

Monthly Print Market Update

March, 2026



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Is It Legal for Printing Companies to Use AI-Generated Images? – Lengthy article, but it will help you better understand potential risks.

Graphic Arts Employment in February Was Flat—Thankfully - February 2026 saw printing industry employment increase a scant 0.1% from January, with production employment up 0.2% and non-production employment down by 0.1%.

AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage – This is an extensive and well done report, you will need to take your time understanding the lessons and strategizing how to benefit from them in your environment.

Strategic Shifts Transforming the Business of Print - Commercial printers are heading into 2026 with both unprecedented opportunity and unprecedented pressure. Inflation, tariffs, and labor shortages continue to squeeze profitability, yet the industry is also undergoing the most significant transformation since the early days of digital workflows. The companies that emerge strongest will be those that combine automation, artificial intelligence (AI), inkjet, and integrated data with sharper sales alignment, value-driven marketing services, and clear strategic positioning.

For commercial printers preparing for the year ahead, understanding these shifts isn't optional — it's a roadmap for protecting margins, capturing new revenue, and staying competitive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

Here are the most influential trends shaping commercial printing in 2026, drawn from Alliance Insights' research and analysis.

- 1. Connected Automation Becomes the New Competitive Advantage**
- 2. AI Moves From Buzzword to Business Tool**
- 3. Workforce Pressures Accelerate Role Redesign and Culture Change**
- 4. Private Equity Influence Elevates Expectations for Operational Discipline**
- 5. Convergence Rises: Boundaries Fall, Growth Follows**
- 6. Production Inkjet Gains Strategic Momentum**
- 7. Intelligent Marketing Services Create New Pathways**

These topics are a result of surveying your peers, so it's good information to review.

Printing Establishments—2010–2023 - According to the latest edition of County Business Patterns, in 2023 there were 22,301 establishments in NAICS 323 (Printing and Related Support Activities). This represents a decline of 23% since 2010.

Obviously dated information, but it still demonstrates the fractured nature of our industry. Nearly ¼ of the firms vanish and there are still 22K competitors fighting for market share!

AI Isn't Lightning Workloads. It's Making Them More Intense - In fact, AI is increasing the speed, density and complexity of work rather than reducing it, according to an analysis of 164,000 workers' digital work activity. The data, from workforce analytics and productivity-tracking software company ActivTrak, covers more than 443 million hours of work across 1,111 employers, making it one of the biggest studies of AI's effects on work habits to date.

Examining AI users' digital activity 180 days before and after they began using such tools on the job, ActivTrak found [AI intensified activity](#) across nearly every category: The time they spent on email, messaging and chat apps more than doubled, while their use of business-management tools, such as human-resources or accounting software, rose 94%.

November Printing Shipments Were Nothing to Be Thankful For - November 2025 shipments came in at \$7.15 billion, a precipitous drop from October's \$8.08 billion.

Defining In-plant Success Strategies – Know thine enemy! Ok, maybe not enemy, but certainly competitor as you attempt to displace them with Praas. Here are the things they are focusing on.

Packaging Outlook 2026: Trends Driving Tomorrow's Growth – I include this article because it gives you a view of an adjacent market and how similar the processes and problems are.

Big Jobs 2026 – A look at wide-format jobs with statistics about the jobs.

New Study Finds Convergence Across Print Segments is Delivering Revenue and Profits - Convergence Has Become the Norm and Delivering Gains - The survey found that 96% of print providers operate across multiple print segments, serving an average of three additional segments beyond their primary business.

This migration trend underscores a structural shift: print businesses are no longer defined by a single specialization but by how broadly and effectively they can serve customer needs.

- 96% report revenue diversification, reducing exposure to volatility in any single print segment.
- 94% cite new growth opportunities, enabling expansion into adjacent and higher-value applications.
- 93% report enhanced competitive positioning, driven by broader service offerings and greater differentiation.
- 93% report stronger customer relationships, as expanded capabilities increase wallet share and customer loyalty.

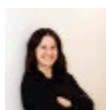
I don't think any of us are surprised by this, but it's nice to have some metrics to confirm our suspicions.

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Printing Impressions – March 24

Is It Legal for Printing Companies to Use AI-Generated Images?



By [Alyssa Summers](#)

AI image generation has improved dramatically over the last few years. What once produced strange, unrealistic visuals can now generate highly detailed marketing and sales imagery in seconds. Tools like Gemini 3.1 (newest Gemini model at the time of this article) have pushed image generation even further, producing visuals that are increasingly photorealistic and usable in professional marketing campaigns.

For printing companies and marketers, this raises an important question:

Is it legal to use AI-generated images in marketing and sales collateral?

The short answer is yes, most of the time. But there are important legal considerations around copyright, trademarks, likeness rights, and misleading advertising that every marketer should understand before using AI images in things like:

- Direct mail
- Websites
- Brochures
- Catalogs
- Digital advertising

Let's break down what you can do, what you cannot do, and where the legal grey areas still exist.

Can You Legally Use AI Images in Marketing?

In most cases, AI-generated images can be used commercially, including in marketing materials.

Many major AI platforms allow commercial use of generated images, including tools like:

- Gemini (Nano Banana 2)
- Midjourney
- OpenAI (DALL·E 3)

As long as you follow the platform's terms of service and avoid infringing on intellectual property, AI images can be used in marketing campaigns.

For printing companies, this means AI visuals can often be safely used in:

- Sales collateral
- Direct mail campaigns
- Website graphics
- Email marketing
- Social media advertising

Using AI Images in Direct Mail

Direct mail is one of the most common places where AI-generated imagery is already being used.

AI visuals can work well for:

- Background illustrations
- Conceptual imagery
- Lifestyle scenes
- Decorative design elements

For example: A postcard promoting a printing company could use an AI-generated image of a modern office environment or a stylized illustration of printed materials.

In most cases, this is perfectly legal as long as the image doesn't violate copyrights or depict something misleading.

Can AI Images Be Used on Websites?

Yes, AI images are widely used on websites today.

Companies frequently use AI-generated visuals for:

- Hero images
- Blog graphics
- Landing page illustrations
- Marketing banners

In fact, AI visuals can often replace stock photography entirely.

For print companies, this can be especially helpful when creating visual concepts around printing services, marketing campaigns, or branding themes that may be difficult to photograph.

Using AI Images in Brochures and Catalogs

AI imagery can also be used in printed marketing materials such as brochures and catalogs.

However, this is where marketers should be careful.

If the imagery is purely conceptual, it's usually fine.

Examples include:

- Abstract marketing visuals
- Illustrations of business concepts
- Decorative backgrounds
- Stylized brand imagery

But if an AI image represents an actual product, there could be legal risk if it misrepresents what is being sold.

For example: If a catalog shows a luxury embossed package created by AI but the company cannot actually produce that finish, the marketing could potentially be considered misleading.

What You Should NOT Do with AI Images

While AI-generated imagery is generally usable in marketing, there are clear situations where problems can arise.

Recreating Copyrighted Characters

Prompting AI to generate images based on protected intellectual property can create legal issues.

Examples include prompts like:

- "Create a superhero that looks like Spider-Man"
- "Generate artwork in the style of Disney"
- "Make a Nike advertisement"

Even though AI generates the image, the result may still violate copyright or trademark law.

Using Real People Without Permission

Another major risk involves generating images of real people.

For example:

- A fake celebrity endorsement
- A realistic image of a real person promoting a product
- AI-generated portraits that resemble real individuals

This can violate rights of publicity, which protect individuals from unauthorized commercial use of their likeness.

