

Web-Enabled Variable Data Print What a Combination!

By Frank McPherson

The marketing world commonly believes that Internet growth comes at the expense of traditional print, but this isn't always the case. When it comes to the development of new applications for Variable Data Printing (1:1 marketing), the Internet is one of the greatest *drivers* of these applications, giving them new power and flexibility, and bringing them to new users.

The core of Web-based VDP applications, including the basic template, branding, and assets, such as images and text, is controlled by the corporate headquarters. Affiliate users, such as branch offices, franchises, dealerships, and distributors, can then use their Internet access to create customized, personalized, or 1:1 documents for their individual client bases. This allows the company to take advantage of these local relationships, while maintaining strict brand control.

Let's look at three levels of complexity for Web-enabled VDP applications:

1. Versioned or customized direct mail pieces created at the point-of-sale or dealer level, designed to boost sales or drive traffic.
2. One-off, personalized sales pieces at the point of sale, designed to help close a sale.
3. Full variable data printing, driven from the corporate level to support local dealerships, franchises, and affiliates, designed to boost sales or drive traffic to those locations.

Versioned or Customized Direct Mail

The first level is really an Internet-enabled version of short-run customization. The corporate office sets up a selection of direct-mail templates that are customizable within limits set by the headquarters.

Say it is a postcard mailer for a farm equipment manufacturer. The basic layout, colors, and corporate logos are set. But local dealerships can select from a list of available tractors, combines, backhoes, and other farm equipment their customers would be most interested in. The software populates the postcard with the appropriate images and text from a pre-approved library, and creates a customized mailer. Dealers can also upload their photos, local address, maps, and other information so that the mailers appear to be coming from their local dealerships rather than the corporate office. Dealers can even upload their own or a purchased mailing list so that the postcards can be printed and mailed directly from the printer.

One-Off, Personalized Sales Pieces

The second level of Web-enabled VDP is one-off personalization of brochures and other marketing materials that can be created at dealerships, customer call centers, and similar locations. The corporate headquarters sets up a template, which can be used to create 100% personalized follow-up mailers.

These applications are particularly popular with car dealerships. After the salesman shows a car to a prospect, for example, he'll go onto the Web site and populate a form with the prospect's name, address, and the make, model, and options of the car they test drove. At the end of the day, the dealership downloads all of the documents to the printer, which prints and mails them the next day. Within 48 hours, the prospect receives a personalized brochure, with the pictures and details of the car, along with directions back to the dealership and a personal incentive from their salesman.

While these Web-enabled VDP applications are powerful communications tools on their own, their ability to increase response rates is lifted further when they are used in conjunction with other media, such as television. For example, one company in the financial sector is using this technology to create follow-up mailers based on phone responses to their television ads. Once the customer service rep gathers the information, they send the database to the printer, who populates the form; and the next day, the mailers go out. The follow-up is immediate and gets to the prospect while their interest is still fresh.

These are powerful personalization and 1:1 personalization applications that, by virtue of the Web, are putting highly effective tools in the hands of those who otherwise would not have access to them, even down to the point of purchase.

Full Variable Data Printing

One of the more sophisticated applications of variable data printing using the Web is printing totally personalized documents on the fly using rules-driven software. This is not an off-the-shelf application and requires proprietary software development, an extensive digital asset library, and intensive project management to be successful.

Say an auto manufacturer wants to help its dealerships increase their routine auto maintenance revenues. It can create a template for a mailer to customers who recently purchased a vehicle, then set up rules based on information in the local dealership's database, such as which customers own which models of cars, when they purchased them, and with what options. When individual dealerships upload their databases through the Web site, the mailers are automatically populated with the correct images and text, inviting car owners to come back to the dealership for the appropriate tune-up, based on the age and model of their car.

Say that John recently purchased blue Hybrid from the hypothetical auto maker Toyonda. John might receive a mailing with a picture of his make and model of car, with text that reads, "Hi, John. Your Toyonda Hybrid is six months old and is due for a routine tune-up. Did you know that if you get regularly scheduled tune-ups, you can improve your car's performance, gas mileage, and extend the life of the car? If you come in within the next two weeks, we'll give you a 10% discount."

Working with full 1:1 versioning gives marketers another benefit, as well. They can utilize the benefits of personalized URLs, which are unique URLs created for every recipient to drive them to their own, personalized Web pages. There, their activities can be monitored and tracked by the marketer. This is a particularly powerful tool for companies like online catalogers, for whom the Internet is a key sales channel.

Although these three applications are appropriate for different types of companies and marketing situations, the common thread is their ability to take advantage of their relationships local dealers, franchises, and other locations have with customers. The sophistication is in the initial design and development, but at the local level, these applications take very little expertise to use. As a result, they decentralize VDP and its benefits, and send them into the hands of those who can use it the most.