Online ordering and fulfillment software can be easily configured to a screen printer's needs. *Courtesy of Ordant.*

WHY WEB-TO-PRINT SOFTWARE MATTERS FOR ALL PRINTING BUSINESSES

It's a sales and marketing tool that enables your company to join the evolution in internet-enabled entrepreneurship and merchandising – and could make the mix of printing technologies offered by individual companies increasingly irrelevant.

Eileen Fritsch

"Web-to-print software" means different things to different people. The term probably dates back to the late-1990s when the internet was in its infancy and analysts tried to envision how print businesses might benefit from the potential disruptions of electronic publishing and e-commerce. But "web to print" is now a well-established phrase that printing companies use to search for all types of e-commerce-related software online.

Today, web-to-print software can be used for many different tasks such as estimating, online order entry, online proofing and approval, and the creation and operation of online storefronts for your customers. In some highly automated shops, web-to-print software is the funnel through which orders flow into the "touch-free" production, finishing, and shipping of standard-sized documents.

The primary reason to adopt web-to-print software is to better serve your customers. A well-constructed portal will allow users to place orders 24/7 without having to contact a salesperson or customer-service rep first. Web-to-print software can also streamline administrative tasks within your office by gathering and storing the data you need to set up, deliver, and get paid for the job. If proofs require approval, all system users will know to whom the proofs should be sent. Or, preflighting a job during the upload process can reduce the workload for your prepress staff by automatically notifying customers that certain file issues must be resolved.

But online order processing is just the beginning.

Web-to-print software can also be regarded as a business expansion, retention, and reinvention tool. It can expand your reach globally, helping you partner with printers outside your region or get actively involved in the explosive growth of e-tailing and creative entrepreneurship. In some cases, you can sell web-to-print services to startup and small design businesses and makers who want to develop and sell their own brands of products.

Today, web-to-print software developers understand that no two printing businesses are the same. Modern printing businesses use a mix of analog and digital printing and finishing equipment and must be able to fulfill orders for print and non-print products. So, the products that can be ordered through web-to-print software aren't limited to brochures, postcards, posters, banners, or T-shirts. You could sell hoodies, tote bags, and embroidered hats as well.

With the flexible web-to-print systems available today, you can decide which mix of products you want to sell online, how many products you want to offer, and which products you want to make available to which groups of customers. Some printed products can be produced in batches and stored in your facilities, then delivered when and where they are needed. Visit screenweb.com for a list of seven web-to-print platforms that offer a range of options.

As web-to-print software has matured, some best practices have emerged to make the planning and implementation process go more smoothly. Before you even start shopping for new or updated software, consider the questions below.

B2B or B2C?

According to an e-book published by Propago, developers of asset management software, web-to-print solutions fall into two categories: B2C (business to consumer) and B2B (business to business).

In a B2C platform, the goal is to capture a high volume of low-value orders from a vast pool of previously unidentified buyers (including individuals, small businesses, and startups). These self-service, design-and-buy platforms are open to all web visitors. B2C sites should include collections of predesigned templates, very basic interfaces, clear ordering instructions, rock-solid payment systems, and tools for search-engine and e-mail marketing.

B2B web-to-print systems can help you serve businesses with which you have existing relationships. A B2B platform provides a portal through which multiple employees can place orders for the goods and services the company buys from you. A B2B system makes it easier to retain that company as a customer and generate a higher volume of higher-margin business over time.

According to Rick Aberle of Propago, well-designed B2B web-to-print portals can help you build deeper relationships with existing customers, positioning your company as more of a partner than a seller. Through the B2B web-to-print system, you will be providing better service and solving more complex logistical requirements that are specific to that customer.

If your company handles higher volumes of garment printing, you can set up a B2B system through which you can offer screen printing, other garment decorating techniques, and finishing services that many digital printing firms aren't equipped to handle.

According to Reuben James of Racad Tech's Web to Print Shop, "We have a simple piece of technology that allows our customers to auto-route specific products to third-party companies. This is often done to create the impression of a full offering on a specific storefront." The fact that products are routed to a predesignated outsourcing partner for fulfillment is invisible to the customer who places the order.

In some circumstances, if you sell the web-to-print platform as a solution to your customer's pain points instead of as a technology platform for ordering, customers will pay a fee for you to set up and maintain the site for them.

