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Printing Impressions

Web-to-Print — Get Clients Invested

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WHAT DO professional golf and Web-to-print have in common? Both make reference to a skins game, where a lot of money is at stake for something that, at first blush, doesn't seem all that difficult to accomplish. The skill and effort involved are often easily overlooked.

On the printing end, the skins game is all about charging print buyers for the design, setup and maintenance of customer branded Web-to-print sites, along with the hosting and service fees that printers absorb. It's about validating (and justifying) the work salespeople put into peddling the technology. It's about fostering the notion that an investment of dollars must realize an investment of mind and heart—if you really want clients to buy into it, well, make them buy into it.

“Printers seem to think that you have to give everything away,” bemoans Rod Key, founder and CEO of R and R Images in Phoenix, and a veteran at providing customers Web-to-print solutions. “You have to look at its value to clients from a marketing standpoint. The printing part is really easy, but the message and creative may be very important. It's a solution and, whether you paid \$10,000 or \$200,000 for it, you need to ask yourself if it makes sense to just give it away.”

So how do you charge for Web-to-print sites? Key points out that volume commitments can do the trick, as can a monthly fee. In some cases, a printer might not mind giving away a Web-to-print solution to a power user that generates a relative high volume of orders. It's a no-win situation, though, if a sales rep invests too much time into a customer that might end up only placing \$300 in orders per month.

Shawn Allison, president of Denver-based Thinking Big Solutions, believes that charging even just a nominal fee is important to get clients fully invested in the Web-to-print life. But, the circle isn't completed unless a customer can adopt the online approach as its cultural way of getting production done.

“What doesn't work is when you launch a site and you only have an internal marketing person placing orders for a remote user or franchisee,” Allison says. “They really need to turn over the system, totally and completely, to be successful.”

Perhaps a bit of clarification is in order before going any further. Web-to-print, as it is defined here, is an Internet-based application that allows customers to more quickly and efficiently place orders for their print collateral—eliminating time-consuming steps and enabling more automated job processing. It can be used to produce something as simple as business cards, or as complex as a variable data digital printing job.

Part of the Web-to-print model's beauty is its ability to be many things for a printing company, depending on customers' needs and their comfort level with the technology. Some printers opt for off-the-shelf software solutions that can start at \$20,000 and less, while others prefer to build their own customized systems, honed through trial and error, that can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Willie Brennan, owner of Custom Print Now Solutions in Columbia, MD, is helping the Digital Print Council/Printing Industries of America to explain the Web-to-print options available to the industry. Working with Julie Schaffer of PIA, he helped develop www.w2ptestdrive.com, a "one-stop resource for printers, print buyers, marketers, etc., interested in learning more about Web-to-print solutions." The Website breaks it down into four categories:

n Print Procurement—Generally basic e-commerce storefronts or broker sites that are "ad-hoc"/send-and-print or templated solutions.

n Document Management—Web-to-print solutions that include fulfillment, mailing and inventory management functions for already warehoused products.

n Marketing Management—Private, branded sites for easy ordering of corporate/franchise collateral. Sites are also used to manage corporate campaigns.

n Workflow Automation—Client-facing portals that interface directly to the print service provider's internal production environment.

Brennan is the unofficial god-father of Web-to-print, boasting a 12-year track record. While serving with other organizations, he found that many out-of-the-box solutions could not be molded from application to application.

In 2004, Custom Print Now rolled out its own solution—tweaked as necessary—that boasts different types of ordering models, including static inventory, customized collateral, customized direct mail and customized electronic delivery. Its latest conquest comprises customized photo products.

"We look at the opportunity and the application to make sure that there's a real need, then help sell it properly," Brennan explains. "If all goes well, we build it. And building it is just a matter of repurposing existing code into a custom label, branded solution for that particular need."

Custom Print Now has produced more than 50 Web-to-print sites for clients,

servicing a market “sweet spot” that includes national brands with dealers and multiple sales offices; charitable organizations, associations and member organizations; and printers/brokers.

