

Web to Print: The Next Generation

**A White Paper by:
Cary Sherburne**

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Introduction

As the Internet began to gain steam in the late 1990s, software developers saw an opportunity to make it easier for businesses and consumers to order, and even design, printed materials. Thus, the web-to-print category of Internet software was born, and the field was littered with players during the dot-com boom. Few of those original entrants have survived, but many others have entered the market as the category has continued to evolve.

And the user requirements have also continued to evolve, especially as cloud-based solutions and mobile communications have become ubiquitous and bandwidth is more readily available. Consumers expect an Amazon- or Uber-like experience. They want to be able to do everything from their mobile devices, anytime, anywhere. They want to be able to seamlessly move back and forth between the mobile and desktop environments (if they are even using a desktop or laptop computer, that is!). And they want more robust capabilities – they want to be able to do more than just put their name on a business card.

At the same time, marketers view web to print as a means of providing marketing and other materials to their stakeholders, moving document creation closer to the point of use while still protecting brand integrity with templates that lock down certain portions of the content. It is a way to ensure higher quality of marketing and other materials while reducing overall administrative costs. And purveyors of web-to-print services are looking for the low cost, ease of use and robust functionality that will help them gain and retain customers in a highly competitive business environment.



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All of this has led to the next generation of web-to-print solutions entering the market. These are pure-play cloud solutions, developed from the ground up to operate in an open environment and to easily integrate with other applications. This allows developers to focus on their individual areas of expertise and users to leverage other modules to round out the total solution by picking and choosing the components that will make up a workflow that meets their needs with minimal internal software development required.

This white paper lays out the capabilities today's operators should be seeking as they move to Uber-ize their customer-facing applications. It cites the real-world experiences and results being achieved by industry leaders as they implement the next generation of web to print, and provides guidance for those seeking to do the same.

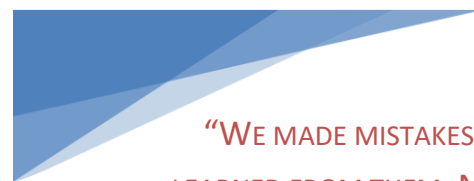
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Hello to Next-Gen Customer Service

The principals at Holland-based Helloprint have been involved with web to print for 15 years. After selling a company, they decided to found a new business. Helloprint was born, and it benefited from the lessons learned in the past. Today, Helloprint is one of the fastest growing ecommerce platforms in the Benelux with more than 130 employees. The company primarily serves small businesses, the SOHO market and does business with the trade. Print is produced through its network of more than 150 suppliers in eight countries.

“We made mistakes in the past and learned from them,” said Michael Heerkens, the company’s CTO. “Now we had the opportunity to build something from scratch, and that was exciting for us.”

Heerkens points out that its customer base is generally not that educated in terms of preparing an accurate print-ready file. “That’s why our HTML5-based system needed to automatically preflight every file that comes in,” he explained. “Customers can upload any file type, and we automatically convert that to a PDF. When preflight fails, we use our built-in online editor to attempt to fix the file. If we encounter file issues we cannot correct, the customer can come right in and fix the file themselves using our online editor. They can also do a final proof of the PDF, scaling file elements or moving things around until they have a proper file they are satisfied with. This process means we are only manually involved with a file if there is an exception; and we are able to deliver accurate, print-ready files to our suppliers that don’t require manual intervention on their part.” Although the company is relatively early in the implementation process, it has already increased the number of files that do not need manual intervention by 40%. “This is a huge win for us,” Heerkens states. “Every time we touch a file, it costs €40. We process about 3,000 orders per day with an average order size of about €100, so manual touches really eat into the profit margin.”



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Helloprint has more than 2,000 professionally designed templates that customers can choose from, and offers the ability for the customer to start with a blank canvas as well. The system is also integrated with Adobe’s Fotolia, allowing users to choose from millions of online photos as they are creating their designs. Within the system, users can also easily add their logos to promotional products such as T-shirts, pens, USB sticks, power banks and more. 3D viewing capability allows them to view products in 3D to ensure they are happy with the logo placement, make adjustments, proof and approve for production.

