TECHNICAL GUIDE

OPTIMISED WORKFLOWS

WEB-TO-PRINT (WTP) TIPS AND TRICKS

Second Edition

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Web-to-Print (WtP) Tips And Tricks

In digital print production, which is generally characterised by both short runs and short delivery times, a Web-to-Print (WtP) ordering system is an obvious candidate, if you want to enhance sales, maximise equipment utilisation and improve customer support. These days there are many systems on offer, but if you're brave enough, you might want to consider building your own system from scratch.

There are pros and cons with both routes: a custom build WtP system has the potential to be a perfect match for your customers' current needs, but there are obvious drawbacks. A home made system has to be maintained and further developed in house and this learning curve can be long and steep. It might not in the long run compete with third party solutions, where new features and functions are added over time based on the needs and requests of many printers with lots of different business models. The time, and so cost, of developing your own solution is often underestimated and the final product may very well fall short of solutions bought off the shelf. These systems will also reflect the experience of a dedicated developer, specialised in WtP. Either way, here are some criteria for what to look for and to include in the specification of a modern and extensible WtP system.

To offer flexible print-on-demand solutions, such as repeat orders of business cards, brochures, banners, roll-ups and so on, a WtP system needs to have

a proper Digital Asset Management (DAM) system incorporated into the solution. There are many alternative names for a DAM system, for example MAM (Media Asset Management) or ECM (Enterprise Content Management), but essentially you want all digital assets searchable and retrievable through a well organised database. Not only well organised, the content must also be suitable for the type of output it will be used for, and print production is particularly demanding.

The DAM must have the scope to automatically transform media files to the size, resolution and colour gamut required for print. Since the images might also be used for electronic publication, they are typically saved in RGB (sRGB or Adobe RGB), and need to be colour managed on the fly to meet the requirements of the selected print method and substrate being used.

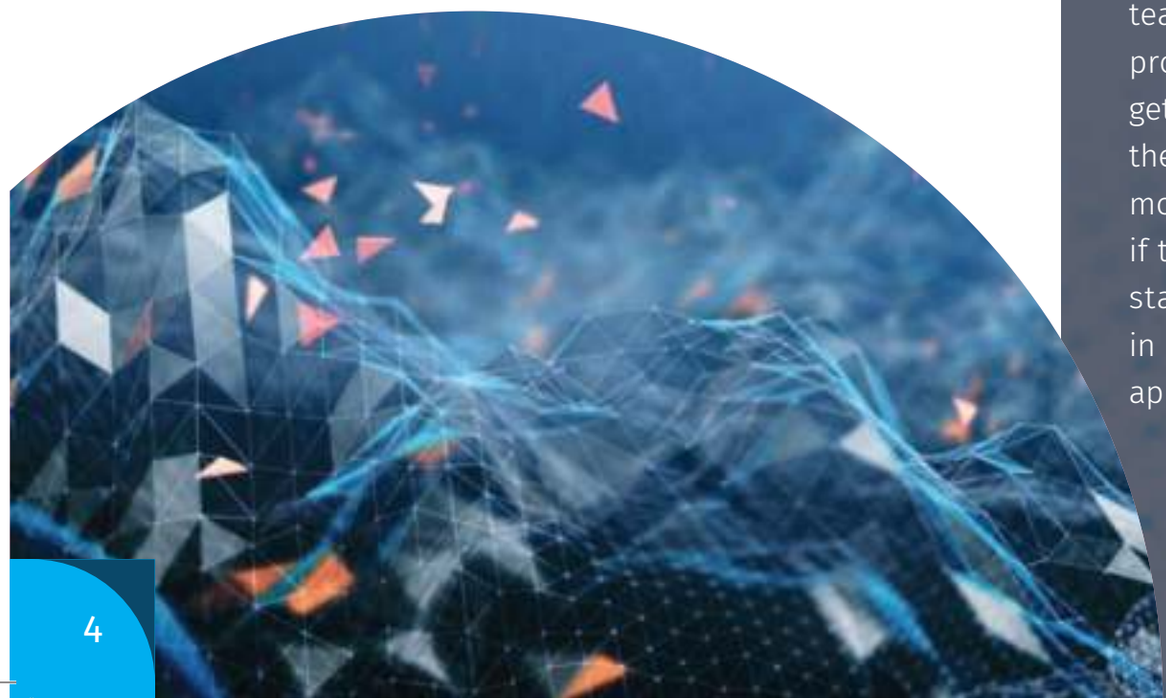
This is where many DAM systems fall short: programmers rarely have the colour management knowledge to either realise its importance or know how to go about supporting such functionality online. Without a solid colour management module in the WtP/DAM solution, there is a good chance that a lot of things will go wrong, and so a high risk of customer complaints related to colour.

