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Online Storefronts for Printers

June 2022

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Introduction

Online shopping is part of our culture. E-commerce is growing while retail businesses face declines in traditional in-person shopping. The trends in B2B shopping closely follow the consumer trends and the printing business is no exception. Online stores, also known as web-to-print or W2P, are an opportunity for printing companies to add value to their products, interact with clients in the ways they prefer, and grow their businesses.

Online storefronts allow print service providers to reach a broader audience with their existing clients. You may have a relationship with a solitary print buyer, but his or her company employs many other individuals who also order print, such as managers, administrative assistants, salespeople, or support staff. A well-designed web-to-print solution can be a new sales tool for you, allowing you to make more sales to your existing client base.

By analyzing the data collected from online storefront software about orders you receive, you can also gain knowledge about your clients or spot trends across market segments and adjust your marketing efforts accordingly.

Each print service provider should evaluate their own circumstances as they contemplate adding online stores. Compare software platforms and assess how well they fit with your production methods and your clients. Develop a clear profile of the clients for whom you want to attract to your online stores and create a plan for promoting stores to this audience.

Offering online ordering is becoming a must-have feature in the competitive world of print services. Failing to adapt to the desires of the marketplace can be detrimental to your company's growth or even its eventual survival.

Why Printers Should Have Online Storefronts

Besides making it easy for clients to order from you, transactions initiated through online storefronts are the initial triggers for automated processing and production. This lowers your cost and improves the customer experience. If your company does not offer a simple online ordering process, your clients will find another print service provider who does, and geography isn't a limiting factor. Your existing clients have access to non-local providers. You may be competing with organizations worldwide.

For many common print jobs, the in-person or over-the-phone approach that requires human interaction at every step is just unnecessary anymore. Specifications for business cards, letterhead, envelopes, brochures, and many other items needed by your business clients can be easily handled via an online interface and document templates. The online interface handles proof reviews and approvals, making the client responsible for design and typographical errors. When clients order jobs for themselves, your experienced staff can spend more time on tasks where they add value and less time processing simple print orders.

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At a time when many print companies are struggling to hire and retain skilled employees, automation and client self-service are even more important. You cannot rely on adding to the staff to meet client demands. The only answer is to automate, and online storefronts are part of that strategy.

Clients used to buying almost anything they want online enjoy the efficiency of such transactions. They are not confined to the business hours of a vendor, they can easily compare products and services, and read reviews. They expect that ordering custom items like printed materials should be accomplished similarly. Print buyers want detailed information about each product and appreciate transparent pricing. They aim to find what they want, provide the information, upload files, place the order, and get back to other things on their to-do lists.

As more employees move to a work-from-home or hybrid arrangement, they won't have easy access to in-house resources to help them order the printed items they need. Online ordering solves this problem while simultaneously enforcing corporate branding standards.

Who Will Use your Online Store?

As you consider implementing an online store to sell your print products, pay attention to the organizations most likely to use it. The profile of your ideal online clients will differ, depending on your current clientele and the markets you serve. Generally, organizations that face a consistent demand for pre-designed, custom, or personalized print products are great candidates for an online store.

Some examples might be:

- Real estate companies with an ever-changing collection of listings
- Businesses associated with fast-moving trends or fashion fads
- Companies or industries that experience high employee turnover

- Corporations looking to outsource their in-plant print operations
- Colleges, universities, or school districts who constantly need up-to-date materials

Industries experiencing high merger and acquisition activities might also be targets for your online store. Re-branding is a frequent result of such transactions, requiring printed materials bearing new logos, corporate colors, and tag lines.

Custom storefronts serve a single association or corporation. When your client's users visit these pages, they can only order pre-approved materials that meet the organization's established standards for colors, fonts, layout, wording, etc. Customization is available, but only within the parameters set by the organization.

What Will You Sell?

Customers cannot order every print project online. Complex jobs will still require personal human intervention. However, templated variable data interfaces will allow your clients to place orders on their own for many common print items:

- Self-mailers
- Postcards
- Flyers
- Posters
- Brochures cards

What Keeps Printers from Building or Leveraging Online Stores?

Printers may believe that online storefronts are difficult to implement. Homegrown solutions naturally require programmers and can take months to develop. However, pre-packaged software to build online stores is readily available and includes all the branding and customization most print service providers require.

Like many other software systems today, online storefront software for printers can be cloud-based. No investment in servers or other infrastructure is necessary. Once you create and test a basic storefront design, your team can clone portals to create online stores for new clients. This technique can shorten the implementation time for simple systems, allowing the portal to be live within days.

A common misperception among some print company owners is that their customers are not interested in an online storefront for ordering print. This is probably inaccurate. If your clients appear disinterested in online ordering, they may have yet to experience it. You may find out your perception was wrong only after a client starts sending their work to a competitor that has made the transition easy with an online system.

Almost all clients of print service providers would rather do business online, on their schedule, than spend time working personally with print salespeople and customer service representatives. This is especially true of print buyers who are no longer working forty hours a week at the office. Their schedules have changed, as have their locations. They don't want to travel to the print shop for meetings, nor do they take business meetings in their dining rooms. They avoid adding more Zoom calls to their work-from-home schedules. This group welcomes an online portal that allows them to handle tasks on their schedule.