Misleading Advertising

Marketing laws require that advertisements accurately represent what a company offers.

AI imagery can create problems if it:

- Depicts unrealistic product results
- Shows services that don't exist
- Misrepresents materials or quality

For example: If a printing company shows an AI-generated image of a highly specialized print effect that it cannot actually produce, that could be considered misleading marketing.

The Legal Grey Areas Around AI Images

Despite rapid adoption, AI-generated imagery still sits in several legal grey areas.

Copyright Ownership

One of the biggest questions is who owns AI-generated images.

Current guidance from the United States Copyright Office states that works created entirely by AI without human authorship cannot receive copyright protection.

This means:

- You can use the image commercially
- But you may not fully own exclusive rights to it

For marketing materials, this usually isn't a major issue, but it does affect exclusivity.

AI Training Data Lawsuits

There are ongoing lawsuits involving AI companies and how their models were trained.

Companies like:

- OpenAI
- Stability AI

have faced claims that training data included copyrighted images without permission.

The outcomes of these cases could eventually shape how AI-generated imagery is regulated. For now, however, most businesses continue using AI images commercially without issue.

Why AI Image Quality Has Rapidly Improved

Early AI image generators produced strange results, distorted faces, broken hands, and unrealistic lighting.

But modern models like Gemini 3.1 have significantly improved image generation capabilities.

New AI models can now produce:

- Photorealistic lighting
- Complex textures
- Realistic environments
- Accurate visual composition

For marketers and printing companies, this means AI imagery is now good enough to be used in real campaigns, not just concept mockups.

Best Practices for Using AI Images in Marketing

To minimize legal risk, print companies and marketers should follow a few best practices:

- “Avoid referencing real brands or copyrighted characters”
- “Don’t generate images of real people for advertising”
- “Modify AI images before final use”

Editing AI images in design software adds human creativity and reduces duplication risks:

- “Use trusted AI platforms with clear commercial licenses”
- “Keep records of prompts and image sources”

This can help demonstrate how the image was created if questions arise.

The Bottom Line When it Comes to AI Image Legality

AI-generated images are quickly becoming a standard tool in marketing.

They can typically be used legally in:

- Direct mail campaigns
- Websites
- Brochures

- Catalogs
- Digital advertising

But marketers should avoid generating imagery that:

- Copies copyrighted characters
- Uses celebrity likenesses
- Misrepresents products or services
- Replicates existing artwork too closely

As AI tools continue to improve, and models like Gemini 3.1 push the technology forward, AI imagery will likely become a normal part of the creative workflow for marketing teams and print companies alike.

The key is understanding where the legal boundaries are today and keeping an eye on how AI laws evolve in the future.

What They Think – March 20

Graphic Arts Employment in February Was Flat—Thankfully

February 2026 saw printing industry employment increase a scant 0.1% from January, with production employment up 0.2% and non-production employment down by 0.1%.

Friday, March 20, 2026

Employment in thousands of workers	January 2025	January 2026	Y/Y Change	February 2025	February 2026	Y/Y Change
Printing, all	347.1	339.5	-2.2%	346.5	339.8	-1.9%
Printing, production	239.8	236.1	-1.5%	238.6	236.5	-0.9%
Printing, less production	107.3	103.4	-3.6%	107.9	103.3	-4.3%
Signs, all	77.0	77.0	0.0%	75.8		
Signs, production	43.5	41.0	-5.7%	41.9		
Signs, less production	33.5	36.0	7.5%	33.9		
Converted paper products	271.5	272.0	0.2%	272.5		
Paperboard containers	160.2	159.0	-0.7%	160.8		
Paper bags and coated and treated paper	53.5	53.2	-0.6%	53.3		
Stationery and other converted paper products	57.8	59.8	3.5%	58.4		
Plastics packaging materials, film, and sheet	99.7	100.6	0.9%	100.3		
Publishing	903.7	897.8	-0.7%	902.2	894.3	-0.9%
Newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers	257.6	243.0	-5.7%	255.6		
Newspaper publishers	86.6	77.4	-10.6%	84.8		
Periodical publishers	61.7	59.7	-3.2%	61.6		
Book publishers	55.3	55.2	-0.2%	55.3		
Directory, mailing list, and other publishers	54.0	50.7	-6.1%	53.9		
Graphic design services	52.5	50.7	-3.4%	52.0		
Advertising and related services	484.9	475.3	-2.0%	482.5	479.0	-0.7%
Advertising agencies	209.9	203.0	-3.3%	210.2		
Public relations agencies	65.0	60.6	-6.8%	64.0		
Media buying agencies and media representatives	37.5	34.7	-7.5%	35.2		
Display advertising	30.3	29.0	-4.3%	30.2		
Direct mail advertising	31.0	29.9	-3.5%	31.6		
Advertising material distribution and other advertising services	111.2	118.1	6.2%	111.3		

We kicked off 2026 with a 2.7% decrease in overall industry employment in January, so we’re happy that February employment was generally flat, with overall employment up 0.1%, production employment up 0.2%, and non-production employment down by 0.1%.

Publishing employment was down 0.4% from January to February.

Looking at other business categories, the reporting of which lags a month:

Overall employment in the signage industry was down 0.8% from December to January, with sign production employment down 0.2%, and non-production down 1.4%.

Converted paper products employment was down 0.2% from December to January, with paperboard container employment up 0.4% and paper bags and coated and treated paper employment down 1.8%.

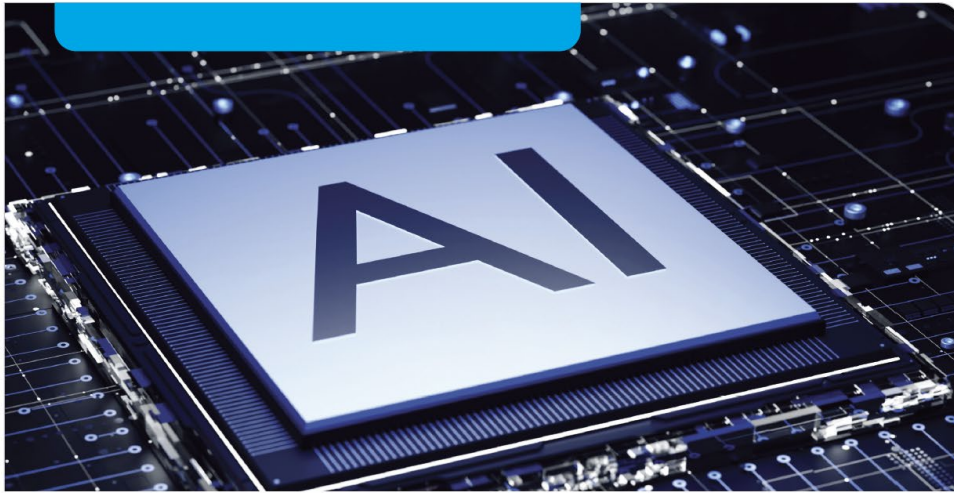
Looking at some specific publishing and creative segments, from December to January, periodical publishing employment was down 1.6%, newspaper publishing employment was down 2.1%, and book publishing was up 0.2%. Graphic design employment was down 0.8%, ad agency employment was down 2.2%, and PR agency employment was down 3.2%. Direct mail advertising employment was up 0.3% from December to January.

