Web-to-Print with Photoshop

Solidifying Web-to-Print Solutions

through Photoshop Support

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W2P: The New Normal

What defines a revolutionary technology? It is something that can be hard to identify if you are standing right next to it. The light bulb, telephone, automobile, and even modern examples such as online shopping were all met with intense skepticism when they were first proposed. However, these technologies' usefulness eventually overpowered the skeptics, as well as other industry forces that perceived these changes as threats, to solidify themselves as widespread solutions to everyday problems that we barely even think about today. The real kicker is that those slowest to adopt these new technologies are usually the ones that would benefit most from them. Sound familiar?

Web-to-print (W2P) is one of these revolutionary technologies. It may be a bit of a stretch to compare W2P technology to something like the light bulb or automobile, but in the scope of the industry, it is not far off. Similarly, the potential of the technology and levels of enthusiasm for it have not been proportional. This is a shame, because a web-to-print solution can pass cost savings on to both the print provider and the customer through the implicit increase in automation.

Introducing W2P—Photoshop Integration

Despite all of the benefits, there are still valid concerns to be had when adopting a web-to-print solution. One of the greatest is the learning curve that usually comes with learning a new technology. Most printers are incredibly busy with backlogs of jobs and do not have the time to invest in something that is not guaranteed to yield a return for them. Moreover, there can often be compatibility issues between design files and W2P editors. End-users will need to painstakingly recreate the design using an unfamiliar, proprietary user interface. Finally, some things get lost in translation when customers have the power to manipulate designs in a W2P platform. This can result in costly mistakes that need to be rectified before runtime.

The solution to these problems has been around for nearly 27 years, but the capability to integrate it into web-to-print has only been developed recently. I am, of course, referring to that program we all know and love, Adobe Photoshop. If you are backtracking to see if you missed something, you read me correctly the first time. There are a select few players out there that are now offering the next generation of web-to-print solutions, and they harness the power of Photoshop to overcome some of the biggest obstacles facing printers who want to try W2P for the first time or update their current system. Throughout this brief white paper, we will discuss the challenges printers face when implementing a web-to-print system, as well as the following three solutions that Photoshop integration provides.

Increased User Friendliness

Learning a new software program with its own unique user interface is like learning a new language. It is easier to do when we are younger and we generally have less time and less receptive brains as adults. Photoshop is a universal language for our industry that everyone already speaks. The ability to integrate PSD templates into a W2P solution drastically reduces the learning curve and makes W2P more accessible.

Streamlined Workflow with Template Support

The backbone of any solution that offers Photoshop integration is the ability to upload Photoshop templates that can then be manipulated in a W2P editor. This feature helps to resolve the incompatibility between platforms that often plagues printers when they must recreate customer files from scratch in a clunky online editor. PSD templates with multiple layers containing images, text, shapes, and smart layers can be imported and manipulated without switching between programs.

Greater Precision with Markers

One vendor in particular — Customer's Canvas (by Aurigma) — offers Photoshop support in their web-to-print system, and has augmented what is already a great feature with

another: markers. Markers are small strings of text that can be added to layers within a PSD template and are later read by the web-to-print software. Markers can disallow the moving or editing certain layers, which can prevent unintended mistakes before runtime.

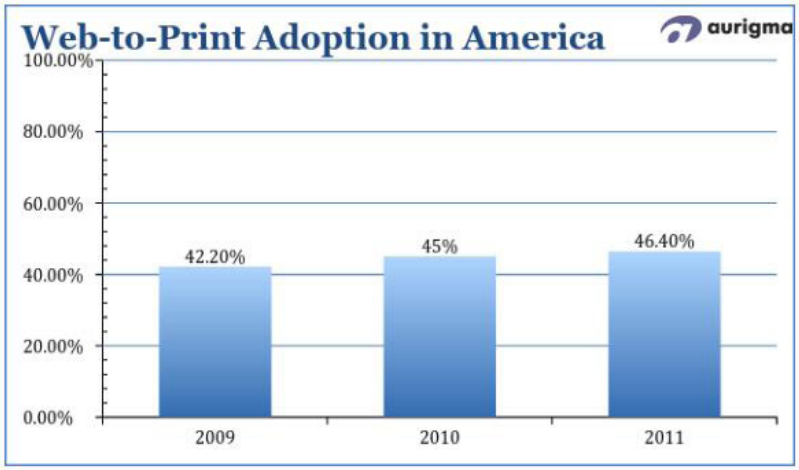
Digital Reluctance: The W2P Holdouts

As mentioned earlier, the transition to web-to-print has been a slow crawl rather than a rapid industry shift, however revolutionary the technology may be. While North America has the highest adoption rate of web-to-print by far at 46%, it took longer than forecasted (Fig. 1-1) to reach this this number, and only 26% of printed products are ordered through a web-to-print portal globally. These numbers continue to grow, but not nearly as fast as one would expect for a solution that can reduce costs, labor hours, and errors through automation. Why? What prevents print providers from taking the leap from a first-floor window?