Sometimes the sales cycle can be a lengthy one, Brennan cautions. One charitable organization was given a demonstration by Custom Print Now and, four years later, got on board with the Web-to-print concept.

“The sales cycle can be long, partially because clients are still naive,” he says. “The solution is still in the early adopter stage, so it’s hard to find someone who ‘gets it’ and who understands that this will instantly solve a real business problem. But, when it fits, it really fits. We sold AT&T in 20 minutes!”

The difference between Web-to-print solutions can be as drastic as night and day when shifting between quadrants. Take the case of Stafford Printing in Stafford, VA. Stafford utilizes the Presstek PathWay Web-to-print solution, and owner Howard Owen believes the company is only scratching the surface of its possibilities.

“We’re a small company, so sometimes implementation of new ideas and products is not as quick as we’d like it to be,” Owen admits. “We hope to be at full speed by the fall, but right now, we’re in ‘adding customers’ mode.”

Business cards, letterhead and forms are the primary offerings in Stafford Printing’s menu, but Owen says the company will aim toward more marketing material types of applications as it becomes more fluent with the software.

As a new proponent of Web-to-print solutions, Owen has found the ramping up process to be relatively simple. He says it’s no more challenging than adding computer-to-plate or installing a digital press. It takes a couple of hours to get customers up to speed with the application, plus another two to four hours smoothing down stray hairs.

Owen cites banking, housing and insurance as three of the prime vertical markets that are attracted to Stafford’s service offering, which is mainly geared for clients with multiple locations. “It’s ideal for almost any business seeking consistent branding and that wants everyone to be able to order their collateral without it being a big deal.

“The great thing is, once you’ve got it set up, you have the opportunity to focus on other services. We started offering personalized URLs through Mindfire. If your customers are not focused on some of those commodity-type needs, it gives you time to talk about other services that you can offer them.”

Thinking Big Solutions, which oversees about 25 Web-to-print customer sites, tapped XMPie’s PersonalEffect and uStore to enable its franchise and multi-location clients to maintain brand consistency across entire networks. This Web-to-print solution stops the “rogues” from modifying the brand, Allison notes. From the printer’s standpoint, the service offering enables it to get more face time

with marketing departments, providing sales opportunities that might not arise otherwise.

“That foot in the door gives us an opportunity to leverage the ramping up period, where we can continue to add products and services through the Web-to-print application,” Allison says.

“The XMPie platform allows us to do some things with direct mail or variable data that we wouldn’t normally be able to do in a standard Web-to-print system. Those robust functionalities have allowed us to grow within our top Web-to-print accounts and continue to provide more added value.”

Key reports that R and R Images is testing Press-sense iWay 5 and beta testing its SmartStream Director Web-to-fulfillment solution, which are sold and supported by HP. The real estate market, healthcare and recruitment, along with franchises, have proven to be fertile ground for the printer.

It boasts a roster of 30 to 50 Web-to-print clients, of which 15 to 20 are very active and five are what Key terms “power users.” Those companies account for roughly 300 to 500 total users. The evolution that he hopes to witness is a population explosion—a growth in user numbers, and a little more strategic approach to selling.

It’s not all about making life easier for just the customer. Printers can gain efficiencies, too.

“Obviously, Web-to-print streamlines things for the client, but you also want it to streamline your business internally,” Key says. “In the past, we had 22 or 23 different workflows, and at one point in time, we were proud of that. But the name of the game for us now is having everything go through one workflow. How do we automate that so we can be a lot more efficient?”

While theoretically a Web-to-print application would fit into virtually any printer’s offerings, Brennan doesn’t believe it’s suited for everybody. It’s not a “me, too” service that can be plugged in and left alone.

“Even if a printer puts in a storefront application, they still need to make it breathe,” he says. “You need the right people to manage it, and the right clients to use it. Ask yourself two questions: ‘Do I have the customer base to fit this equipment?’ and ‘Do I have the people who understand the technology?’ ” **PI**