Wide-format Impressions – March 17

AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage

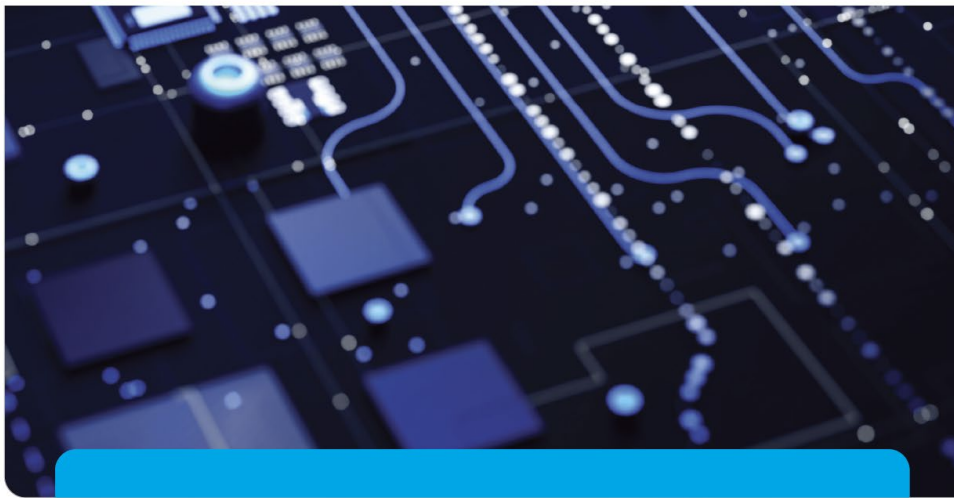
This is an in-depth look at deploying AI in Print Environments.

Full Report Attached



**AI Adoption in the
Printing Industry:**
From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage

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Printing Impressions – March 18

Strategic Shifts Transforming the Business of Print



Credit: Getty Images by Anastasia Sudinko



By [Lisa Cross](#)

Commercial printers are heading into 2026 with both unprecedented opportunity and unprecedented pressure. Inflation, tariffs, and labor shortages continue to squeeze profitability, yet the industry is also undergoing the most significant transformation since the early days of digital workflows. The companies that emerge strongest will be those that combine automation, artificial intelligence (AI), inkjet, and integrated data with sharper sales alignment, value-driven marketing services, and clear strategic positioning.

For commercial printers preparing for the year ahead, understanding these shifts isn't optional — it's a roadmap for protecting margins, capturing new revenue, and staying competitive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

Across Alliance Insights' survey research and interviews with innovative print providers, a single theme is unmistakable: Firms that invest intentionally, guided by strategy rather than gut feelings, are better positioned to succeed. Technology matters, but technology alone is not enough.

Here are the most influential trends shaping commercial printing in 2026, drawn from Alliance Insights' research and analysis.

1. Connected Automation Becomes the New Competitive Advantage

Automation is no longer just a collection of upgrades — it has become a strategic differentiator, and its full value is realized only when the workflow is connected end to end. Many commercial printers have improved individual parts of their operations over time, automating prepress tasks, enhancing scheduling tools, or modernizing finishing. These steps delivered meaningful gains, but when automation exists in separate pockets, the workflow can still stall. Throughput, accuracy, and efficiency never reach their potential because the system isn't acting as a system.

Alliance Insights' research illustrates the importance of integration. In a recent survey, 87% of print providers said automation increases business resilience, and printers who embrace it report higher productivity, expanded capacity, fewer errors, and stronger staff satisfaction. The companies seeing the biggest payoffs aren't simply automating isolated tasks — they're linking every stage of production, from job onboarding through finishing, into one coordinated, data-driven workflow.

That shift is accelerating. In the most recent "Commercial Print Trends & Strategy" survey, finishing automation ranks as the top capital investment priority, surpassing presses, MIS enhancements, and prepress tools. Printers recognize that finishing has been the persistent choke point slowing an otherwise automated production chain.

When finishing integrates with upstream systems, printers unlock the efficiency that digital workflows have long promised: smoother job flow, predictable schedules, consistent quality, and faster delivery. Online ordering portals are also becoming a critical front-end component of connected automation. As customer expectations shift toward faster turnaround and self-service access, these portals reduce manual onboarding, standardize job specifications, and capture accurate job data at submission. That information flows directly into prepress automation, scheduling, color management, and versioning workflows, minimizing errors and accelerating production. For many commercial printers, enhancing online ordering portals has become a practical way to improve customer experience while strengthening the efficiency of the entire production chain.

In 2026, speed alone is not a differentiator. Competitive advantage increasingly comes from connected automation — a workflow where every component communicates, every process is coordinated, and every job moves with purpose.

2. AI Moves From Buzzword to Business Tool

Artificial intelligence (AI) has crossed a critical threshold. According to Alliance Insights' study, "AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage," printers are moving from experimentation to real operational integration:

- 85% say AI is critical to staying competitive
- 83% believe AI will create new business opportunities
- Nearly half agree that companies that fail to adopt AI may not survive long-term

AI is quietly transforming core functions: faster, more accurate estimating that takes minutes instead of hours; automated scheduling and imposition; predictive maintenance that reduces downtime; and integrated analytics that reveal operational and financial blind spots.

The research underscores a clear conclusion: AI is rapidly becoming a strategic requirement. Printers that advance fastest are treating AI like any other business-critical initiative: assigning ownership, building roadmaps, training staff, and targeting high-impact use cases. Those that wait risk widening competitive gaps that will be difficult to close.

3. Workforce Pressures Accelerate Role Redesign and Culture Change

Commercial printers are confronting a structural labor challenge. Alliance Insights' research shows that 72% of printers struggle to hire production staff, and 83% cite rising labor costs as a top concern. Successful companies aren't merely recruiting harder — they're redesigning work.

Digital printing, automation, and connected workflows reduce manual labor, simplify complex tasks, and create cleaner, tech-enabled environments that attract younger professionals. These systems also support cross-training, shorten onboarding, and shift roles toward problem-solving, quality oversight, and system management.

Walker360, a Printing Impressions' 2025 Innovator of the Year and PRINTING United Alliance member company, exemplifies this philosophy. The Montgomery, Alabama-based printer invested heavily in digital press and finishing technology, and also built a culture and facility designed to engage and retain talent. From bright, modern plant décor to employee feedback programs and incentives tied to career development, Walker360 reframed the workplace experience to reflect technology-centric, growth-oriented operations.

In 2026, workforce strategy must move from replacement to reinvention. The printers that succeed will pair digital production with forward-looking talent development and modernized work environments.

4. Private Equity Influence Elevates Expectations for Operational Discipline

Private equity (PE) is no longer a background force and is actively raising the competitive bar. Alliance Insights' "Private Equity in Printing & Packaging" report shows that PE-backed firms bring:

- Tighter financial discipline

- Structured reporting
- Data-driven investment models
- Professionalized leadership
- Aggressive automation and modernization

PE firms invest strategically, demand ROI clarity, and build scale quickly through buy-and-build strategies. At the same time, demographic pressures — particularly aging owners — are driving more succession-driven deals.

For independents, the implication is clear: competing effectively increasingly requires PE-level discipline, even if they never take PE capital. This means adopting the same rigor in capital planning, financial controls, sales processes, and strategic growth.

5. Convergence Rises: Boundaries Fall, Growth Follows

Customers now expect integrated solutions that span media, substrates, and channels. The firms gaining ground are those expanding into adjacent print markets, building portfolios that blend commercial print, packaging, signage, direct mail, wide-format, and even apparel decoration. The boundaries between segments aren't just blurring — they're dissolving — and customers increasingly want providers who can meet many of their communication needs through a single, coordinated partner.