Hurdles Facing the W2P Transition

Of course, if it were so easy, then everyone would be doing it. There is more than one answer to this question. As I mentioned briefly above, the challenge of learning new software well enough to integrate it into an existing workflow without throwing a wrench into it in the process is a major concern. Even after such a system is integrated, one has to worry if the time they thought they were going to save is spent on recreating customer-submitted files in a 3rd-party proprietary format, which is the case with some providers. Also, perhaps there might be even more work involved with correcting and preflighting the files of customers who are not necessarily print-savvy, but decide to use the web-to-print editor online. With all of these obstacles in mind, we have not even begun to talk about the costs upfront. Some of these systems are prohibitively expensive and lock smaller players out of the market. Let us examine some of these challenges in greater detail before discussing the revolutionary change that Photoshop support can bring to web-to-print.

Fig. 1-1: Web-to-print reached an adoption rate of 46.4% in 2011, up from 45% in 2010 (Source: InfoTrends 2009-2011).



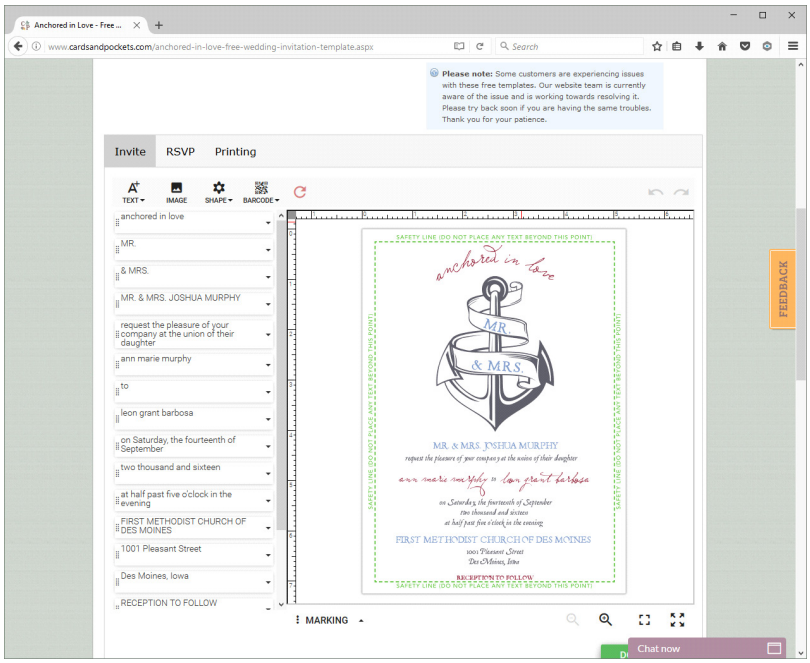
High Learning Curve for New Technology

As any reader knows, the workflow of a print shop is a complex and delicate machine. Especially for smaller shops, the layout of the workflow is a very personal thing and is highly varied between shops. Therefore, integrating something new into the mix can be a daunting task, especially if it takes a lot of time and effort to figure out how it works and, more importantly, how it works relative to an existing workflow. The most immediate concern is learning the software of a web-to-print solution. As I mentioned above, I like to equate learning a new program — its UI, its limitations, and its little quirks that you learn by doing – to learning a new language. Depending on the program, it can take just as much time to become fluent enough to know exactly how it can impact your workflow both positively and negatively.

Time and Costs Lost to Incompatibility

Just as some languages do not translate very well to others, the same is true for different software platforms. Many web-to-print platforms out there will not accept industry standard files such as PSD templates into their online editors (Fig 1-2). Proprietary file systems are either profit driven, a result of not enough technical skill to create an open platform, or a combination of both. Either way, print providers and print buyers lose. Designers will often have to take customer-submitted files and spend valuable time recreating them in the editor with a UI that is not nearly as intuitive as an Adobe product. Or perhaps they will

need to go back and forth between the editor and Photoshop template because design elements are not immediately editable in the W2P editor. Moreover, some vendors require manually converting designs to a 3rd party format like XML. Time is money, and the costs are passed on to the customer, which is the exact opposite result that a printer is looking for in web-to-print.



1-2: Unlike Customer's Canvas (pictured), most web-to-print editors cannot support Adobe Photoshop Templates. (Source: Aurigma 2017).