For example, with Agfa's Apogee or Asanti StoreFront software, you can help local bar owners make more money by setting up their own branded B2C platforms to sell bar-branded drinkware, T-shirts, posters, coasters, and other promotional merchandise. All orders placed through these B2C portals will flow into your printing business and your partners for fulfillment.

Cloud-based systems avoid the need to invest in servers, software updates, and database applications and can reduce the amount of time it takes to get your system up and running. They are typically easier to manage by employees who aren't skilled in HTML or scripting. Cloud-based software is purchased as a subscription that includes different levels of technical support and ongoing upgrades as technology platforms change.

Usman Ali, principal of Ordant, believes cloud-based systems are more secure than having software on an in-house server, which are more prone to viruses and can easily be hacked. Cloud-based software vendors typically have dedicated security teams and back-up systems in place to handle any disruptions to service. As for data security, Ali says, "We can have restrictions on who can access the cloud-based software, and scripts are constantly running to monitoring who is logging in."
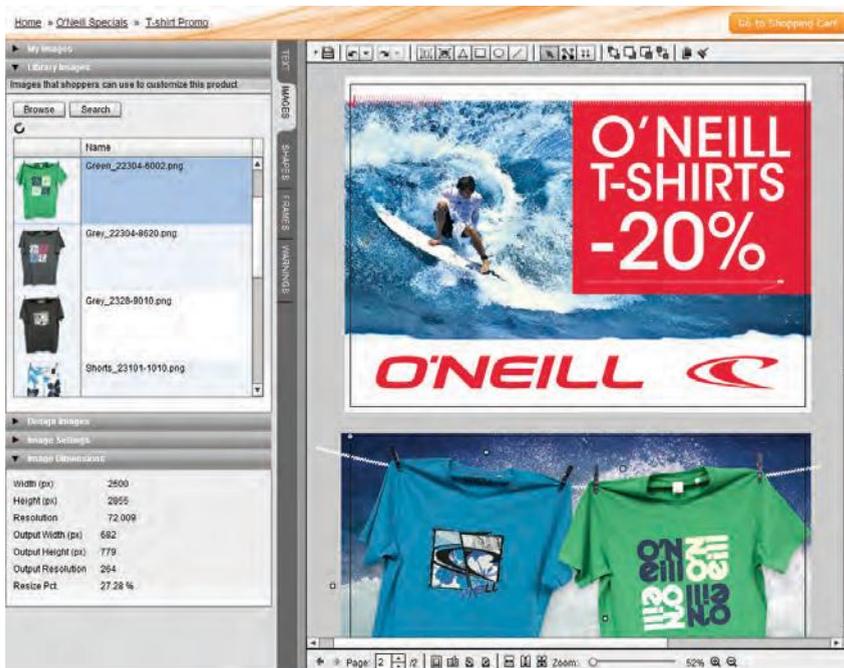
Agfa's Apogee StoreFront platform can help print providers build a connection from their client's business to its consumers. *Courtesy of Agfa Graphics.*

What Are Your Primary Goals?

Before shopping for web-to-print software, it's important to clearly define the most important goals you want to accomplish. For example, you can:

• Keep your best B2B customers loyal, even when the print buyers you've built relationships with move on to other jobs;

• Sell screen-printing or specialized finishing services to startup companies that need extra capacity or capabilities beyond digital printing;

• Make it easy for e-retailers to carry a wider assortment of printed merchandise by having a reliable partner for order processing and fulfillment;

• Connect with a wide pool of talented designers and offer well-designed specialty products directly to consumers;

• Help independent designers develop and grow their own brands and businesses;

• Or create virtual "niche brands" through which you can market different types of T-shirts and other apparel to different generations of buyers or buyers within different vertical markets.
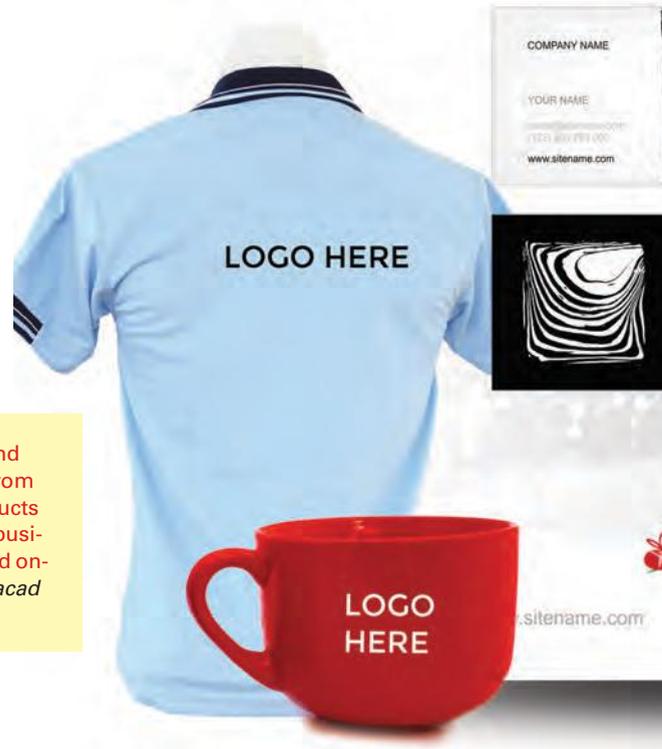
What Happens When Orders Are Received?