While Helloprint has been focused on smaller businesses, the cloud-based system it has developed is robust and scalable enough to support larger enterprises. The company is in the process of increasing the

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range of branded designs it offers larger customers. “These are closed, branded environments,” Heerkens said. “Authorized users of these enterprises visit a branded store, modify materials as allowed by the brand owner, and purchase materials without the need for a designer to be involved.”

Heerkens points out that for these companies, the previous process required a designer to be involved if any changes were made, along with all kinds of approval processes. “Now that can all be done online, in real time, and significantly reduces the administrative and design time requirements at the enterprise.”

One advantage Helloprint – and the other companies we spoke to in researching this white paper – has over its older competitors is that it was able to create a pure play cloud-based clean sheet design that is not dependent on legacy technologies. At the core of the system is an online editing solution that is built on XML and HTML5 with well-documented APIs that make it easy to integrate with other modules. “Building a cloud-based platform like the one Helloprint has implemented on top of a legacy system is not an ideal approach,” said Pat McGrew, Director of the Production Workflow Service at research firm InfoTrends and a long-time evangelist for digital workflows in the graphic arts industry. “We have seen many suppliers of legacy (i.e., client/server based) web-to-print and other workflow offerings try to move onto a cloud-based platform, and they are discovering that their legacy platforms, on which they are dependent, are killing them.”

In the Helloprint implementation, the company assembled a number of cloud-based components around the core online editing solution in order to avoid the legacy pitfall. This also allows them to choose best-in-class modules from a variety of suppliers to build the exact solution they need, rather than being required to use a more closed, turnkey system that might not meet all their needs and might be difficult to integrate.

“Helloprint chose CHILI publisher as its core online editing solution,” McGrew added. “As their past experience showed them, the user interface needs to be as easy for a small to mid-sized business to adopt as a larger enterprise. Since CHILI publisher was designed as a component, not a turnkey solution, the folks at CHILI publish have well-documented procedures for integrating with ecommerce platforms such as Magento as well as other components. They can provide guidance on what to do and what not to do that can make the implementation process smoother and the final product better than it might otherwise be. We’re in a state of the industry where there are not as many quality players as you would think there might be, in terms of suppliers. So doing a complete evaluation and lots of testing up front, before the buying decision is made, is critical.”

Lessons learned by Helloprint include:



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- Start with a clean-sheet design if at all possible.
- Choose an open platform, well-documented online editing solution that can integrate with a robust storefront and other workflow components.
- Make sure the final outcome will yield a platform that is easy to use for inexperienced users but robust enough to meet the needs of more experienced users.
- Ensure the final platform will be as automated as possible, taking touches out of the process and delivering accurate print-ready PDF files.
- Enable a 3D proofing process to make it easier for users to ensure they have specified their designs accurately. This is especially important when dealing with three-dimensional promotional products or products such as labels but can be useful to demonstrate binding, page layout and more.
- Leverage native, cloud-based components to keep costs in line while allowing the ability to scale as the business grows.
- Templates are a must – your web-to-print offering must be able to provide customers with high quality templates, but must also be able to give them the flexibility to create their own designs.
- Transparency is critical. There needs to be a mechanism for customers to easily enter the system, both to edit and/or correct files, anywhere during the process where this is required, and to check status of their order. This self-service model eliminates time and cost and makes it more convenient for both customer and printer.



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This is sage advice for companies that are new to web to print or are looking to upgrade an existing web-to-print platform.

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Data is King

As demand continues to grow for variable data and personalized products, the ability to easily incorporate data sources into the mix is critical. According to Claud Monro, Senior Vice President of Business Development at direct marketing agency SK+G, “While most marketers understand the value of multichannel communications, including print, the shortfall has been the ability to integrate print into a single system, eliminating siloes and streamlining campaign creation. That’s the problem we set out to address, and we wanted to do it with a completely cloud-based solution.”

SK+G is a full-service advertising agency that counts among its clients casinos and resorts, restaurants, hotels and entertainment businesses. It’s direct division, of which Monro is a part, has developed its own technology for a fully automated marketing platform that it white labels for its clients. The platform is also sold by Konica Minolta, a SK+G client and partner, under the name Konica Minolta EngageIT.