Alliance Insights' 2025 study "Profiting Through Convergence" shows:

- 93% of providers now serve multiple segments
- 94% see the industry moving toward multi-segment providers
- 91% say customers expect a one-stop partner for diverse print needs

The study also found that commercial printers expanding into an adjacent print market increased revenue by 18.8% and pre-tax profitability by 11.1%.

Diversification is no longer optional for firms seeking growth. In 2026, convergence is the business model.

6. Production Inkjet Gains Strategic Momentum

Inkjet's role in commercial printing has fundamentally shifted. Once viewed as an auxiliary or transitional technology, inkjet is now becoming central to next-generation production workflows. Alliance Insights' "Next Generation Inkjet Investment" study confirms this shift: Printers operating production inkjet report an average 10% decrease in production waste, a 9.4% increase in profitability, and the ability to run production with fewer operators due to automation and simplified workflows built directly into the platform.

This data reflects that inkjet is aligned with the conditions shaping commercial print in 2026. As run lengths shrink, turnaround times accelerate, and variability becomes the norm, printers need a

technology that can change over quickly without compromising quality. Inkjet does exactly that — delivering offset-comparable output with the flexibility and responsiveness of a digital, automation-ready production backbone.

What's equally important is the strategic impact. "Production Digital Printing 2026" highlights a rising trend: Commercial printers are migrating offset volume to inkjet not out of necessity, but out of opportunity. Among planned inkjet adopters, 57% aim to move offset work, 47% seek lower cost of ownership versus toner, and 43% want to accommodate demand for short runs.

With fast makereadies, integrated color management, and the ability to version or personalize without additional steps, inkjet opens the door to expanded revenue models in direct mail, marketing collateral, books, catalogs, and transactional communications. These are the very applications Alliance Insights identifies as rapidly accelerating due to inkjet's automation and data-driven advantages. Inkjet is reshaping production economics and workflow efficiency, but its impact is highly dependent on business fit and operational readiness. Alliance Insights' research shows that inkjet delivers measurable gains when volumes, application mix, substrate requirements, and workflow maturity align with the platform's strengths. However, the investment is significant, the learning curve is real, and the return is not uniform across all providers. Evaluating inkjet requires disciplined analysis — including cost-of-ownership modeling, throughput expectations, staffing implications, and integration with existing or planned automation. For well-matched environments, inkjet can strengthen margins and reduce production friction; for others, traditional offset or toner may remain more economical in the near term. In 2026, inkjet should be viewed not as an automatic upgrade, but as a strategic decision that rewards careful due diligence and a clear understanding of operational objectives.

7. Intelligent Marketing Services Create New Pathways

Intelligent marketing services are emerging as an important new growth engine for commercial printers. These services combine data, analytics, automation, and cross-channel delivery to help organizations run more personalized, relevant, and measurable campaigns. Instead of focusing solely on static output, intelligent marketing services connect print to digital — using audience data to tailor messaging, adjust creative, and track response across multiple touchpoints, from direct mail to email to web activity.

This represents a significant business model transformation. This evolution moves print providers from job-based vendors to strategic marketing partners. Instead of selling output, they sell outcomes: customer acquisition, retention, and measurable response. That unlocks recurring, programmatic revenue and strengthens client relationships.

Forward-looking companies are expanding their capabilities to support this evolution by adding:

- Marketing strategy and consulting
- Data modeling and analytics
- Digital channel integration
- Creative and content development

- Campaign tracking and attribution

Some providers are even building in-house agency teams or acquiring marketing agencies to deliver full-service, integrated solutions.

Why does this matter now? Because 2026 pressures every channel to prove its value — and print can do that when it becomes part of an intelligent, data-driven marketing ecosystem. Brands want personalization, accountability, speed, and omnichannel coordination. Intelligent marketing services meet those expectations and create recurring, programmatic revenue instead of one-off jobs. In 2026, print's value increasingly comes from intelligence layered on top of production capabilities.

The Future Belongs to the Fast Movers

Across every Alliance Insights report and executive interview, the same message echoes: 2026 favors firms willing to move beyond incremental changes toward more integrated transformation.

Commercial printers that weave together automation, AI, inkjet, cloud ecosystems, data intelligence, security, and value-driven marketing services will lead the industry into its next era.

Those who wait risk falling increasingly behind.

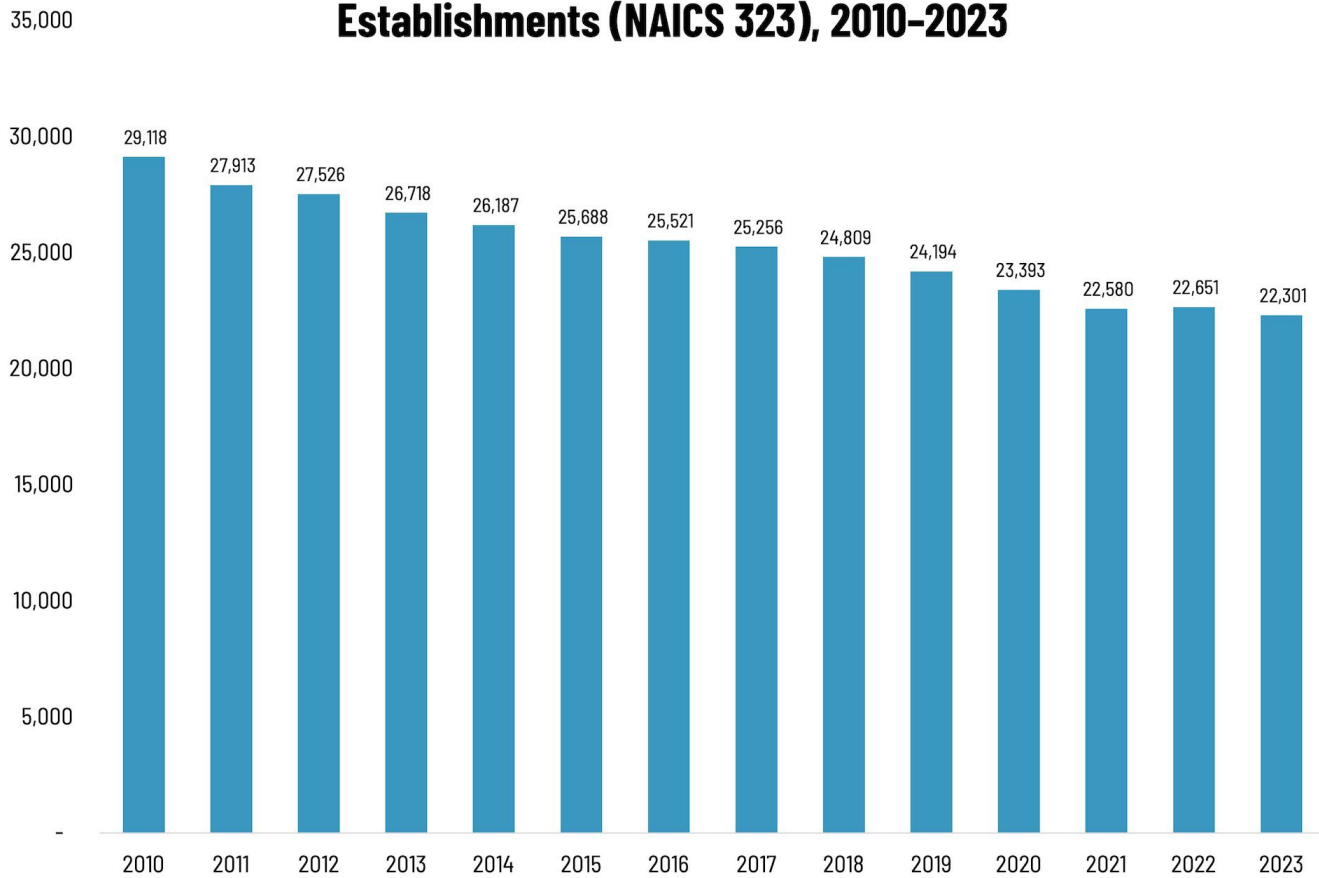
What They Think – March 13

Printing Establishments—2010–2023

According to the latest edition of County Business Patterns, in 2023 there were 22,301 establishments in NAICS 323 (Printing and Related Support Activities). This represents a decline of 23% since 2010. In macro news, inflation is still reasonably under control...for now.