The WtP/DAM system also needs to support a lot of file formats because you never know what online customers will expect you to produce, and it must be easy and efficient to add metadata. The presence of rich and relevant metadata is crucial for fast and correct retrieval of digital assets, be it images, logos, PDFs or native document files created in Word, PowerPoint, Excel or InDesign. There are many legacy file formats for older types of metadata, but today some flavour of XML is typically used, as in Adobe's XML Metadata Platform (XMP). Supporting your WtP system with a properly configured DAM system will provide customers with a robust platform, and should boost both goodwill and sales.

A Web-to-Print system offers your customer an efficient way to order print online, either from their computer, or from a tablet or smartphone.

Extensible and Adaptable

Since every DAM system depends on a database, it's important for the WtP system that the database can be extended or upgraded as needed. A simple, perhaps cheap or free database may work fine initially, but it will choke under an increased load. If the existing data and metadata can't be transferred to a new and more robust database, you've worked yourself into a costly WtP dead end. When you choose your DAM system, make sure there are powerful export functions, or upgrade paths to more powerful solutions.



Softproofing and Approval

A quick and reliable approval and softproofing function is vital for effective WtP workflows. Depending on your customers' needs and expectations, the softproofing module must be able to support colour accurate previews of the colours and images. You can't take for granted that this is supported on every off the shelf WtP technology, so if this is important to you, make sure it's in place before you buy.

The approval process needs to be both easy for your customers and staff to use, whilst offering a rich tool set for collaborative proofing and approval processes. Everyone in the approval team needs to be able to see every comment or request on the proofs to avoid unnecessary work on the pages and to avoid getting conflicting and contradictionary requests for changes to the proof. The approval system should also include a scheduling module, so alerts and warnings can be automatically initiated, if the set deadline for the job is about to be reached. The status of the job order should be available for anyone involved in production and planning and, once the page or sheet is approved for production, it should automatically be fed into

the actual workflow system. A modern approval system replaces the cumbersome practise of sending out single PDFs to the approval team, and so speeds up the proofing and approval process considerably.

A WtP solution should include a good approval module, and ideally also offer colour accurate previews of the pages (and instructions on how to correctly calibrate your monitor). Here is an example from Dalim's Softproof software.

Personalised Printing and Beyond

One of the most attractive and challenging features of digital printing, is the potential for truly personalised print production. This has been the topic of many articles in the trade press for years, but still hasn't taken off as expected. There are many reasons for the slow uptake, but correctly implemented variable data print production, or personalised printing if you prefer, can make a big difference in a marketing campaign. The problem is often that the technical solutions for personalised printing seem too big for both the designer responsible on the print buyer side, and/or the prepress staff on the printer's side. But if you as a print service provider want to be at the forefront, and be in the picture when attractive and potential customers consider this type of job, you need to have the system and solutions in place and be able to fulfil such requests.

As with considering what WtP solution to go for, you can either build your own custom made variable data print production system, or go for a more or less off the shelf solution. The more features and functions you want, the higher the price and the complexity of the system. But the potential in personalised printing is big, and more or less only limited by the imagination of your staff, and/or your customers. And it's an ideal application for WtP.

Get Personal

Personalised printing can be anything from simple business cards, created from a template with the print buyer's information added as and when the order is made. It can be course material, again created from a template, and then personalised with the names of the course attendees at the point of ordering. But it can also be much more complex, such as when combining data from an existing customer database with new information taken from what are called personal URLs or PURLs. These are sections of a web site where a potential customer can go and personalise her or his request on a certain product. The technique has been used with success by for example car manufacturers to produce product brochures for a certain make and model in terms of colour, optional equipment and décor, based on the data a prospective customer submits online.