How Much to Charge for Online Orders

Your costs to process online orders should be less than your expenses for doing the same job using a manual workflow. You may decide to pass some of those savings on to your clients, depending on competitive pressures. However, remember the client benefits from online ordering as well. Features valuable to your clients are inventory management, tracking, and analysis. They can easily set reorder points and see when and where print items are used, making adjustments when needed. It may be unnecessary to drop prices. You are now providing more services and value.
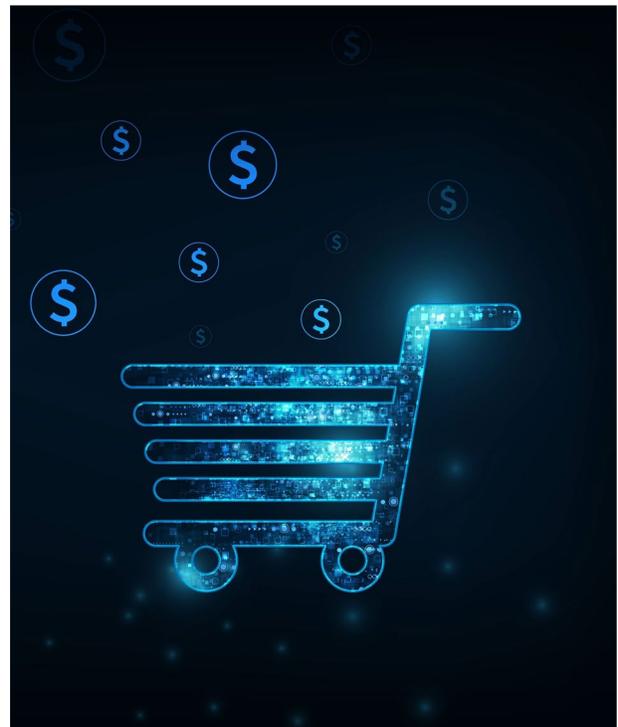
How much to charge depends on an infinite number of variables, just like any other print job. You may set some minimum dollar amounts or quantities, charge for packing and shipping, charge for rush orders, orders you must outsource to a partner, etc. You will probably want to insist that all charges are final once you secure the last approval. All these details, plus

plus the rates you charge each client, will be customizable within the online storefront software.

How to Collect Payments

As with everything else associated with online stores, the payment/checkout process should be smooth and seamless. Your payment functions need to consider the requirements of your clients. Some clients will want you to charge a credit card, others will require an invoice and references to purchase orders. Ideally, each online storefront should connect to your client's accounting system to chargeback departments appropriately or monitor print budgets so client employees cannot place a print order that exceeds the budget or pre-set limits without special approval.

Best and Worst Practices

Offering online storefronts to your business clients is an investment in time and money. You definitely want to be sure that your clients will use it once their storefront is available, and that takes some strategic planning. Demonstrate sample stores for your clients to make sure they understand the value of the technology and secure commitments from them in advance.

Here are some web-to-print best practices:

- Simple stores may not require much effort from your staff to get set up, but a wise printer will make sure the clients

have some skin in the game to encourage them to participate once the store is ready to use. Charge a reasonable start-up fee to cover your development, customization, and training. Perhaps include a certain number of templates at no charge but add an extra fee for those clients with an excessive number of templates to create and load.

- Work with your client on a rollout plan. Don't leave it up to them to promote this new functionality for ordering print within their organization. Help them by providing graphics, text, and video content they can use to spread the word internally about this new way of ordering print. Also, help them choose the location on their intranet site where the link to the online store will appear. For best results. The link should be on a page that employees already use frequently to access other services.

- When transitioning from an existing order entry method to the online store, some individuals will probably still submit orders using the old process. When they do, have one of your customer service representatives reach out to the client and walk through the new procedures with the individuals who have yet to switch over.

- Talk to your client's HR department about adding an introduction to the online store to the new employee onboarding packet.

And here are some mistakes to avoid:

- Do not build your entire online storefront strategy based on the whims of a single customer. It's good to have a pre-engaged client that wants to use an online storefront, but don't let them make all the design, functionality, and integration decisions. Think ahead about how you will roll out online stores to your customer base.

- Resist getting bogged down in technology. It is easy to become enamored with all the neat things online storefronts can do but keep an eye on the primary objectives—making money for you.

- Do not insist on building it yourself. Online stores require continuous maintenance as web browser companies update their products, software with which your online store integrates changes, you add new clients, or modify the catalog of available items. If you can find a vendor that offers the must-have features you desire, building your own system may not be the best choice.

- Avoid waiting for the next big development in online store software. Software is always advancing. While you wait to purchase the latest and greatest version, your competition may be quietly attracting your clients.

- Beware of focusing on cosmetics. An attractive and easy-to-use interface is important but stalling the implementation of your first W2P storefront while you decide about a blue theme or an orange one is a mistake. Getting those first orders in and testing is more critical.

- Do not rely solely on the vendor for support. Establish an in-house expert. Your software vendor may be great at providing technical support but having someone on site that knows their way around your online store software can

someone on site that knows their way around your online store software can help you respond rapidly to questions or issues from clients and staff.

- Do not fail to get your sales force on board. Some salespeople may see online storefronts as a threat. They need to understand their roles are changing. The ways you compensate salespeople may also change. Be sure to communicate these developments in advance.

Final Thoughts

Automation is without a doubt a critical shift that all successful print operations must make. This was true before 2020, as technology advanced at a rapid rate. The COVID pandemic and the business adjustments it spawned only made automation initiatives more urgent.

Work-from-home, hybrid work arrangements, and the "Great Resignation" that your clients and your own business have experienced since the pandemic began are having lasting effects you must address.

Implementing online stores for your clients is an easy way to add automation to a manually intensive task. The time and cost savings made possible by accepting and controlling print orders submitted online should be substantial enough to convince most printers to take this step.

Added to the cost and efficiency benefits, online stores also trigger changes in your customer relationships that move print purchases from commodities to value-added activities. This shift allows printers to create stronger relationships with clients, resulting in greater customer loyalty and more favorable profit margins.

Whether you call them online stores, e-commerce, web-to-print, or W2P, make implementing this technology one of your near-term business development priorities.