Friday, March 13, 2026

**US Printing and Related Support Activities
 Establishments (NAICS 323), 2010–2023**

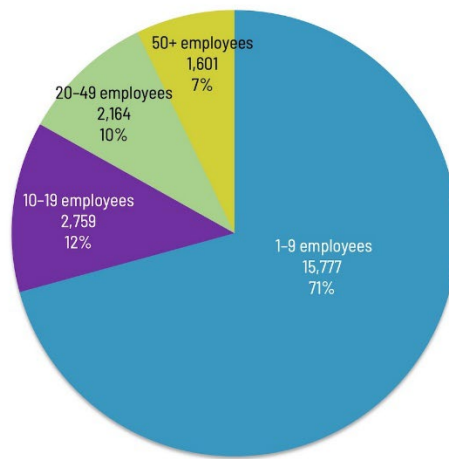


As 2023 began, there were 22,301 establishments in NAICS 323 (Printing and Related Support Activities), which represents a decline of 23% since 2010. From 2010 to 2011, establishments declined by 4%, thanks to the Great Recession, and from 2014 to 2015, the decline was only 2%; and from 2016 to 2017, the decline was 1%. Consolidation picked up toward the end of the decade, with establishments declining 6% from 2018 to 2020. And then the pandemic hit, although the impact was not as bad as we had been expecting. As we remarked in our *Printing Outlook 2023* report, based on our Fall 2022 survey, 2022 was the “back in the black” year for the industry, with print buyers racing to replenish the printed materials they had cut back on during the pandemic year(s). However, the slight

decline in 2023 represents the challenges the industry has faced since the post-pandemic peak year, which have only gotten worse.

Small shops (1 to 9 employees) still comprise the bulk of the industry, accounting for 71% of all establishments. The largest shops account for only 7% of industry establishments with mid-size shops accounting for 22% of establishments. These percentages have not varied substantially since at least as far back as 2010.

Number of Printing and Related Support Activities Establishments (NAICS 323), 2023



These counts are based on data from the Census Bureau’s *County Business Patterns*. In the months ahead, we will be updating these data series with the latest *CBP* figures. *County Business Patterns* includes other data, such as number of employees, payroll, etc. These counts are broken down by commercial printing business classification (based on NAICS, the North American Industrial Classification System):

- 32311 (Printing)
- 323111 (Commercial Printing, except Screen and Books)
- 323113 (Commercial Screen Printing)
- 323117 (Books Printing)
- 32312 (Support Activities for Printing—aka prepress and postpress services)

These data, and the overarching year-to-year trends, like other demographic data, can be used not only for business planning and forecasting, but also sales and marketing resource allocation.

The Wall Street Journal – March 11

AI Isn't Lightning Workloads. It's Making Them More Intense.

The technology is increasing the speed, density and complexity of work rather than reducing it, new analysis shows

By [Ray A. Smith](#)

March 11, 2026 10:00 am ET



AI use among workers may boost productivity but could also lead to cognitive overload and burnout. Getty Images

One of the great hopes for artificial intelligence—at least, among workers—is that it will ease workloads, freeing people up for more high-level, creative pursuits. So far, the opposite is happening, new data show.

In fact, AI is increasing the speed, density and complexity of work rather than reducing it, according to an analysis of 164,000 workers' digital work activity. The data, from workforce analytics and

productivity-tracking software company ActivTrak, covers more than 443 million hours of work across 1,111 employers, making it one of the biggest studies of AI's effects on work habits to date.

Examining AI users' digital activity 180 days before and after they began using such tools on the job, ActivTrak found [AI intensified activity](#) across nearly every category: The time they spent on email, messaging and chat apps more than doubled, while their use of business-management tools, such as human-resources or accounting software, rose 94%.

Meanwhile, the amount of time AI users devoted to focused, uninterrupted work—the kind of concentration often required for figuring out complex problems, writing formulas, creating and strategizing—fell 9%, compared with nearly no change for nonusers.

“It's not that AI doesn't create efficiency,” said Gabriela Mauch, ActivTrak's chief customer officer and head of its productivity lab. “It's that the capacity it frees up immediately gets repurposed into doing other work, and that's where the creep is likely to happen.”

Such habits aren't exactly what AI evangelists have predicted. A number of tech and business leaders, from Bill Gates to [JPMorgan Chase's](#) Jamie Dimon have suggested that AI could ultimately lead people to work less, not more, and result in a shorter workweek. Elon Musk has said that, within 20 years, advancements in AI and robots could even [make work optional](#).

Yet, evidence so far suggests that many AI adopters aren't using the technology's efficiencies to give themselves a break.

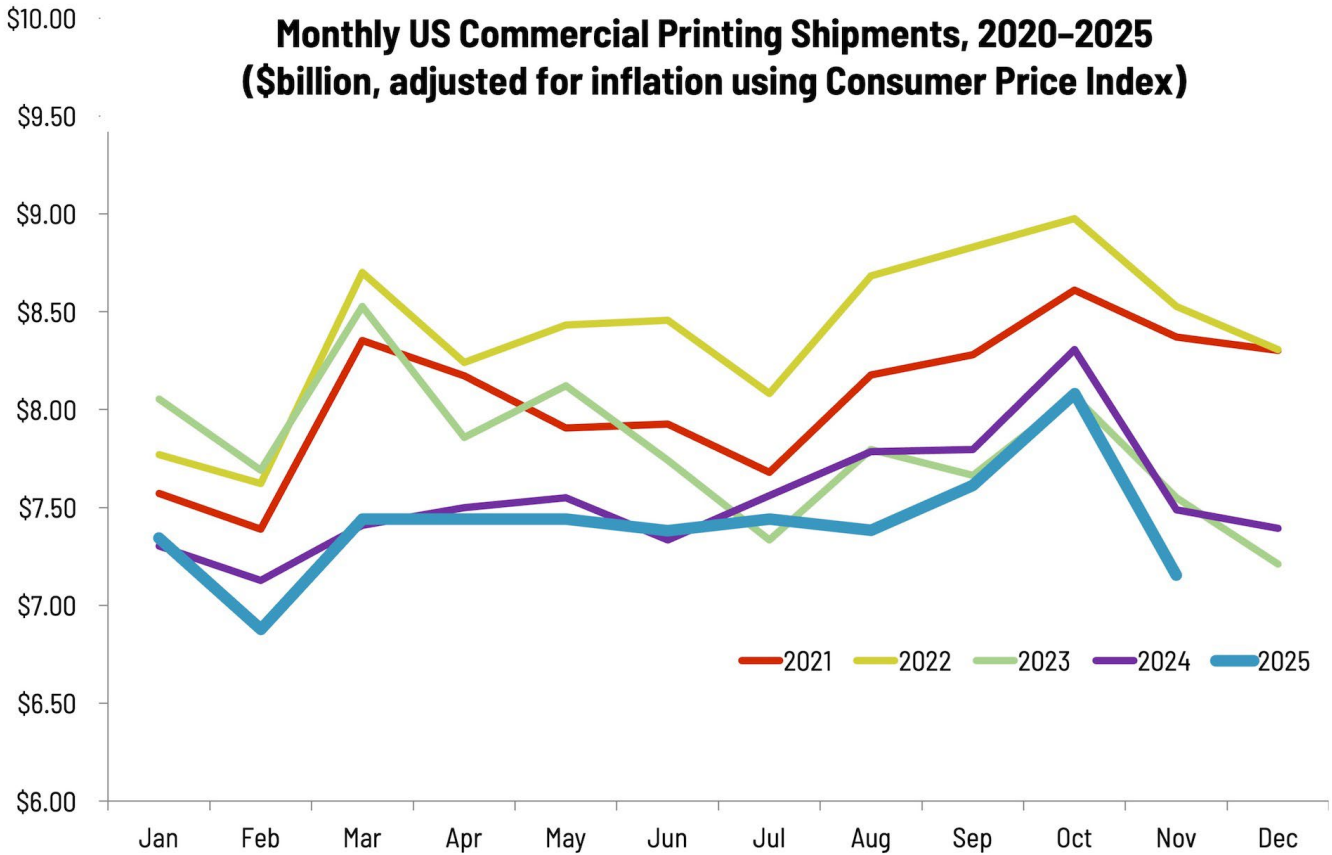
Dean Halonen, co-founder and chief revenue officer of software startup Steelhead Technologies, said he has experienced the work-creep first hand. Deploying AI has let his company automate a lot of administrative tasks and made its software developers more efficient at writing code, he said.