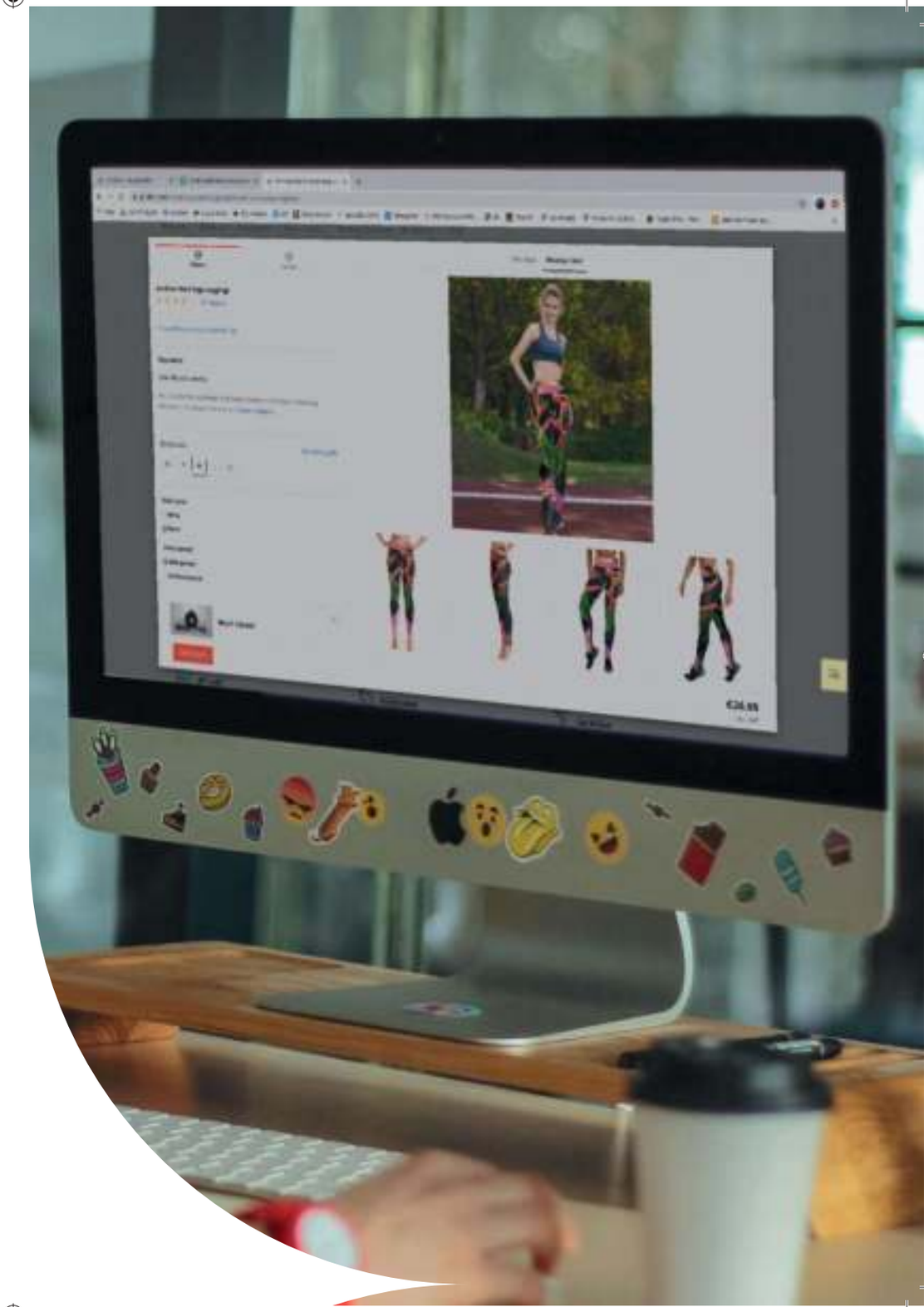
Another possibility, related to tracking and measuring the effectiveness of a marketing campaign, is to combine the printed material with 2D bar codes and or solutions for Augmented Reality (AR). Does this sound like science fiction? It's actually used in many campaigns at the moment, and you have probably come across several implementations in the last week, perhaps without being aware of it. A large format poster can for example contain a 2D code somewhere, and when someone is interested in the product or message, they can point their smart phone to the 2D bar code, and instantly be taken to the web page offering more information, or interaction, related to that product. By tracking the use of this bar code, your customer can measure the effectiveness of that particular campaign.

Our favourite example is in the IKEA catalogue. This well know furniture manufacturer has coded some images in their catalogue to act as portals to their web site, offering more information on the product in the catalogue than the printed version can provide including more images, design ideas, animations and videos. Again, this is a kind of AR that can boost the effectiveness of a marketing campaign, and strengthen the brand name.

You don't have to include all of these options and features in your WtP system, but they are worth having in mind when planning for further extensions. Digital print production, be it small or large format, can offer very interesting cross media applications,

Print and electronic publishing can be combined in for example Augmented Reality applications (AR). The 2D barcode on this beer glass is a link to the brewery's web site, where more information and offers can be found.

combining print production with other publishing and marketing techniques. The key to success could very well rest in having the know how to best combine different publishing methods, including print. But it all starts with an effective WtP system.



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