

Why W2P Vendor Support Matters

The People Behind Web-to-Print

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The Human Factor

For a moment, let's imagine that you're stranded in the middle of the ocean, treading water, the hot sun beating down, and no help in sight. I apologize in advance if this is actually one of your worst fears. Suddenly, you see a helicopter off in the distance. You manage to flag it down, they toss you a life ring and...they leave. Sure, it's a well-made life ring, but your situation has hardly been improved. Now you'll just die of thirst instead of drowning. Another helicopter approaches and they toss you an identical life ring, only this time it's actually attached to something: a team of rescuers who are trying to save you. Given the choice, which ring would you take?

When you need any kind of support behind a product that you purchase, companies can either help you like our team of rescuers, or abandon you when you need them most like a group of mercenaries that already have their cash in hand. Unfortunately, this is the way of the world in any industry, and printing is not immune. As we continue to see exciting innovations in web-to-print technology every year, it is something that definitely belongs in any printer's arsenal. However, the machinery is only as good as the humans behind it, and you do not want to be stranded in the middle of your busiest day of the quarter with no help in sight.

Why Choosing the Right W2P Vendor is Important

Web-to-print is an innovation with so much proven potential that its slow growth has been slightly baffling. The adoption rate is still hovering below half at 46%, but this number is only going up. Moreover, the compound annual growth rate between 2009 and 2015 was a robust 9.1%, and growth is expected to steadily continue in this direction¹ (Fig. 1-1). The cost savings that web-to-print technology can bring to both printers and customers have long overpowered the doubters, and we can only expect both the numbers and the technology itself to improve as W2P becomes more normalized in the industry. However, this is not enough to convince many of the holdouts. Many printers fear that the technology will not be helpful to them without the proper support from vendors, that it could possibly interrupt their current workflow, or not have the flexibility required for some of their more personalized jobs.

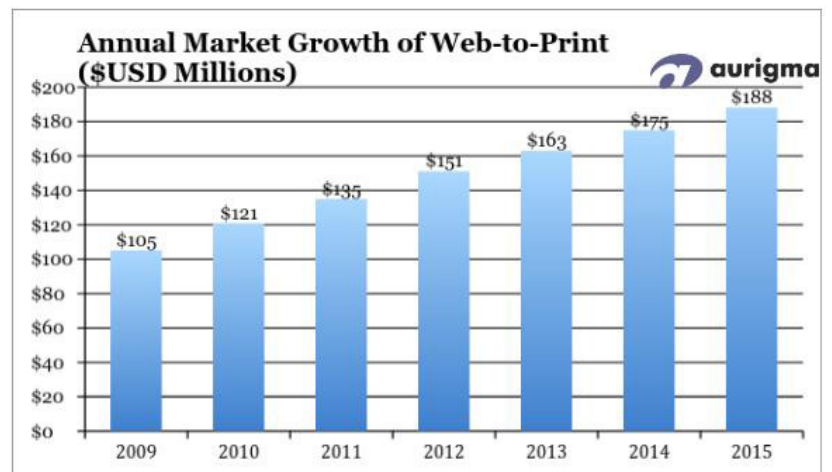
¹ InfoTrends, 2012, p. 7.

This white paper will explore the people behind web-to-print and the valuable work they are doing in an effort to quell some of these fears. There are some great minds behind the newest technology, but printers should take the initiative to vet any vendor before choosing their product to make sure they will get the proper support when they need it instead of being hung out to dry. We will explore some of the challenges facing both vendors and printers in the W2P world and what you should be looking for in a company when browsing the market for a web-to-print solution.

Knowledge is Power

Software is hard to make. Good software is even harder, and the complete web-to-print package is not exactly as straightforward as something like Microsoft Word to develop. The average coder is likely not up to the challenge of developing a user-friendly online editor, the preprocessing features that produce a print-ready file, or the complicated guts on the backend that handle things like image optimization. There are, however, reputable vendors with teams of experts that can bring all of these elements together into a cohesive, powerful product that will help the average printer gain access to **some of** the same features as the big players in print.