When customer-approved orders are submitted online, the data about production requirements, delivery instructions, and payment processing can go directly into print MIS software for steps such as ordering materials, scheduling jobs, preparing shipping labels, processing invoices, and reporting cost data.

Depending on the level of automation in your shop, each job that's submitted online can either be manually or automatically scheduled for production on whatever mix of printing and finishing equipment you have. For example, you can schedule orders for hoodies on your screen-printing presses, orders for athletic apparel on your dye-sublimation equipment, and orders for custom T-shirts to your direct-to-garment digital printers.

Companies that use a mix of high-speed digital and analog printing equipment to manage a high number of short-run, multipiece jobs can use sophisticated dynamic scheduling software to automatically calculate which machines and/or processes are available and will be most profitable to meet the quality and delivery requirements of a specific order.

With an ever-growing demand for customizable products, from apparel to promotional products and more, it's important for businesses to have an established online presence. Courtesy of Racad Tech's Web to Print Shop.

How Will Web-to-Print Projects Be Implemented?

You need to address a ton of questions about how a web-to-print project will be implemented before beginning. Will you start out with a pilot program with a limited number of users? Or will you begin by designing a program for a specific B2B customer?

Which products will be offered on the site? For what prices? Will you offer customer and/or volume discounts?

What Types of Payment Systems Will Be Available?

The options will vary based on whether you are setting up a B2B or B2C site, and whether you are selling to clients overseas.

Who will be responsible for setting up and running your e-commerce site? According to Reuben James,

"Systems are rarely ready for ordering on day one. All web-to-print systems and portals need to be built." Clients may need you to edit their price sets, change product imagery, add new design templates, and create or refine workflows. You can assign the task of managing an e-commerce site to in-house graphics or IT staffers, but only if they have sufficient time to focus on keeping the site updated and running. Some web-to-print companies will handle the setup and maintenance for an additional fee.

What types of software will your web-to-print software need to connect with? If you plan to market screen-printing services to handle specialty products for a commercial printing firm, you need to know that your web-to-print software can handle orders coming from theirs.

Many web-to-print software providers offer plug-ins that allow you to set up storefronts for small businesses that use WordPress for their websites.

What Role Will Your Sales Team Play?

Personal, face-to-face relationships will always be important in B2B sales. But when time is of the essence,

customers prefer fast, accurate quotes, and even faster turnaround. In many cases, your salespeople work with buyers they've known for years. But what happens when those buyers retire and are replaced by new people? If your company hasn't yet installed an online ordering system that everyone in your customer's firm can access, the new manager may be tempted to listen to sales pitches from other printing firms.

Even if your salespeople continue to receive orders by phone, email, or over lunch, they should be encouraged to enter all orders through the online ordering system so that all incoming orders are processed uniformly. When it's time for your salespeople to propose a B2B system to an existing customer, they will understand which features of the system might be most attractive to that prospect's needs.

When proposing B2B systems, your sales team should sell the platform as a long-term business solution, not just a bundle of new technology, says EFI's Joe Fedor. Instead of focusing on the technical features of the platform, develop a proposal and demonstration that highlights how your system will make your customers' job easier.

How Will You Market to Target Audiences?

Developers and users of B2C platforms need to be particularly well-versed in search-engine marketing and keep up with changes in the algorithms used by search engines. Just because a storefront exists doesn't mean people will be able to find it.

The good news is that many young designers and artists who want to build their own brands of apparel or other merchandise are already comfortable with online marketing. Most have already built communities of followers online and know how to connect with influential fashion bloggers. But all creative entrepreneurs will appreciate the marketing support and tools that your web-to-print platform can provide.