“But what we're finding is, the work that is out there, it seems unbounded,” he said. “It's like the appetite is always to do more, not to, like, go home at noon.”

What They Think – March 6

November Printing Shipments Were Nothing to Be Thankful For

November 2025 shipments came in at \$7.15 billion, a precipitous drop from October’s \$8.08 billion.
 Friday, March 06, 2026



Yowza! What goes up, must come down, we guess. After ramping up to a pretty impressive high in October, printing shipments crashed and burned in November, coming in at \$7.15 billion, down from October’s \$8.08 billion. A healthy (or unhealthy) chunk of this is the seasonal slowdown as we headed into the holidays. Most of 2025 certainly had its challenges macroeconomically: the tariffopalooza did not help matters (although that had kind of stabilized in the late fall, although the next few months will see the uncertainty increase again), and the employment situation had been (and continues to be) a little concerning, but seems OK. Most of 2025 was not too far off 2024, at least up to the fall, and even November’s precipitous drop parallels November 2024’s drop. Still, it did beat out February 2025 as the single worst month for printing shipments in at least the past five years, but probably ever. But as we all know, shipments are only half of the story; profitability is the other half, and as costs for just about everything continue to rise (if you have checked your utility bill recently you may have been in for a shock), printers can only pass so much of that onto customers, which means that despite how

much shipments (aka revenues) rise, profitability may remain flat, or even decline—and when revenues decline, that makes it even more of a problem.

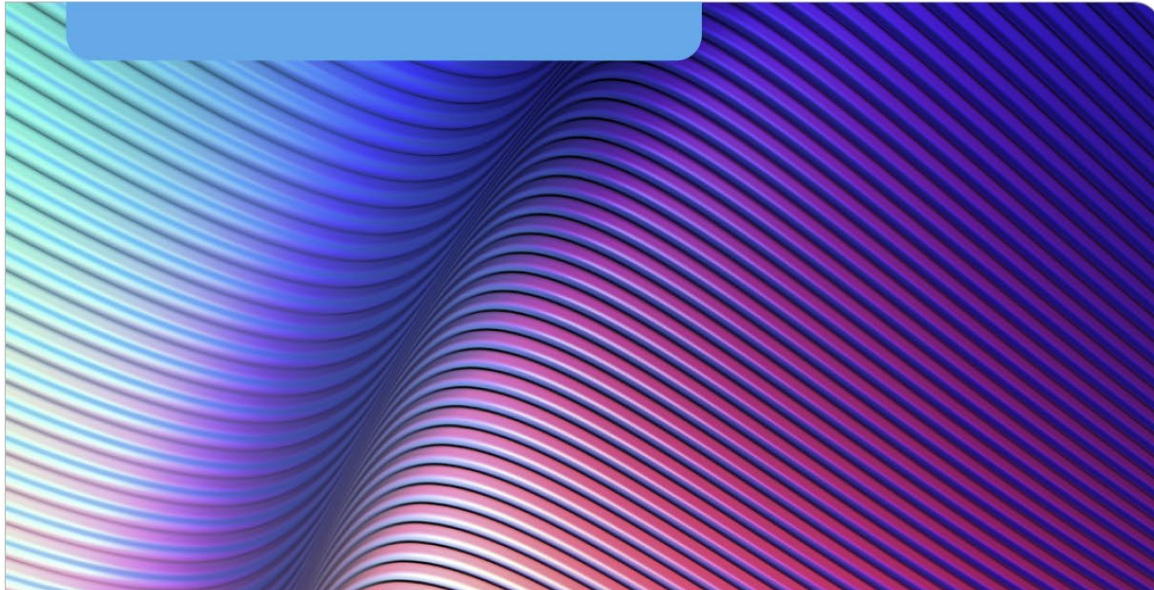
Year-to-date (January to November) shipments for 2025 are at \$81.60 billion, far below last year's \$83.16 billion. So unless we have a truly spectacular December, total shipments for 2025 will be less than those for 2024 or any other year—and, yes, even the COVID year.

We just closed our 2025 Printing Outlook survey so once we go through the results, we'll have a better idea of what's been going on—and what we can expect to go on for the remainder of 2026.

In-plant Impressions – March 6

Defining In-plant Success Strategies

Full report attached.