Fig. 1-1: North America saw a healthy compound annual growth rate of 9.1% between 2009 and 2015. (Source: InfoTrends 2012).



Effective Workflow Integration

Just as a competent web-to-print solution is not so easy to make, it can also be difficult to integrate the technology into an existing workflow. Disturbing the feng shui of a print shop's delicate workflow can result in a huge waste of time

Customized Solutions for Any Printer

and money. Printer's should be wary of this and select W2P vendors who have established themselves not only with great products, but also with a history of going the extra mile to make sure their products work well with the framework their customers already have in place.

Every printer has cornered their own specific niches, whether it's making bottle labels for local vineyards or parking decals for local government agencies and residential areas. A transition to W2P technology has to take these special niches into account, meaning that no single out-of-the-box W2P solution can be applied indiscriminately to every print shop. There is a lot of choice in the web-to-print world, and vendors that offer third-party ready-to-use products can generally customize their solutions to fit the unique needs of their individual clients.

Web-to-Print: It's Complicated

Web-to-print has helped the printing industry make a U-turn when the road ahead looked uncertain. It enabled the industry to embrace the perceived online threat and instead use the Internet as a tool to create several new niches that are now becoming some of the most profitable for the average printer today. Now that the technology is out of its “beta” phase, print shops all around the country should have no problem with finally adding W2P to their mix. There is not necessarily a complete absence of challenges, one of which is choosing the right vendor that has comprehensive expertise in the field and the willingness to help their clients when they need it. Let's examine some of the hurdles that vendors should be ensuring their potential customers that they can overcome with ease.

The Challenges Facing W2P

What can look like a small inconvenience to the outside observer could cost a print shop several hours and dollars in lost labor and materials. The whole point of web-to-print is to streamline the workflow and reduce these problems. Printers are looking for vendors that also understand this goal and aim to help their customers achieve it. This requires expertise to build a product that allows easy access to e-commerce solutions powerful enough to allow users to customize products. Vendors need to approach their customers' existing workflows with a delicate touch while integrating their solutions. Some don't even bother helping once money has changed hands. Finally, the canned solutions of some vendors will not be able to accommodate some of the very niche jobs that are becoming more and more common.

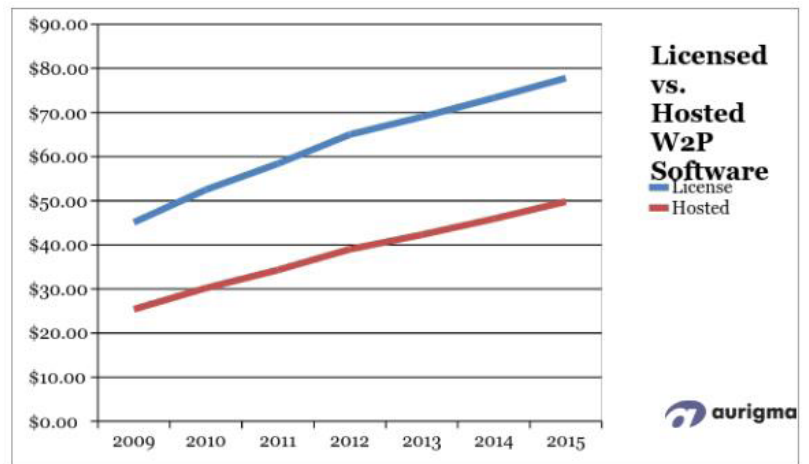
The Complexity of Developing W2P Technology

By virtue of the technical complexity of web-to-print technology, it is inevitable that some vendors will not meet the technical challenges as effectively as others. Some vendors try to make traditional e-commerce solutions fit into web-to-print applications and the result is usually far from satisfactory. No one doubts their expertise in building platforms to sell products online, but the web-to-print ordering workflow is much more detailed. The software needs to allow customers to create their own personalized designs, which gives more power to consumers and saves both time and money for the consumer and printer. Additionally, it is extremely difficult to develop a user-friendly web-to-print editor that is both intuitive for customers and can return a print-ready file based on their designs. For example, many W2P solutions will not support Adobe Photoshop templates and will instead require the print shop staff to painstakingly rebuild their existing template files in XML or some other clunky format. This will create more work for the print shop if they choose to adopt, because they must convert all of the templates that they want customers to access to these formats before getting use out of their investment.

