

Don't be too Certain About Print's Future

I have been reading many written views by pundits about how print will survive because it's something you can touch and feel: that it gives the reader a sense of interaction with the words and a feeling of control. All of which is true.

They also say printed products do things online products cannot. You can clip a coupon from a magazine: although you can also clip coupons online, you still have to print them out...for now.

I'm speaking of general commercial printing. Package printing, wide format and certain types of print, such as thermography, foil printing are products e-print can't really replace.

Still, things are changing and they are changing rapidly. Kids are much more comfortable reading from a screen than most adults. Older folks (like me) still print out long documents because we want to hold them in our hands and underline things with a highlighter.

Electronic media delivery is developing rapidly, and if we think print will forever allow people to "do things you can't do electronically," think again. iPhone apps are a perfect example of using new media to do things that are intuitive, interactive and involve touch and feel: just like print only different - and in some ways better.

I just came back from attending a meeting where 50 people spent three days grading church ordination papers. Nearly everyone had a laptop. We used a Word template to make the comments on the papers.

Even this ancient forms of human interaction - between student and teacher -is entering the 21st century. In all likelihood, next year's exam readers will be required to bring a laptop, and students will submit their exams electronically. The goal is to do it all online. Testing. Scoring. Everything. It will save the church tens of thousands of dollars in ink, paper, administration, printing, and the cost of mailing the physical exams all over the country.

For my last on-campus class, I ordered a book, but it didn't come in time. I found the e-book on Amazon for 99 cents, downloaded it to my iPhone, (A Kindle would have been much better). A book that's cheaper and can be obtained instantly has a big advantage over one that must be printed and shipped.

The electronic books of the very near future will be read on tablet computers that look and feel a lot like books, only will be able to do far more - like have color photos and videos, interactive note taking, underlining and annotating, searches and more. We should be concerned about the effect instant access to information will have on the ability to think creatively, but it is happening whatever the consequences. The clever ads Microsoft is playing about search engine overload syndrome strike a chord. We're become addicted to instant data gratification.

You will NEVER be able to get that gratification from print. Print turnaround has gotten very fast, but it can't be instantaneous.

Print providers need to augment online communications. Printers are not going out of business tomorrow because of the Internet, but they need to engage in and be responsive to electronic formats to remain viable.

At some point e-paper will bring truly instant delivery of any form of data that can be delivered by print today. It will be in a portable, and interactive (even "touchy-feely") and reusable form that will be much cheaper and more environmentally friendly than print on paper.

I don't think many people realize how quickly that is likely to happen. Technology will make the experience seem far better than print for the end user. People won't be concerned that e-print is not the same as print-on-paper as long as it is just as simple and convenient to use.

Print on paper won't disappear: it may never disappear completely. The continuing rise in demand for data is not likely to lessen, but the portion of that demand that will be filled by print-on-paper providers will.

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