Evading Errors in Customer Submissions

Massive online storefronts like Amazon and Alibaba have created a desire for instant gratification in today's consumer. According to a 2013 UPS survey, over 70% of Americans prefer to do their shopping online. This extends to ordering a taxi online through Uber, buying groceries with Thrive Market, and yes, even print products through big players like VistaPrint and MOO. Web-to-print storefronts give customers the power to modify pre-designed templates or submit their own completed design files. This is great in theory, as it gives modern consumers the power they want to customize a product, submit an order, and wait for it to arrive, all without visiting a shop or picking up a phone. However, this opens the door for more errors, as most customers are unaware of certain "best practices" when submitting their designs, especially if they have

complete freedom with all of the design elements in an online template. Perhaps there is a text box for a business card template that is positioned exactly where it needs to be within bleed lines…but the customer moves it, resulting in mistakes that need to be corrected later.

Prohibitive Costs Prevent W2P Adoption

Not all of the barriers between printers and web-to-print technology are technical. Vendors place a hefty price on this technology, hoping that the promise of cost savings, higher volume, and higher profits will be enough to tempt printers into reaching deep into their pockets. We often see this with licensed software products in the web-to-print market. A licensed product is purchased and installed on-site with a high cost upfront. In addition to this, servers that can handle Photoshop templates are in a class of their own — one of them being Adobe's InDesign CC Server — and are out of reach for small providers at several thousand dollars per year. So, with the high cost of installation and possible snafus that could occur during integration into an existing workflow, it is not hard to see why so many printers are reluctant to adopt a web-to-print solution at this time.

Photoshop to the Rescue

These are all legitimate challenges that the average printer must consider before pulling the trigger on a web-to-print solution, and they all have a hand in why the adoption rate as a whole is so slow. However, with something as simple as Photoshop integration, these are going to become outdated problems soon. The use of Flash in online web-to-print editors is quickly declining as the platform dies out all over the web, with HTML5-based editors set to become the new standard. Essentially, we are seeing the next step in the evolution of web-to-print, and none of the oldies have the Photoshop support that the newer players are carrying as a part of these new systems that address most of the obstacles above.

Let us examine how Photoshop integration in a web-to-print solution can specifically meet the challenges outlined above.

Photoshop as a Universal Language

Small shops do not have the time to budget into becoming well versed in new software, and costly errors are always a possibility early on if the user and program are not fully acquainted with one another. That is why web-to-print editors that speak Photoshop are going to be the next big thing that printers look for if they want to make the W2P transition. Almost everyone in the industry at least knows their way around the basics of Adobe's user interface, so it makes sense for the bulk of the work to be done in Photoshop rather than a clunky Flash-based UI online. The user can simply make a PSD template as they normally would and upload it to the W2P platform. So, instead of spending a load of time learning a new program that does not have as many applications beyond the con-

fines of the web-to-print designer, you already possess the transferrable skills in Adobe Photoshop.

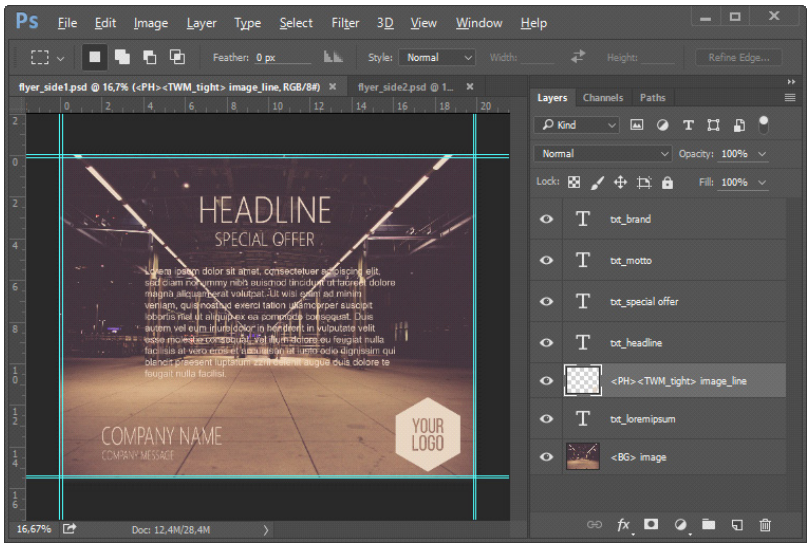


Fig. 1-3: Markers within brackets can be inserted into layers to disallow users from editing certain elements. The highlighted layer contains markers for an image placeholder and text wrapping. (Source: Aurigma 2017).

