

UNTANGLING WEB-TO-PRINT

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By Margie Dana

Many print buyers don't really understand what Web-to-print (W2P) is all about. Not their fault – it's not a simple concept to explain.



Articles on the subject abound, because all of the major trade publications have been covering W2P lately.

Printing News featured Web-to-print in its October 6, 2008 issue. Malinda Martines wrote a great article entitled, "Where's the Money? Web-to-Print." In it, she references a report by Infotrends, "Customized Communications: Web-to-Print," which has a terrific definition I'd like to share with you:

"Web-to-print solutions are browser-based applications that facilitate commerce, collaboration and/or customer service interaction between those who buy printed products and those who sell them. Common functions of these solutions include page design, file submission, catalog ordering, order entry, versioning/VDP, job tracking, soft proofing, online payment, online shipping and inventory management."

Web-to-print tools can help you and your clients/customers/sales force quickly, conveniently and efficiently produce and deliver customized print materials over the Internet.

Jon Ward of Nu Graphics Inc. untangled the mystery of W2P at our February Boston Print Buyers dinner in Waltham, MA. He's the VP of Marketing Services for Nu Graphics. His company began offering Web-to-print in June of 2006, though Jon implemented his first web-to-print site in 2001. I interviewed him in anticipation of that dinner program.

MD: When your sales reps first explain Web-to-print, how do they do it?

JW: There is really no common understanding about Web-to-print; we normally start with questions to diagnose whether it would actually solve any problems or issues. Here are some examples:

1. Do you have a closet or area of your warehouse that is filled with marketing materials?
2. How long does it take, on average, for brochures to get to your sales staff or resellers from request to delivery? How often do you encounter "out of stocks" in this scenario?
3. How much time does you or your marketing team spend fulfilling internal (channel or employee) requests for marketing materials (like for tradeshow, for instance)?
4. Are you looking for an easy way to recoup printing costs associated with marketing literature and tradeshow graphics?

MD: Typically, do you work with print buyers, designers, marketing staff, or all of the above?

JW: Our primary contact is usually upper-level marketing. Because Web-to-print solutions touch the people most important to the company (sales people, the channel, the marketing team, buyers/purchasers, HR, upper level management and many others), the scope of the solution really requires upper management buy-in. A cross-functional team is usually pulled together to help implement, including sales, marketing, purchasing and Web development.

MD: What are some of the applications your customers are currently using web-to-print for? Can you give us a few examples of how this technology is used?

JW: The best use of Web-to-print technology is our client, 3Com Corporation. The solution we implemented allows employees and resellers/partners to log in to a private site, select literature, review a shopping cart (that includes pricing) and pay with a credit card or 3Com PO. The materials are printed in one of our nine global distribution centers and delivered anywhere in the world in three to five business days (and sometimes shorter).

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MD: It must take a long time to execute a W2P campaign. Am I wrong? Are there any guidelines you can offer?

JW: Much like any IT implementation, the length of a web-to-print project is really driven by the scope. What I've found even more true, is the length of a W2P project is driven by the ability of our client to identify true needs (not nice-to-haves) and achieve consensus among all stakeholders.

Really, the best way to keep costs down is to use as much of the out-of-the-box product you can and avoid custom integrations wherever possible. If you customize a site too much:

1. You'll have to develop your own support documentation that matches your process and custom screens (big \$\$).
2. You will no longer take advantage of enhancements and upgrades that people who use the standard product will get. Thus, your W2P solution will be stuck in time, while everyone else gets really cool added functionality and fixes!

MD: What are the key benefits of using W2P solutions? Also, is it cost-prohibitive or cost-effective?

JW: Key Benefits: very little print waste (print only what you need), little to no printed material inventory (very little waste), can track usage by partner type and region, so you know what people use and what they don't. You can also have sales and other offices (other budgets, really) pay for marketing material, rather than having corporate marketing absorb 100 percent of the bill for marketing literature. You can also track the success of a given initiative for better managerial reporting (i.e., keep your job).

Disadvantages: If you make the storefront and process (approvals, etc.) too complex, no one will have the patience to use it. You need someone to be in charge of customer support/service. People expect that it's available 24/7, so you might get some late calls if you're in my position!

MD: What software do you use at Nu Graphics? How's the user interface?

JW: We use the product offered by Responsive Solutions for a few reasons. First, the solution is Web-services based, for easy integration into other products. Second, the product has PURLs, e-mail management, inventory management and digital asset management all within the same tool – so managing one-offs and complete campaigns are easy. It's just really cool that I can build an integrated campaign (e-mail, PURL, print) and enable a sales rep in Singapore to grab the content, merge a list and send out in about 15 minutes or less! Talk about making your sales folks ambassadors of your products while controlling your brand!

The administrative interface has always been good, and they just launched a completely InDesign server-based solution that is elegant and really quick. Now it looks better than ever for end-users.

MD: What is the biggest misconception about W2P?

JW: Great question! Many people I talk to think Web-to-print is just a tool for printers that allows customers to upload their files, pay and print. Or, it's a solution that allows a user to pick one of their templates, edit, pay and receive final product (like Vistaprint or 48hr print).

Web-to-print automates the ordering, production and distribution of marketing materials to sales reps – in brand and within a couple of days from request.

The second misconception is "build it and they will come." When you implement a Web-to-print system, you need to promote it, as it's really just an online store.

MD: Thanks, Jon.

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