Why Should You Make Online Ordering a Priority?

Businesses of all types and sizes are being rewired for online procurement and e-tailing. Plus, many new e-tailers, makers, and online marketing entrepreneurs must connect with real-world printers and manufacturers that can produce and ship their products.

Today, powerful economic and technological forces have converged to make it financially attractive for businesses and individuals to do more business online. The Great Recession of 2008 and 2009 was a turning point for everyone: printing businesses, marketers, educators, publishers, retailers, manufacturers, employers, and employees. When business slowed to a crawl, everyone suddenly had the motivation (and time) to rethink their business models and marketing strategies. The recession hastened the widespread adoption of on-demand printing; online publishing, training, and marketing; and just-in-time manufacturing. No one wanted to be stuck with printed inventory they couldn't use.

Companies asked: "How can we do more with less money and fewer employees?" Laid-off employees and under-employed college grads asked: "How can I gain some control over my own economic future or earn some extra money on the side?"

E-commerce and automation have enabled companies to be more efficient in processing orders. E-commerce has provided a low-risk way for designers and makers to open

online stores for everything from books, art, and photos, to T-shirts, fashion apparel, and accessories.

Print-on-demand businesses and e-commerce platforms have evolved to meet these changing needs. The first web-to-print sites were vast, uncurated marketplaces that required visitors to sort through far too many good and bad designs and product types. Today, smaller niche sites emphasize high-quality design and cater to more specific tastes. Smaller marketplace sites enable online buyers to support artisans in their local communities.

One of the first web-to-print portals was CafePress, which started in 1999 to allow people to design their own T-shirts. Today, CafePress runs 2 million online stores for members who want to transform their artwork and ideas into unique gifts and revenue streams.

Etsy and Zazzle, both launched in 2005, have also built thriving communities of makers and internet-enabled creative entrepreneurs. A recent Etsy survey showed that sellers like building businesses on their own terms, prioritizing flexibility, independence, and creativity. For almost a third of Etsy sellers, online shops have become their sole occupation.

Similarly, Zazzle has created a platform for makers and designers because "We believe that dreams should be indulged, ideas explored, and inner creators set free. Our mission is to give anyone, anywhere the power to make anything imaginable."

But some makers and designers want more control over their brands and online businesses than the big marketplace sites offer. In 2006, five snowboarding enthusiasts in Canada started an online store to sell snowboard equipment. Because the e-commerce tool they wanted didn't exist, they created their own, calling it Shopify.

Today, Shopify is a cloud-based, multichannel commerce platform that generates more than $7 billion in sales for 175,000 merchants in more than 150 countries. Shopify merchants can use the software to design, set up, and manage

stores on the web, mobile devices, social media, brick-and-mortar locations, and pop-up shops. The scaled-up Shopify Plus platform is used by companies such as Tesla Motors, Budweiser, Google, and the Los Angeles Lakers.

As the Shopify creators explain on their website: "We could have listed our products on a number of marketplaces, but we wanted to own our brand and build relationships with our customers, along with selling our goods."

On the Shopify blog (read by 240,000 people each month), aspiring entrepreneurs can find in-depth, practical advice on how to get started in e-commerce. For example, a post by Tucker Schreiber outlines the steps he took to build an online T-shirt business. Schreiber writes: "We knew from the get-go that we wanted to sell something that was relatively hands-off, was easy to get up and running, and could be an exciting business that would be fun to work on for the foreseeable future … I didn't want to invest more than a few hundred dollars before being able to turn a profit. And, I wanted to be able to spend more money on marketing – and less on inventory." With the help of print service provider Printful, Schreiber says "Getting started was incredibly simple."

This rise in online entrepreneurship isn't limited to the T-shirt business.

Aspiring fashion designers are turning to online communities such as Print All Over Me (paom.com) to get their creations printed on apparel and accessories. Fashion entrepreneurs and others can also use sites such as Maker's Row (makersrow.com) to find manufacturers in the US that can help them make their products. So far, Maker's Row has connected more than 80,000 businesses with American manufacturers.

Among millennials, there's a shift away from mass-market retail apparel toward more independent, social-media-savvy designers who have friendly faces, approachable brands, great stories, and visually interesting Pinterest, Instagram, and Facebook posts. The Shopify founders believe: "The opportunity to shape how retail works is in our hands. Over the coming years, the way purchasing works will change at a fundamental level. Customers will expect options of where and how to buy."

