

WhatTheyTh!nk

The Top 3 Priorities When Buying New Print Software

There is much in your control when it comes to choosing the right print software package for your business. It has nothing to do with counting features. It has everything to do with your approach to engaging with the vendor, learning from other printers who already have the solution, and choosing your team wisely.

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There is this dance that buyers and sellers do, often referred to as “the sales process” by the sellers. It might be the weirdest and most difficult process to evaluate on a rational/logical basis. Investing your hard-earned profits into new potential software solutions is an optimistic process. Most entrepreneurs are optimists. Business owners typically like this part of their job. Looking into the future, projecting their needs, and investing to build/scale their business. In the print business, there is a lot more love for investing in production equipment than there is for investing in software.

The purchasing of new software is a minefield of challenges. We in some ways put way too much emphasis on the selection of the “perfect solution” and **way too little emphasis on the change required of the humans working in your business to adapt to the new software**. Software sellers have the advantage of being able to sell a “vision” of your business experiencing the magically full return of potential on the software. They have at least one customer who has reaped the full benefits of the software. The process that customer went through is never told in detail, because it would reveal how much reaching the full potential of software relies on the efforts of the printer themselves.

We want the purchasing of software to solve our business challenges. Purchasing does not solve challenges. Just like purchasing exercise equipment for your home gym does not make you more fit. Purchasing is the easy part. But there are still some very important considerations to consider when purchasing software for your business. I would consider the following three priorities as key to making good print software decisions.

Number 1: YOU (the buyer) should drive the sales process.

You are purchasing the software. The software is for your business. Do not be driven down a generic sales process. This is how most sales happen. You express vague interest because you think strategically keeping your cards close to your chest will be an advantage. Your business needs are the most important factor in the process. If you are not clear on your business needs or are clear and you don’t share them with the vendor, there is a much greater chance that you’ll end up with a solution not well suited to your business.

One of the most common things I hear is a general decision that your current software isn’t working for you anymore and there is a generic decision to look for something else. The whole thing is not very specific or clear. It

is vague. What specifically isn't working? Is it not working because your process never adjusted to work properly with the software or is it not working because your business has grown in a direction that is not properly supported inside the software package? I have seen big mistakes happen here. Printers get frustrated that their current solution doesn't support a new product offering as well as their standard product offerings, e.g., they have recently invested heavily in wide format. They then go looking for wide-format feature sets, ignoring the fact that 80% of their business is still in cut-sheet litho and digital.

Driving the sales process means that the first step you take is getting yourself organized. This is NOT an exhaustive feature list. I hate feature lists. Features are in the weeds. You need to be able to describe your business in a very thoughtful way so that the vendors can respond to your needs. Your job in the sales process is to describe your business and its challenges. The vendor's job is to **prove to you** that their solution matches your challenges. You don't want to be odd. You don't want to be special. You don't want to be an exception. You want to be a very "normal/standard" customer to the vendor. If their solution works best in small to medium sized commercial print businesses and that matches your business, you want to be there. Everyone thinks their business is unique. Your business is unique, you have your own customers, your own employees, your own relationships. AND your business challenges match a pattern of other businesses. You want to buy the solution where the other customers using it look a lot like you.

Driving the sales process is starting with a proper categorization of your business so that you can assess whether the vendor currently serves businesses like yours. I've seen print businesses buy solutions that were made primarily for the labels and packaging space when they are cutsheet litho shops. It didn't go well. I've seen smaller companies with short-run litho buy solutions that were made for enterprise-size printers with long runs or web presses. It didn't go well. I've seen organizations buy solutions that had fancy features for cross-media campaigns when the core business of the printer was short-run digital office printing. It didn't go well.

Number 2: Talk to Other Customers

You may think of other printers as your competitors, but when it comes to print software, they are also your partners as common users of the same platforms. There is always a list of "referrals" provided by the vendor. These have been hand-picked and will likely tell you only the good stuff about the application. This is where networking and collaboration really pay off. Find other printers like you who aren't your direct competitors who are using the system before you buy it. Don't just talk to the owners/management!

If you're deciding on a prepress automation tool, talk to the prepress manager. If you're deciding on a web-to-print system, talk to the person that administers that system. If you're deciding on a print MIS/ERP, then talk to BOTH the owner and the administrator. Finding other businesses like yours that have already been through the implementation process and have developed some internal competency in the application is a gold mine for your decision-making process. Don't forget to ask about the support experience with the vendor.

You can ask and get answers to questions that the vendor's sales team simply cannot answer. They don't know precisely how much effort it takes to get the system implemented or widely adopted. You need to hear that from people like you working at businesses like yours who have done it before. If you take the time to build relationships at this point, you can continue to collaborate with these other printers as you go down the journey of implementation and adoption.

Number 3: Choose Your Team Carefully

The number one mistake people make when implementing new print software is assuming that because it is a piece of software, the implementation belongs with IT or your technical team. It doesn't. Software isn't a project for IT. Software is a project for the people who are going to be using the system every day. IT's job is generally

confined to making sure it is securely hosted and remains up and running. This means that if you're implementing a Print MIS/ERP, the leadership of the implementation is probably your operations leader. This individual has overall responsibility across the operations and therefore manages the team that will be most impacted by the new system. A Print MIS/ERP is literally hundreds of operational decisions, of which only a very few belong with IT.

Your team is also the team that will make or break the change management process. By change management I mean facing down and working through the resistance to change. It happens in every organization. For the most part humans don't like change. When you change things, people who felt like experts suddenly feel like beginners again. Not very many people like that beginner feeling, especially if you're over 50 years old.

The top three considerations when investing in new software have nothing to do with feature sets. They are all about your approach to the process and the things you can control. The real differentiation in print software comes in the way you implement it, the way your team adopts it, and the relationship you develop with the vendor. All those things are solidly in your control.

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