An SK+G campaign typically starts with a printed piece or email that drives the recipient to a personalized URL. Once the visitor completes the online form, a thank-you text or SMS message is sent, along with a follow-up email or postcard. Based on the actions the recipient takes, further automated triggered communications continue in a closed-loop process as reflected in the chart below.



“We believe we have the only automated marketing platform that creates a print-ready file in addition to digital communications using the same business rules for both,” Monro states. “It is connected to our clients’ data sources. Data is delivered to the platform based on rules that can automatically trigger campaigns. It eliminates the need for users to begin the process by manually uploading lists.”

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SK+G also partners with List Giant, a list provider that allows clients to segment data and augment their lists, automatically adding data to the marketing platform. The agency also partners with AccuZIP for a built-in presort capability, adding presort tray tags to the print-ready file, further automating prepress and the mailing process for its print suppliers. The system enables the use of the same business rules for print and digital communications; for example, selecting male or female images, seasonal or regional themes, etc.

Monro describes some typical campaigns the company conducts for clients in the casino business.

- **New member postcards.** As new members join a casino's players' club, they are tagged as new and the data is automatically fed into the new member campaign. On a periodic basis, the system automatically generates the entire campaign, with every communication being dynamically created within the system, including personalized images, for a truly one-to-one communication. The casino does nothing except tag the new member in the database.
- **Birthday greetings.** Another frequently used campaign sends birthday greetings. A filter is set to retrieve records whose birthday is seven days out. The campaign might be run at 10 AM every day, and pulls the data directly from the casino's database. The filter is then connected to whatever execution the business rules dictate – email or postcard. In the case of an email, the system returns a message indicating whether the email was successfully sent. If yes, it is connected to a landing page; if no, a postcard is automatically generated and sent. Once the campaign is built and approved the first time, it never needs to be touched again. It just runs daily.
- **Reminders to visit.** This can be emails or postcards. Rules are based on things like the last time the recipient visited the casino and what games were played. For example, if the visitor played blackjack, a blackjack image would be used. In addition, the distance of the recipient's home from the facility dictates the offers that will be included. If the recipient is more than 75 miles from the casino, a hotel and food & beverage offer will be included; less than 75 miles, food & beverage only. A campaign could also be generated for clients who have visited every month for the past two months, but then skip two months. "Because the entire process is automated," Monro said, "it doesn't matter if this is one postcard or 500. It can be done cost-effectively."



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A similar strategy is used for a marketing company that serves 300 high-end auto dealers. Direct mail pieces and emails are triggered off the same template and are dynamically created by the data. The auto brand at the top of the piece changes, as does the name and address of the dealer. The offer is based on

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the data, such as how long is left on the lease and the type of car. This campaign has 3,600 possible variations for each piece and is intensely data driven, even to the point of automatically generating a link on emails and postcards with directions from the recipient's house to the dealer. This client sends out about four million direct marketing pieces per month.

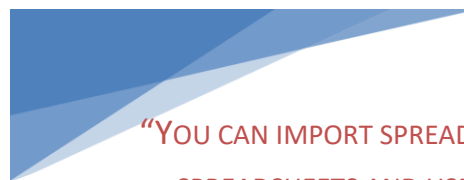
Templates are built using an online editor that is integrated into the overall system. "The biggest thing for us," Monro said, "is that we needed the same system to generate both email and postal mail. We needed to be able to create the template once, and just have it run automatically until something required a change. The only editor we could find that could 100% automate the postal mail part of the process was CHILI publisher, and its ability to use the same rules for direct mail that we build for emails was critical." Monro reports that set-up is easy, saying, "It is very turnkey. For small to mid-sized chains, we can have a campaign up and running next day."

The system is responsive as well. If someone visits a landing page and answers certain questions, the answers will determine the next direct mail piece that will be sent. Another attractive factor is the ability to import data in a variety of formats. "It's not limited to comma delimited files," added InfoTrends' McGrew. "You can import spreadsheets, Google spreadsheets and use connectors to connect into enterprise SQL and DB2 databases. This is a smarter, more modern approach to data."