The Difficulty of Integrating W2P Solutions

When introducing something new to their current workflow, any printer would be foolhardy to not wonder, "How is this going to mess up what I already have?" Truly, a lot can go wrong when introducing web-to-print, especially if the vendor is just out to sell a prohibitively expensive licensed software product with no plans to help their customers 1) make sure the product is actually right for them, or 2) ensure that it fits smoothly into the existing workflow. It is all too easy for companies with less scruples to sell their product for a one-time fee and then abandon their customer when they have trouble getting it to work for them in a way that it was advertised. Therein lie the pitfalls of licensed software products that may seem like a magic bullet initially, but fall short either during integration or when a print shop decides to make changes later on.

Fig. 1-2: While a large gap remains between the market share of licensed and hosted W2P software products, they are still growing at roughly the same rate. (Source: InfoTrends 2012)



Accommodating Custom Requirements

Speaking of canned, licensed software, many printers have several unique requirements that these products cannot fulfill. For many years now, the industry trend has been lower volume and higher personalization. If an e-commerce solution can only allow customers to make basic products like business cards or letterhead then it will be very limiting to printers who have already carved out a niche for some other more complicated product like photo books or beer bottle labels. If a print shop chooses a vendor that cannot cater to these unique needs, it will make them less competitive with other printers that can provide their customers with more variety. This is often more common with licensed products as there is less incentive for these companies to go the extra mile after a client has purchased and installed their product. Software-as-a-service (SaaS) vendors offer a hosted version of their products on a subscription basis and will make more of an effort to retain their customers, including accommodating their custom requirements. It's a shame, then, that there remains such a large gap between the market share of licensed and hosted solutions² (Fig. 1-2).

² InfoTrends, 2012, p. 8.

Web-to-Print: The Vendors Make It Work

While the above obstacles may prevent some vendors from producing a web-to-print product that caters to any printer's needs, there are other companies that do not take the easy route despite the difficulties. Products like Customer's Canvas (by Aurigma) can provide print shops with powerful e-commerce tools that accommodate the intricacies of web-to-print. Vendors behind such products also have the skills and expertise to develop all the necessary features on the backend to produce print-ready files. This knowledge extends to how their products will interact with their customers' workflows, and they can ensure that they will play nicely together. Reputable vendors can also take extra steps to make sure their flexible technology can bend to fit the distinct needs of their individual clients. In other words, web-to-print is better than ever, thanks to the people that have perfected it through years of hard work and thoughtful interactions with printers of every stripe. Before exploring some of these developments in greater detail, let's take a look at a real-life example of how a customer was helped by the kind of W2P vendor that's helping us move forward as an industry.

Real Printers, Real Solutions

Let's take a look at a real life example in which a client saw all of these challenges met for his business. Mike runs a long-established business that his father built in the UK. His shop specializes in gift personalization and labeling, so custom jobs are the norm for him. He needed a robust solution that could help his customers create their own designs that could also be effectively integrated into his existing workflow. Customer's Canvas by Aurigma accomplished this and handled any integration issues he did have promptly and affordably. While other vendors could have provided a similar solution for him, he found that they were prohibitively

expensive and less personable than his experience with Customer's Canvas. Now, he is more competitive than ever, but wanted to remain anonymous for this paper.



I really wanted to provide a positive review for Customer's Canvas because they made my life easier and my business more profitable. Unfortunately, if competitors learn about what Customer's Canvas did for me, it could actually reduce our market share. It's a brilliant web-to-print solution, but it must remain my secret!

