

Strategic Shifts Transforming the Business of Print

Prepared for: Commercial Print Company Owners and Senior Leaders

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Overview: A Landscape of Unprecedented Opportunity

The commercial printing industry is undergoing its most significant transformation since the advent of digital workflows. While macroeconomic pressures persist, the prevailing narrative for 2026 is one of profound strategic opportunity. Print businesses are no longer defined by a single specialization. Instead, the most successful firms are those that proactively embrace convergence, automation, and artificial intelligence to capture new revenue streams and build resilient, multi-segment operations.

*96% of print providers now operate across multiple segments—
reporting an average revenue increase of 16.7% and an 11.1%
boost in profitability when expanding into adjacent markets.*

For commercial printers, capitalizing on this momentum requires intentional investment across seven core strategic pillars.

Seven Strategic Pillars for 2026

1. Connected Automation as a Competitive Advantage

Automation has evolved from isolated upgrades to a holistic, end-to-end strategic differentiator. While automating individual tasks yields incremental benefits, true efficiency is unlocked when the entire workflow is seamlessly integrated. Finishing automation has emerged as the top capital investment priority, eliminating historical bottlenecks and enabling faster, more predictable production cycles.

2. AI Moves from Buzzword to Business Tool

Artificial intelligence has crossed the threshold into operational necessity. Currently, 85% of printers view AI as critical to maintaining competitiveness, utilizing it for rapid estimating, predictive maintenance, and automated scheduling. However, AI adoption also intensifies work density; users report increased time spent on communication and business management tools. Firms must strategically deploy AI to enhance capacity rather than merely accelerating administrative tasks.

3. Workforce Redesign and Culture Change

With 72% of printers struggling to hire production staff and 83% citing rising labor costs, the industry faces a structural labor challenge. Leading companies are responding not just by recruiting harder, but by redesigning the work itself. By leveraging digital printing and automation, firms are creating cleaner, tech-enabled environments that attract younger talent, support cross-training, and shift roles toward problem-solving and system management.

4. Private Equity Elevates Operational Discipline

The increasing influence of private equity (PE) is raising the competitive bar across the industry. PE-backed firms introduce rigorous financial discipline, data-driven investment models, and aggressive modernization strategies. To remain competitive, independent commercial printers must adopt comparable levels of operational rigor, capital planning, and strategic growth frameworks—regardless of their funding structure.

KEY INSIGHT: Convergence Is No Longer a Differentiator—It's the Baseline.

With 93% of providers already serving multiple segments, the question for print business owners is no longer whether to diversify, but how quickly and strategically they can expand. Success in convergence is customer-led, requiring investments in sales enablement and workflow integration alongside any new equipment purchases.

5. Convergence: Boundaries Fall, Growth Follows

Convergence is now the standard business model. Customers increasingly demand integrated solutions from a single partner capable of spanning commercial print, packaging, signage, and direct mail. With 93% of providers already serving multiple segments, diversification is no longer optional. Success in convergence is customer-led, requiring investments in sales enablement and workflow integration alongside new equipment.

6. Production Inkjet Gains Strategic Momentum

Production inkjet has transitioned from an auxiliary technology to the backbone of next-generation workflows. Printers utilizing inkjet report a 10% decrease in production waste and a 9.4% increase in profitability. Driven by the demand for short runs, fast turnarounds, and variable data, 57% of planned adopters aim to migrate offset volume to inkjet. This shift enables expanded revenue models in direct mail and personalized marketing collateral.

Inkjet adopters report a 10% reduction in production waste and a 9.4% increase in profitability—making it the single highest-ROI technology investment of 2026.

7. Intelligent Marketing Services Create New Pathways

To secure recurring, programmatic revenue, commercial printers are evolving from job-based vendors to strategic marketing partners. By layering data analytics, digital channel integration, and campaign

tracking over traditional print capabilities, firms can offer intelligent marketing services. This transition allows printers to sell measurable outcomes—such as customer acquisition and retention—rather than just static output, proving print's value within an omnichannel ecosystem.

Conclusion

The future of commercial printing belongs to the fast movers. While the industry faces undeniable headwinds—evidenced by a 23% decline in printing establishments since 2010 and volatile shipment volumes—the path forward is clear. Firms that weave together connected automation, AI, inkjet technology, and value-driven marketing services will not only protect their margins but will lead the industry into its next era of growth and profitability.

Key Performance Metrics at a Glance

Metric	Value	Significance
Revenue increase from multi-segment expansion	+16.7%	Core justification for convergence investment
Profitability gain from adjacent market entry	+11.1%	Validates diversification as margin strategy
Printers viewing AI as operationally critical	85%	Signals AI adoption as competitive threshold
Print firms struggling to hire production staff	72%	Accelerates workforce redesign initiatives
Printing establishments lost since 2010	-23%	Underscores urgency for differentiation
Production waste reduction with inkjet	-10%	Demonstrates inkjet efficiency ROI
Profitability lift for inkjet adopters	+9.4%	Supports capital investment in inkjet platforms
Planned adopters targeting offset-to-inkjet migration	57%	Forecasts significant workflow transformation
Providers already operating across multiple segments	93%	Confirms convergence as the industry standard

References

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