Conserving Time and Money with Template Support

The strongest feature of a web-to-print solution that can be integrated with Photoshop is, of course, the ability to work directly with PSD templates. Users can upload multilayered templates with text, images, shapes, and smart layers to the web-to-print platform. As long as fancy design elements like layer effects and blending modes are flattened, entire PSD templates can be imported and the elements can be manipulated in the W2P designer. The files are then converted to the internal JSON-based format (.ST), but as users will not deal with .ST files directly, it is easier to think of it as opening a PSD template within the editor. Once the template has been imported, users can manipulate text, positions of objects, and change color themes, all within the editor. The benefit is two-fold. Users do not need to painstakingly recreate customer submissions from Photoshop into a readable format and they can continue to make changes to the template within the editor.

Using Markers to Manipulate Templates

The two previous benefits already make for a superior web-to-print platform, but yet another feature enhances PSD template integration even further. Customer's Canvas is a platform with a dedicated set of markers (Fig. 1-3) that

can be added to the layers in Photoshop templates. These markers can add multiple and specific permissions to each layer. For example, if you are compiling a library of templates for business cards, letterhead, and other collateral to be used by your customers, you can make some static design elements, such as backgrounds, non-editable. This can help cut down on mistakes tremendously, especially when customers want to keep their branding consistent between orders. Additionally, markers can be used as placeholders that can later be populated with variable data, which everyone knows is a crucial sector of the market today.

There are so many exciting developments underway with web-to-print technology that we couldn't include them all. Click here for a far more in-depth white paper that explores these topics and much more.

Lower Costs Make Photoshop Support Accessible

While larger vendors try to push prohibitively expensive licensed software products, there are other vendors out there that offer hosted services on a subscription basis. This is sometimes referred to as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) and is hosted on the vendor's server for the printer to access online for a recurring fee. This is a good solution for printers who are not sure how far they want to go with W2P and would prefer to test it out before implementing it fully. If they decide it is not for them, they can cancel the service instead of being out thousands of dollars from a licensed product. At the moment, only one vendor is offering both an affordable hosted and licensed version of a web-to-print solution that supports Photoshop templates, and that is Aurigma's Customers Canvas.

Specific Use Cases with Photoshop Support

All of this sounds well and good, but let us see how Photoshop support can be applied to a web-to-print solution in the real world. What follows are two examples where Photoshop integration can both save valuable time and prevent errors. The first case demonstrates how a template can go from Photoshop and straight into Aurigma's web-to-print platform, Customer's Canvas. The second case will show off the power of markers, and how they can be used to make layers editable, non-editable, or partially editable.

Uploading a Photoshop Template

We will use a very simple business card design to demonstrate how simple it is to go from Photoshop to the web-to-print editor. This template will have three layers: background, text, and a logo (Fig 1-4). Once the layers are in place, the user can save the template and drop the file into the ProductTemplates/designs folder for Customer's Canvas. In the web-to-print designer, the user only needs to initialize a new product by selecting that template, and it will appear in the editor. Users can then edit the text, change color themes, and move objects around within the web-to-print designer without switching back and forth to Photoshop.

Changing Permissions with Markers

Using the same business card template as an example, perhaps you want to lock a text layer in place so that a customer cannot move it, but you still want the text to remain editable. Photoshop itself is not flexible enough to do something like this, so Aurigma have created a system of markers that can be added to Photoshop layers and allow or disallow changes in specific parts of the design. If we add the marker <LC><OID_f> to the background layer of the business card in Photoshop, then a user cannot edit it in the web-to-print designer. To make the text editable, but not movable, add the <MAMH_f> and <MAMV_f> markers. There is an entire glossary of these markers to choose from to customize your product templates, and all you need is Photoshop to reap the benefits.

Fig. 1-4: The same template we saw earlier in the web-to-print editor. Because of the placeholder marker, we can now change the image within the online editor without switching back to Photoshop. (Source: Aurigma 2017).

Conclusion

I could write ad nauseam about the myriad of benefits of web-to-print, how exciting the technology is, and the dry technical aspects, but at the end of the day, the average printer wants to know what's going to cut costs and grow profits. The answer might surprise you...web-to-print! There is a point in time when the reasons to not adopt this technology become excuses, and that point is fast approaching now that Photoshop can be integrated into the solution. Smaller print shops lacking large IT staff can now duck the learning curve that often accompanies W2P technology. Template support in web-to-print editors makes life easier for both customers and your staff. Markers add a new layer (no pun intended) to template customization while simultaneously preventing errors with their permissions system. And, finally, all of this technology is not so prohibitively expensive that it prices everyone except the biggest players out of the market. It is finally time to get excited about web-to-print. Photoshop support is a game-changer, and every printer out there who has yet to follow the winds of change, and even those who are unsatisfied with their current W2P solution, should click the links below to find out more about this solution and how it can rejuvenate their business.

Additional Resources

Embracing Automation: A Web-to-Print Solution that Thrives on Change

Doing Web-to-Print Right: Effective Integration of Web-to-Print Solutions into Existing Workflows

American Printer - Web-to-Print Evolved

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