"One thing we have learned," Monro commented, "is that marketing automation systems are typically purchased and then not used to their full capabilities. To mitigate that, we sell the platform along with strategic, creative and data services."

"As an agency, we realize the ROI on print is absolutely there and there are significant benefits to using both channels. But many of the companies we work with have a marketing department that does exactly the same thing every month: They pull a list and deploy a campaign. If they are doing both print and email, they repeat this for each channel. We wanted to automate the entire process. We built this platform around a three-dimensional database so we could do data calculations and automate everything to have the system automatically trigger campaigns. This frees up the marketing department to spend more time looking at results and to fine-tune future campaigns, as opposed to the same repetitive work every month deploying campaigns."

SK+G supports clients with a team that consists of an account manager, a creative person and a data specialist; this becomes an add-on to the client's marketing team. "One hotel client we have," Monro says, "runs 125 campaigns simultaneously. This would be physically impossible for a marketing team to do without this automation."



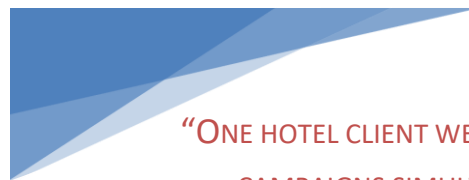
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Lessons learned by SK+G include:

- Integration with a variety of databases, internal and external, is critical.
- Templates and rules need to be created once and be available for use digitally or through the postal system.
- Avoiding the manual uploading of lists wherever possible adds to the effectiveness of the overall solution. Data should be ported to the system in real time to enable fast, responsive campaigns that are more likely to deliver results because of their timeliness.
- Providing services in conjunction with the marketing automation platform is recommended to ensure full use of the system.
- Once campaigns are designed, they must be deployed on an ongoing basis in a fully automated manner. This “one and done” approach allows for very short to very long runs in a cost-effective manner.



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Monro cites a Boston printer as an example of how this platform can be used by a commercial printing operation. “When we started working with Boston-based print-and-mail company Jet Mail Services,” he reported, “they told us they didn’t know the first thing about HTML and programming and data, but they knew their clients would love to have this solution. After 18 months on the platform, they are producing about six million individual transactions per month with a 30% margin. And it is driving print volume. They just added ten new digital presses!”

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Uber-izing Die-Cut Designs

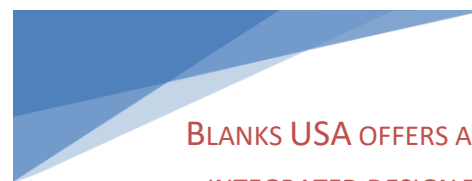
Blanks USA has taken the Uber-izing of web to print to a new level for the creation of die cut products such as door hangers, labels, boxes, cup sleeves, bottle hangers, tab dividers and more. The company offers more than 17,000 pre-built templates as well as the ability to begin with a blank canvas. Thirty years ago, Blanks USA began its life selling door hangers and raffle tickets. Today, the company has evolved into an industry-leading supplier of security paper and die cut paper products.

“There are a number of dynamics in the printing industry that have made it more difficult for printing companies to grow their businesses,” said Andy Ogren, Owner at Blanks USA. “One of those is the increasing quality and capability of office and workgroup printers, resulting in companies producing print in-house that might have gone to an outside printer in the past. This trend has impacted print volumes for many shops, and they are looking for new applications and revenue streams to offset this decline.”

To address this challenge, Blanks USA offers a portal with an integrated design tool and online editor that empowers users, even those with little design experience, to create professional quality materials and export their designs into a print-ready PDF. The company offers a white-labeled portal to printing companies that enables them to quickly and easily create these products for their customers, significantly reducing design time and design skill required. Blanks USA also offers high quality pre-converted stock using its patented Lift-Off™ die cuts that reduce the manufacturing time and increase the quality for die cut products. While files generated on the Blanks USA site can be printed on any substrate the user chooses, the files are imposed to work perfectly with Blanks USA substrates.