B2C e-commerce isn't the only area that will flourish in the coming years. Forrester Research estimates that B2B e-commerce sales in the US alone will hit $780 billion this year and could surpass $1.13 trillion in just five years. According to a report in *internet Retailer magazine*, "That growth presents a goldmine of sales and new opportunities to cut operating costs through customers'

Web-to-print platforms facilitate the mass production of personalized, one-off products. *Courtesy of Shutterfly.*

self-service transactions and other digitally enhanced methods of more effectively managing inventory, marketing products and services, and managing other operations."

Real-World Examples from Apparel Printers

Spreadshirt (spreadshirt.com) is a global company that fulfills print-on-demand apparel orders through the online storefronts they've provided to 70,000 active sellers. Spreadshirt's mission is to make merchandising easy for anyone with a good idea. Sellers can bring their ideas to life on clothing and accessories via multiple channels with no upfront financial investment. The Spreadshirt online storefront platform is designed to provide a seamless extension to its sellers' websites.

This year, Spreadshirt announced a Shopify plug-in that connects Spreadshirt's apparel fulfillment service to the larger Shopify accounts. Shopify merchants can import products from their Spreadshirt accounts into their Shopify-powered stores and automatically arrange for the production and delivery of the ordered merchandise.

Another example, Trevco (trevcoinc.com), started in 1989 as a wholesale screen printer of licensed apparel. Since 2007, they've reinvented

themselves as an all-digital, highly automated factory for printing and fulfilling licensed apparel and merchandise for hundreds of e-tailers and retailers.

Today, Trevco no longer uses screen-printing equipment in house. They operate nine Kornit direct-to-garment printers and serve as the largest print-on-demand wholesaler of licensed apparel in the US. Recently, the company expanded its print-on-demand offering through a robust web-to-print platform. Trevco partners with manufacturers that can print licensed designs on new product types such as pillows, shams, duvet covers, ottomans, beanbag chairs, shower curtains, bath mats, totes, towels, and woven throw tapestries – even iPhone cases and wall art.

Trevco processes incoming orders from retailers and e-tailers and reformats the approved designs for the type of product and substrate that will be printed. Orders and files for non-apparel products are sent to the appropriate printing partners for output and drop-shipping directly to customers. The company then processes all of the royalty payments and paperwork for the license holders. Trevco currently serves more than 70 licensors, representing more than 400 properties for products related to movies, TV shows, cartoon characters, musicians, and the US Army, Navy, and Air Force.

Tomorrow's Retail

Trevco's transformation away from screen printing could strike a note of caution for some readers of this magazine. By enabling the creators and buyers of niche products to find one another, as well as by helping manufacturers and larger sellers to carefully control what they produce and when, web-to-print technology has the potential to further erode order sizes, a trend that will not be a boon to screen printing as a process.

But the good news is that web-to-print software can help all types and sizes of printing businesses, regardless of the type of equipment they use or mix of products they sell. Buyers today aren't just seeking suppliers of printed products.

Because integrated marketing and retailing have become so complex, many buyers want complete printing, manufacturing, and marketing programs. Through web-to-print platforms, a company could offer access to everything from printed documents, promotional products, and apparel, to central artwork libraries, email campaigns, and a complete supply chain for inventory management, production, procurement, and fulfillment.

If your business isn't prepared to give customers the convenience of online ordering, you are likely to miss out on opportunities to be part of this new, interconnected ecosystem for printing, manufacturing, and commerce. Your competitors who do offer online ordering can use web-to-print capabilities as an attractive point of differentiation.

Price, quality, service, and the type of equipment you have are no longer the real differentiators when selling printing solutions to companies. "Manufacturers have to become trusted partners to their clients and provide solutions that will ultimately require production methodologies that are not in their current arsenal," says Rick Aberle. He notes that partnerships between printing firms should be symbiotic: "You will drive some business to your partner and in turn get some business from them."

For more in-depth advice about implementing web-to-print solutions, follow Jennifer Matt, president of the consulting firm Web2Print Experts (web2printexperts.com). Web2Print Experts is a technology-independent consulting company that can help companies develop an online strategy, optimize print software investments, and plan and execute implementation services.

Matt believes web-to-print software should be regarded as more than an automation tool. In a Dscoop blog post entitled "3 Top Reasons Web-to-Print Projects Fail," she writes, "Web-to-print is not a technical project. Web-to-print is a sales and marketing initiative that just happens to use technology." ⏩

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