-end, off-the-shelf systems, in particular, offer a great opportunity to get into the W2P model at a very reasonable cost, and for many marketers, this might be all they'll ever need. Other marketers may outgrow them quickly and find themselves locked into a restrictive system and need to start from scratch in order to continue to grow.

7. Think volume.

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 one national financial institution, the system was costly to set up, but 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.

8. Once you decide to deploy a Web-to-print system, implement a plan to get full buy-in.

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.

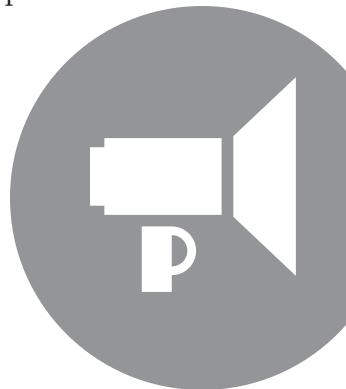
This is why another one of the best practices of successful W2P implementations is setting up training and incentive programs that get employees at all levels (or third parties like distributors or independent realtors) vested in the program even before it is deployed. One approach is to set up employee focus groups to help in working out the bugs. Not only does this help to get the buy-in from participants in the program, but it has the additional benefit of helping you work out any potential problems before you deploy the site.

9. Think beyond digital print

Whenever people talk about Web-to-print, the tendency is to talk about applications like 1:1 personalization, customization, and decentralized targeted marketing. But when it comes to cost-justification, Web-to-print is just that—Web to any kind of print. It can be long-run offset. It can be short-run digital. It can be labels. It can be presentation folders. It can be business cards and corporate identity materials. It can be large-format graphics or anything else you need.

If you can print it, it can be output on the back end of a Web-to-print system. Even complex documents can be uploaded on a static basis to a Web-to-print solution for output as needed.

For this reason, it's important to keep in mind that cost justification comes, not just from the sexy applications, but the ability to streamline and automate mundane, day-in, day-out print ordering, too.



Conclusion

Not every application will fit the customizable W2P model. Highly custom documents—not just in content, but also in size or shape—typically won't fit into the kind of templated, fully automated solution that is driven by Web-to-print. However, once the document is designed, it can be uploaded to be printed on a just-in-time basis, even if the document cannot be modified.

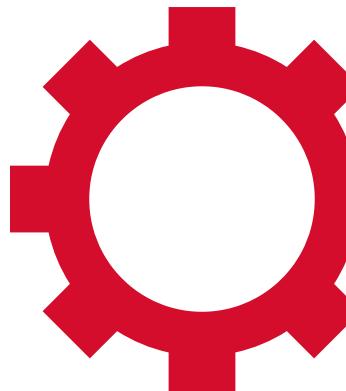
Packaging, in particular, can be difficult to automate at this level. Not only does flexography, for example, have special needs hard to accommodate in an automated system, but the variety of dies (unfolded packages), whether offset or flexo, can present challenges, too.

Still, for those willing to trade unique product sizes for mass efficiency, it can be done.

In the meantime, Web-to-print is finding its place as a mainstream solution for solving document management and marketing challenges that deserves serious consideration for marketers of all sizes.

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