“Our large variety of product selections required a robust online editor,” Ogren added. “We needed something that was easy to use for those with limited design skills but was functional enough to meet the needs of professional designers. We also needed a very cost-effective model, preferably cloud-based, and a solution that could be integrated with other modules for seamless, end-to-end operation. This includes 100% capability to change any element in our templates, as compared to other solutions where portions of the template are locked down. To accomplish this, we partnered with MyCreativeShop and CHILI publish.”

In explaining the solution to potential customers, Ogren points out that even for experienced designers, production time can be cut by as much as 40%, and the resulting product is of higher quality especially when the Lift-Off substrates are used.



BLANKS USA OFFERS A PORTAL WITH AN INTEGRATED DESIGN TOOL AND ONLINE EDITOR THAT EMPOWERS USERS, EVEN THOSE WITH LITTLE DESIGN EXPERIENCE, TO CREATE PROFESSIONAL QUALITY MATERIALS AND EXPORT THEIR DESIGNS INTO A PRINT-READY PDF.

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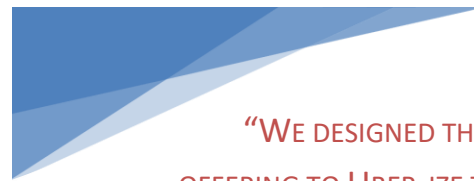
“One packaging printer we work with was thrilled with this solution,” Ogren reported. “Hand labor for his die cut boxes typically took three minutes per box to remove the product from the matrix and get the box ready for assembly; we can reduce that to 20 seconds. Boxes are stronger, because the substrate has a laminate on the inside. In addition, our Lift-Off die cuts are clean – there are no ties as you might see with a traditional perfed pre-converted material. He told us he could see easily producing a million boxes per month without any increase in labor using this solution.”

And with his cloud-based configuration, Ogren can offer unlimited access to the portal for a mere \$20 per designer per month. “We designed this web-to-print offering to Uber-ize the production of die cut products,” he said. “It’s a game changer for us and for our customers. They save money on design and end up with a higher quality product; and, for printers, new revenue streams. Plus we make money on substrates when they choose to acquire them from us.”

Ogren is not new to web to print. “We have had three major web-to-print deployments over the last five years,” Ogren stated. “And we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars. While those previous implementations functioned, our current configuration is much less costly and even more robust, and that allows us to make a compelling offer to our customers. And we are seeing great response from the market.”

Lessons learned from Blanks USA include:

- Have a clear understanding of the business objectives you are trying to achieve and the price elasticity in the market.
- A robust online editor that allows 100% capability to change any element in templates rather than having locked-down portions by default increases flexibility. Of course, customers should be able to lock down portions of their own templates as necessary to protect brand integrity.
- Users should be able to create clean-sheet designs from a blank canvas as well as use templates.
- The cost model is critical – cloud-based modules that can quickly and easily be integrated to create a full solution typically preset the most cost-effective and flexible approach.
- Think out of the box. Consult and brainstorm with software providers to better understand what is possible, and then stretch the limits of those possibilities for new and innovative approaches. It is critical to have partners who are willing to work with you in this manner.
- By making the system easy to use, robust and flexible, and by giving users lots of options, the solution is likely to generate more return business. Even though in the case of Blanks USA, not everything is printed and what is printed might not use Blanks USA substrates, the company has



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still seen growth in volume printed through its network of printers and using its substrates because of the attractive cost model, quality and efficiency of the process and final product, and their willingness to let the customer be in the driver's seat as much as possible.

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Ready. Set. Go.

Are you ready to investigate the possibilities of implementing a next-generation web-to-print solution? The three companies profiled here all have very different businesses. But they all have one thing in common: They took a leap of faith and found game-changing ways to offer new products and services to their customers using a compilation of cloud-based components to design the exact system they needed. And they did this without spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, yet have a system that can scale as their businesses grow.