"Mike", printer from England
and loyal Customer's Canvas client

Years of Expertise Result in Powerful Products

As mentioned, web-to-print products can be very complicated to develop, but vendors with years of experience under their belts, dedicated teams, and several ongoing relationships with customers around the world can generally be relied on to deliver. Their products contain e-commerce tools that can integrate into any website or platform (including mobile devices) and provide users with the ability to design their own products or select templates that the print shop has uploaded. Even if a printer would rather work with an e-commerce vendor to get the basic mechanics of the site sorted out, they can still use a web-to-print vendor to integrate these kinds of ordering workflows into that existing framework. These products can also apply correct color management, printing imposition, and produce a PDF/X-4 output that is ready to be sent through the print production workflow without requiring additional preprocessing outside of the W2P system.

Experts Can Integrate W2P into Any Workflow

Vendors that have been on the scene for a few years have seen pretty much everything, from small mom and pop shops with only a few presses to massive companies that operate out of one or several large warehouses. They have experience with almost every setup imaginable and will put in the time to blueprint a customer's workflow to make sure that their solution is a nice fit before actually integrat-

ing the technology. Good vendors don't let printers adopt their technology prematurely, which could result in expensive mistakes. Every part of the workflow will be dialed in correctly for the highest level of optimization, from the ordering workflow to the print production workflow. This is the sort of quality assurance that makes web-to-print more accessible than ever and it is the type of service printers should be inquiring about when browsing the market for the newest addition to their setup.

Fig 1-3: The Washington, DC headquarters of Aurigma, the vendors behind Customer's Canvas.



Solutions Can be Adjusted for Unique Needs

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.

Just as reputable vendors have experience with several workflows differing in type and scale, they also know how to customize their solutions to fit the unique project requirements that every printer has. The workflow for standard business collateral varies wildly from an obscure product like customized Frisbees for a disc golf team. This is just a drop in the bucket when it comes to the sheer variety of interesting projects for which printers suddenly find themselves in the position of trusted local specialist. Web-to-print vendors who specialize in third-party ready-to-use products understand this need for a customized solution better than anyone, and they consider it as part of their service to make sure that their products are tailored to each

Hosted Solutions Open New Doors

customer's unique project parameters. Companies that offer hosted versions of their software especially have a vested interest in making sure their product works no matter what requirements their customers may have, as they do not want to lose subscriptions.

For years, prohibitively expensive licensed software products were the norm in the web-to-print world, and although they still maintain most of the market share, SaaS is growing at a similar rate. These hosted solutions are generally more affordable and offer the same powerful tools as licensed products. In fact, vendors that offer SaaS generally offer more flexible products than licensed products, which generally try to be a one-size-fits-all product out of the box. Printers who buy licensed products are generally left to solve their own problems when the product malfunctions because they have already paid their steep, one-time fee, so those vendors are not really motivated to help unless they are charging maintenance fees. Vendors that offer hosted services are more willing to help because customers are paying their monthly fee, and that usually includes troubleshooting any issues that may arise. As a result, we have a product that is more affordable, more flexible, and with a greater level of support should there be any issues in the future.

Conclusion

If Mike's success with Customer's Canvas is any indicator of the quality of vendors we have to choose from on the web-to-print market, it's safe to say that any anxiety that printers have about the technology is quickly becoming unwarranted. As this market continues to expand and produce further innovations, the amount of choice increases as well. With the array of qualified vendors available today, any printer can have a web-to-print solution that supports detailed ordering workflows, can integrate into an existing workflow without damaging it, and fulfills most unique project requirements. The best part about all of this is that it is no longer so expensive that small print shops are locked out of the opportunities that web-to-print has to offer. Hosted web-to-print solutions provide a more affordable W2P option that includes both the technology and the support behind it to make it work well in any situation. If you are a print shop owner who has been on the fence over adopting web-to-print, now is the time cast away your doubts and gain a new competitive edge while reducing costs for both yourself and your customers. Check out the many resources below for further information on the latest and greatest W2P tools on the market today.

Additional Resources

[American Printer - Web-to-Print Evolved](#)

[Embracing Automation: A Web-to-Print Solution that Thrives on Change](#)

[Web-to-Print with Photoshop: Solidifying Web-to-Print Solutions through Photoshop Support](#)

[Doing Web-to-Print Right: Effective Integration of Web-to-Print Solutions into Existing Workflows](#)

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