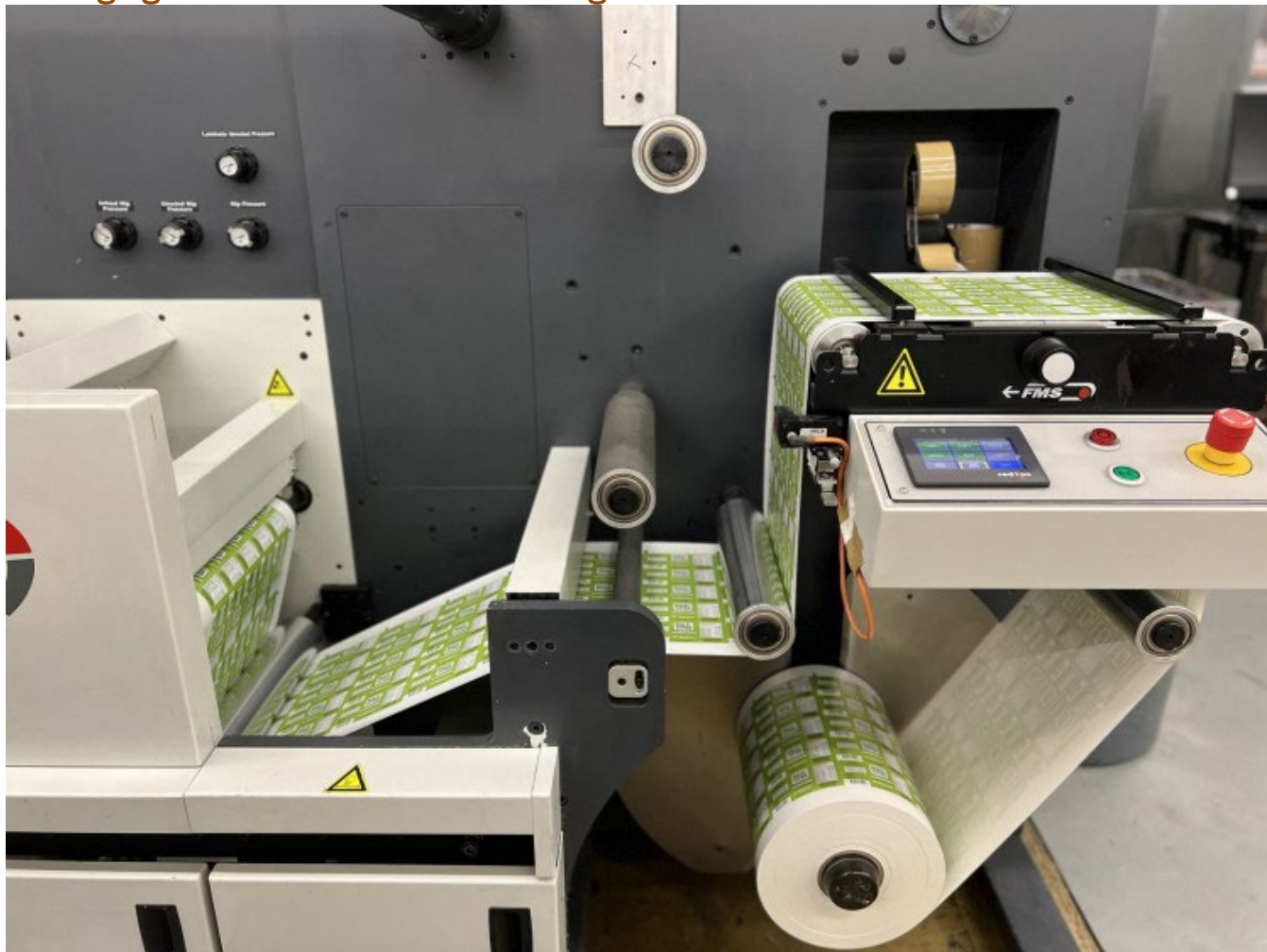


**Defining In-plant
Success Strategies for
Demonstrating Value**



Printing Impressions – March 5

Packaging Outlook 2026: Trends Driving Tomorrow's Growth



Label and packaging providers are increasingly required to meet brand demand for short runs and quick lead times. | Credit: Meyers



By [Kalie VanDewater](#)

As 2025 comes to a close, it's once again time to refine plans for business growth in the coming year. To do that, it's crucial to have insight into what's happening in the market — on every side of the equation.

For those interested in growing via convergence into the packaging and labels market — or for those already in that segment — read on for insights into what to expect in 2026.

Sustainability Reigns Supreme

For Ryan Bennett, product manager at Minneapolis-based Meyers, a PRINTING United Alliance member company, sustainability is something customers are looking for.

“It used to be, you stood out if you were a sustainability leader, but now it’s kind of the starting point,” Bennett says. “You have to start there and then innovate.”

Meyers has lived up to this by using 100% carbon-free electricity, installing solar panels, committing to a “zero landfill” strategy to divert waste away from landfills, and using eco-friendly products like recycled paperboard and water-based glues, inks, and coatings.



Sustainability is a focus at Meyers, which has committed to 100% carbon-free electricity, a “zero landfill” strategy to divert waste away from landfills, and eco-friendly products. | Credit: Meyers Bennett says the brands turning to sustainable packaging options most are in the health, beauty, life sciences, and food markets; these brands have increasingly moved toward paperboard and packaging made from recycled materials.

However, data from the “Digital Packaging: Maximizing Innovation and Impact” report from Alliance Insights, PRINTING United Alliance’s research arm, show that recyclability of a package is only part of

the sustainability puzzle for brand owners. In 2024, 60% of brands ranked recyclability as their top packaging sustainability demand; in 2025, that percentage dropped to 42%.

The other sustainability attributes taking priority include lightweighting and rightsizing — which are on 37% of brand owners' radars — followed by reusability (34%) and reduction of packaging material waste (30%).

What's driving brands' need for sustainable packaging solutions? Cory Francer, analyst at Alliance Insights, says the push is often coming from external sources.

"I think that's because they're feeling a lot of pressure, not just from their customers being consumers that want recyclability, but that want to feel like they are supporting a sustainable product, sustainable package," Francer says. "There's also now all of this legislative and regulatory stuff that they have to contend with. We're seeing EPR laws passed in seven states now, and 12 have it on the table."

And while sustainability demands are certainly on the rise, Clayton Stormer, national sales manager at Dallas-based Abbott Label, says there's one thing that's giving interested brands pause.

"Some of these larger brands — it sounds really good out of the gate, but when you finally start talking cents and dollars, it almost leads them to go back to [substrates and materials] they've been using in the past," Stormer says.

A Need for Speed

Another trend shaping the packaging and label industry going into 2026 is the demand for shorter runs and quicker lead times. Bennett says more and more brands are adopting this mindset.

"Industry standard for the printing industry is usually three weeks from PO, and people are doing anything to push that just to get to market quicker," he says. "There's a ton of stuff that drives that." For instance, Bennett explains that many of those brands are pursuing quick turns because their competitors are going to market quickly.

To help keep up with these sorts of demands, Meyers is investing in detection systems to ensure quality and cut makeready time, as well as new digital systems.

"We're upgrading our digital systems — that's both sheetfed and flexo — where, again, that's less waste, shorter runs; we can be a lot more agile with that kind of stuff on how we run things," Bennett says.



Abbott Label, a Dallas, Texas-based wholesale label manufacturer, offers a variety of capabilities, including digital label printing and packaging, and flexo-printed labels and tabs. | Credit: Abbott Label Other innovations being helped along by the demand for quick turns and short runs are artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, which are gaining traction across the industry. While the results of the “Digital Packaging: Maximizing Innovation and Impact” report indicate that 53% of converters are using mostly manual production processes with some automation, Francer is starting to see more AI applications.

Those that currently use AI are implementing it for content generation, PR, marketing, and some sales, says Francer, who adds that's comparable to last year's data. When asked where they aren't currently using AI but have interest in the future, he says respondents indicated general interest across the board.

These areas of interest include production, customer service, HR and hiring, IT, distribution, and shipping.

“AI is definitely on the forefront and something you’ve got to stay on top of and be aware of to keep up with your competition,” John Abbott, president of Abbott Label, notes.

Managing the Supply Chain

The supply chain has made headlines this year, with tariffs being threatened, levied, and reduced seemingly at random throughout 2025. But supply chain has been top of mind for converters for longer.

“Ever since 2020, it seems like everything is very volatile — everything — from cost of stock to timelines,” Bennett says.

To address what is within the company’s control, Meyers maintains good partnerships with its suppliers and uses the more common types of stock.

Abbott also sees vendor relationships as a crucial part of his supply chain management strategy. “I think working with quality vendors, holding those vendors accountable for what your expectations are, leads you to the results,” Abbott says. “And that’s what everything is about: results.”

While Meyers has yet to feel the full impact of tariffs, Bennett expects that to change in 2026, especially when it comes to plates and substrates.

“I know a lot of companies built their stock up figuring it was coming, so now that everyone’s kind of bleeding through that, I think we’re going to start to maybe see a little bit more of that [impact],” he says.