Whether you have an older generation customer-facing solution or are new to web to print, the time is now to take stock of your offerings to ensure your company is the best it can be and you are staying current with industry trends and market demands. As we have seen from the three companies profiled, a next-generation web-to-print solution that is open, incorporates robust online editing, and can easily be integrated into an end-to-end workflow offers many benefits to both provider and customer. Web to print has truly evolved, and as Blanks USA's Ogren found, these next-generation solutions are game changers. They are easier than ever to implement, and they won't break the bank. In fact, investment levels are such that, as the Jet Mail Services experience demonstrates, ROI can be relatively fast.

If you don't have internal IT resources or don't wish to undertake all of the integration efforts, consider partnering with someone like SK+G, who can take much of that burden off your staff.

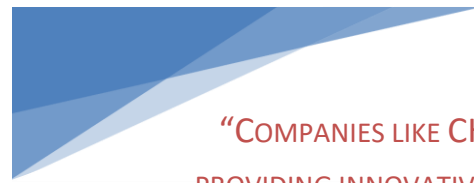
I also recommend that you consider using an outside consultant who can help you do the necessary needs analysis and configure the best possible system. This can be an independent consultant or you can take advantage of professional services that suppliers like CHILI publish offer.

"Companies like CHILI publish are providing innovative technology," said Jennifer Matt, President of Web2Print experts. "In the case of CHILI, they stuck to their guns and just built the composition engine, allowing users to select a best-in-class storefront and other components to complete the solution. Unlike many legacy providers, they are not beholden to trying to sell the entire package; rather, they provide an important component to an overall solution that can be easily integrated with other components to create an overall solution targeted at specific business objectives."

Whatever you decide, do something. Standing still is not an option. As Will Rogers said:

Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

Follow the lead of the forward-thinking companies we have profiled here and benefit from their lessons learned. You, too, can position your company more competitively, generate new revenue streams and



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Jennifer Matt, President, Web2Print Experts

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gain new customers by making a move to a next-generation web-to-print implementation. Start today by assessing your current state. Then consult with your staff and your customers to determine an ideal future state. With today's modern open solutions, it is easier and more affordable than ever before to expand your possibilities and differentiate yourself in the marketplace with a unique, flexible, scalable web-to-print implementation that will meet your needs today and into the future.

This white paper was sponsored by CHILI publish. To learn more about the possibilities of next-generation web-to-print, visit www.chili-publish.com.

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About Cary Sherburne

Cary Sherburne is a well-known author, journalist and marketing consultant whose practice is focused on marketing communications strategies for the printing and publishing industries. She was inducted into the Soderstrom Society in 2015, recognized as a 2009 Woman of Distinction by Output Links and was awarded the 2009 Thomas McMillan Award for excellence in journalism. Sherburne has written six books, including *Digital Paths to Profit*, published by NAPL; and most recently, *No-Nonsense Innovation: Practical Strategies for Success*, written with the late Bill Lowe, the Father of the IBM PC and available on Amazon. She has also ghost-written several books for busy executives, for whom she makes the process simple and efficient. In addition to her role as Senior Editor at WhatTheyThink.com, the leading online news and analysis resource for the printing and publishing industry, Sherburne occasionally writes for other printing trade magazines, as well as creating by-lined editorial for private clients.

Prior to launching her consulting practice in 2002, Ms. Sherburne was the Vice President of Marketing Communications and Outsourcing Solutions at IKON Office Solutions. In that capacity, she developed and implemented a branding campaign to build brand awareness for IKON in the marketplace as well as enhance employee pride in the organization, and was responsible for all internal and external communications, including trade shows and events, corporate newsletters, and industry and press relations. In the outsourcing role, she set strategic objectives and priorities for IKON's product and services portfolio in its Outsourcing businesses, including development of programs and sales support materials for that environment. Sherburne was a Director at InfoTrends, an internationally known firm specializing in market research and strategic consulting for the digital document and print on demand industry, before joining IKON, where she launched and managed the company's Document Outsourcing Consulting Service.

Her tenure in the printing and publishing industry has also included sales and marketing positions at Xerox Corporation, HP Indigo and PageFlex. Sherburne can be reached at Cary@WhatTheyThink.com. She resides full-time in the Dominican Republic.