And Bennett recognizes that Meyers is essentially part of the supply chain for its own customers, who want frequent updates about their orders, from job placement to shipping.

“We manufacture cartons that then go to a customer that’ll put a bottle into it,” Bennett says. “Well, they’ve got to have all that stuff procured and in their facility before they can go to the line, so there’s a lot of stuff that goes into this, and we’re just one part of it. The transparency on when you’re getting your stuff, where it is in the manufacturing process, is key nowadays.”

Stormer adds that this is largely being driven by the “Amazon effect.”

“People [want] information quicker, faster,” he says. “And we’ve just recently made a significant decision to partner with CERM on our ERP side of things, which we feel is going to allow us the opportunity to give our customers information quicker, it’s going to allow a lot of our customer base to integrate EDIs [electronic data interchange] and portals in which they’ll have access to what’s transpiring on our end without having to actually reach out to someone. I think it will just allow for information at people’s fingertips a little bit better.”



Meyers explains there is a push for RFID tags to “do more,” including to serve security and inventory purposes. | Credit: Meyers

Radio frequency identification (RFID) integration can also help with this transparency, Bennett says. “There’s a lot of push for RFID tags and stuff like that where it’s not just packaging that holds product — it does more,” Bennett says. “It can do security; you could just go up and scan the skid and you know how many cartons are in it.”

But this technology can do more than order tracking. RFID is now being incorporated into packaging for inventory purposes, theft reduction, and consumer engagement. Abbott points out that Walmart is taking the lead on this front, with the retailer recently deciding to integrate RFID in its produce section. This uptick has been great for Abbott Label’s RFID business.

“With us, the RFID side of things is growing and booming,” Abbott says. “We opened up an RFID plant in Nashville and we just finished our 13th month, and we’re having great success with it.”

Preparing for What’s to Come

Looking forward, the biggest concern on Bennett’s mind is labor.

“The one thing that we do see that is a challenge — not even next year, but going into the next decade — is the aging workforce,” he says. “The workforce for printing seems to be getting older and older.” He’s not alone in this worry.

“When thinking about [converters’] challenges, what isn’t new is that they are reporting staffing shortages as a top challenge and workforce development as a top challenge,” Francer says.

According to “Digital Packaging: Maximizing Innovation and Impact,” 37% of converters cited staffing shortages as a significant challenge, and 32% said it was a moderate challenge. Similarly, workforce development was a significant challenge for 27% and a moderate challenge for 41%.

Francer says converters are turning to technologies that can speed production times — such as digital equipment, automation, and AI — to help address these issues.

On the whole, though, Bennett sees the packaging industry as a growing one. Francer agrees, noting that it’s a great option for commercial printers looking for a new avenue of growth.

“If I’m a commercial printer and I’m looking to expand or diversify into a stable print segment or a print segment where there is demand and projected growth, labels and packaging checks those boxes,” Francer says.

Wide-format Impressions – March 3

Big Jobs 2025

A look at interesting jobs in the marketplace – full report attached.



Credit: Carisma Large Format Printing Ltd.

BIG JOBS 2025

CELEBRATING SOME OF THE BIGGEST, BEST, MOST CREATIVE, MOST UNUSUAL, MOST COMPLICATED, OR JUST PLAIN FAVORITE WIDE-FORMAT JOBS OF THE YEAR.

BY TONI MCQUILKEN

Wide-format Impressions

Printing Impressions – March 2, 2026

New Study Finds Convergence Across Print Segments is Delivering Revenue and Profits



By [Lisa Cross](#)

The following article was originally published by [Wide-format Impressions](#). To read more of their content, subscribe to their newsletter, [Wide-Format Impressions](#).

Market segment migration, often referred to as convergence, has moved beyond an emerging trend to become a defining characteristic of today's print industry. Commercial printers, graphics providers, packaging and label producers, apparel decorators, promotional product suppliers, and in-plant operations are increasingly expanding into adjacent print segments to better meet customer demand and capture new growth opportunities.

Alliance Insights has tracked convergence for nearly a decade through a series of ongoing research studies. To better understand the financial and strategic impact of this expansion, Alliance Insights conducted its third study on convergence, examining how and why print organizations are operating across multiple segments and what results they are achieving.

The initial study identified early indications that print providers were beginning to move beyond traditional market boundaries. The second study documented the acceleration of this shift, confirming

market segment migration as a deliberate and increasingly widespread strategy. This current study, titled [Profiting Through Convergence](#) examines how and why convergence has evolved from an opportunistic growth tactic into a strategic imperative.

Convergence Has Become the Norm and Delivering Gains

The survey found that 96% of print providers operate across multiple print segments, serving an average of three additional segments beyond their primary business.

This migration trend underscores a structural shift: print businesses are no longer defined by a single specialization but by how broadly and effectively they can serve customer needs.

Survey respondents reported that convergence is paying off. On average, respondents reported that moving into a new print segment resulted in a 16.7% increase in revenue and an 11.1% increase in profitability. The study includes a table detailing gains in revenue and profitability by print segment. In addition, survey results indicate that expanding into adjacent print segments is delivering tangible, organization-wide benefits. Respondents reported measurable improvements across revenue diversification, growth, competitiveness, customer relationships, and financial performance, including:

- 96% report revenue diversification, reducing exposure to volatility in any single print segment.
- 94% cite new growth opportunities, enabling expansion into adjacent and higher-value applications.
- 93% report enhanced competitive positioning, driven by broader service offerings and greater differentiation.
- 93% report stronger customer relationships, as expanded capabilities increase wallet share and customer loyalty.

Customer Expectations Are Driving the Shift

At the heart of convergence is the customer. More than nine in ten respondents say buyers increasingly expect a one-stop print provider capable of handling multiple applications. Rather than managing multiple vendors, customers want simplicity, consistency, and accountability. Providers that expand into adjacent segments are capturing more share of wallet, deepening relationships, and reducing the risk of being displaced by competitors offering broader solutions.

Execution Matters More Than the Segment

While results are strong overall, the research also highlights that success is not automatic. Profitability depends less on which segment is entered and more on how expansion is executed.

Providers that achieved the strongest outcomes shared several common traits:

- Expansion was customer-led, based on validated demand.
- Investments extended beyond equipment to include sales enablement, training, and workflow integration.
- Sales and marketing teams were prepared to actively promote and cross-sell new capabilities.
- Outsourcing and partnerships were used strategically to reduce early risk.

Conversely, challenges such as learning curves, staffing gaps, pricing pressure, and operational complexity were most pronounced when organizational readiness was underestimated.

In-Plants Are Seeing Parallel Benefits

The study also finds that convergence is reshaping in-house printing operations. Eighty-four percent of in-plants have expanded into additional applications, most commonly graphics, mailing, and promotional products.

For in-plants, convergence has increased internal production volumes, reduced outsourcing spend, and strengthened their strategic value within parent organizations, helping reposition in-plants as business partners rather than cost centers.

A Defining Strategy for the Future of Print

The takeaway from [Profiting Through Convergence](#) is clear: convergence is no longer a trend; it's a defining characteristic of successful print businesses.

As customer expectations continue to rise and competitive pressure intensifies, providers that deliberately expand into adjacent print segments, invest in organizational readiness, and execute with discipline are positioning themselves for stronger revenue growth, improved profitability, and greater long-term resilience. Download the full Profiting Through Convergence study to explore detailed data, segment-level performance insights, and practical guidance for expanding your print business into new print segments.