WHITE PAPER

Leveraging the Wide Format Application Opportunity

A How-To Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Sign, display, and specialty graphic applications are powerful communication tools, compelling marketing vehicles, and effective décor enhancers. Ongoing innovations in inkjet printing technologies, inks, and substrates are expanding application opportunities and driving the revenue growth of wide format providers. Wide format printing applications are everywhere, and their use is growing all the time. Traditional applications that most people are familiar with include banners, vehicle graphics, signs, window graphics, and backlit displays to name just a few. Newer applications include wallpaper, fabric soft signage, industrial products, and apparel, and this list of profitable applications continues to grow. This how-to guide is designed to educate and offer direction on taking advantage of these opportunities.

UNDERSTANDING KEY APPLICATION AREAS AND OPPORTUNITIES

KEY APPLICATIONS

Wide format applications dominate the visual landscape. With today's technologies, nearly every surface can carry a message or image that was printed on a digital wide format device. Although the application possibilities are endless, they can be classified into the following broad areas: outdoor graphics, indoor graphics, and point-of-purchase (POP) displays.

Outdoor graphics encompass a wide variety of applications that are used outside and must therefore be able to withstand the elements. Typical applications include:

- Building coverings and wraps
- Flex-face billboards
- Backlit signage (day and night)
- Banners/fleet graphics
- Vehicle wraps
- Transit/informational signage

Indoor graphics, as the name implies, are used in indoor environments and include a wide variety of applications that fall into the following categories:

- Branding promotions
- Pop-up displays
- Posters
- Backlit signage (day and night)
- Exhibition/event graphics
- Floor/window graphics
- Backdrops for theater/TV

- Photographic reproductions

Point-of-purchase (POP) displays are marketing or advertising vehicles placed next to the merchandise they are promoting. POP displays come in many varieties, including:

- Rigid POP displays

- 3D POP displays

- Open-box packages/displays; in-store promotions

- Short-run packaging for prototyping

- Short-run packaging for seasonal promotions and one-off events

TRENDING APPLICATIONS

Ongoing innovations in inkjet printing devices, inks, coatings, substrates, and finishing equipment are enabling many new and attractive application opportunities. The applications that can be produced on wide format printers encompass a seemingly endless variety of uses and span many industries. Here is a summary of trending applications:

- **Soft signage** printed direct or via a transfer process to fabric is becoming increasingly appealing to customers because of the higher-end look and feel of the finished graphics. It's easier to handle/hang, costs less to ship, can be easily reused, and can be used with curved or framed structures.

- **Short-run packaging and prototyping:** The combination of digital wide format printing with digital cutting has enabled the cost-effective production of short run packaging and prototypes. Digitally printed packages and labels offer brand managers the flexibility to run smaller quantities for test markets, regional/ethnic products, and seasonal offerings. Digital production eliminates expensive setup costs as well as long lead times for short-run specialized versions or one-to-one personalized packages.

- **Thermoforming** is another area that is generating interest. With thermoforming, a plastic substrate is heated to a pliable temperature, formed to a specific shape using a mold, cooled, and trimmed to create a usable product. Brand owners, retailers, and manufacturers can use thermoforming to create custom-formed 3D signs, packages, POP displays, vending panels, gaming kiosks, and much more. Digitally printing directly to these materials is much quicker and more cost-effective—it eliminates costly and time-consuming screen/hand painting processes, or pre-printing and laminating to formable plastics.

- **Décor** applications like wallpaper, flooring, furniture, and tiles are growing as customers become more familiar with digital wide format printing's ability to accommodate shorter runs and faster delivery times for custom and "small-batch" requests.

MARKET TRENDS DRIVING APPLICATION GROWTH

Retailers, event exhibitors, and designers are always seeking the next big thing to make their sign and display graphics stand out. Here are a few reasons that the above trending applications are experiencing growth:

- Fabric graphics offer the richer, more eye-catching colors that big brand owners want. They can be folded, reused, and are also less expensive to ship and install. As a result, soft signage applications are highly appealing.

- Architects, interior designers, and homeowners are looking to customize their interior environments. Digitally printed wallpaper, upholstery, and tiles are just a few of the higher-demand applications in the growing décor market.

- Wide format is helping to transform the packaging industry by enabling smaller print runs of custom packaging and labels. Packaging is an attractive print market because it cannot be displaced by electronic alternatives.

KEY TIPS FOR TARGETING A VERTICAL MARKET

The most successful wide format providers will actively target the most profitable customers that need their services. By focusing marketing and sales efforts on a targeted vertical industry that requires wide format applications, providers can make better use of their resources and gain an in-depth understanding of that industry.

Focusing on one (or several) industries offers many benefits to the marketing and operations sides of a business. Key benefits of targeting a specific vertical market include:

- **Commanding attention in a selected industry.** Tailoring products and services to meet a select industry's specific needs makes it easier to get that market's attention and win sales.

- **Positioning an organization as an industry expert.** Being viewed as an expert in the marketplace differentiates an organization and positions it as a go-to resource.

- **Focusing marketing efforts to drive results.** Understanding the nuances of a vertical market generates reality-based sales and marketing messages that demonstrate a clear understanding of prospective customers' needs. For example, the things that matter to a financial services firm are very different from the things that matter to a retail operation.

- **Maximizing internal resources.** By understanding the specific needs of a target industry, an organization can best leverage its internal capabilities to deliver the right mix of offerings.

- **Developing new applications.** A specialized focus also provides the insight necessary to create new, high-demand applications.

- **"Talking the talk" of the industry.** To win business, it is important to speak the language of the customer's industry and truly understand the terminology.

IDENTIFYING VERTICAL MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Because all industries use wide format applications, there are a number of vertical industries to consider. When identifying the industries that are the best fit for your organization, start by asking yourself the following questions.

1. Who Are My Customers?

First, evaluate your own company and customers. Identify the customers that are the most profitable and that you enjoy working with by answering the following questions:

- Where are you successful today?
- Who are your customers?
- What markets do they serve?
- What are the key characteristics of your existing base?
    - Size
    - Profitability
    - Products and services purchases
    - Pain points
- Can you sell more to those customers?

2. What Do My Customers Want?

Think about the applications that you currently offer. Which ones are the most profitable, and which do your customers perceive as having the most value? What are the critical market trends in the industries you serve, and how will these trends impact the applications you currently offer or are considering?

3. Why Should My Customers Buy from Me?

Individual buyers and organizations evaluate products and services to determine whether they provide the desired benefits. As part of your targeted marketing approach, you must develop a strong value proposition. A value proposition is a thirty-second "elevator pitch" to outline the benefits that a product or service provides to a buyer. It illustrates why the product or service is superior to competing offers. The value proposition answers the key question, "Why should I buy from you?"

KEY VERTICALS BUYING WIDE FORMAT APPLICATIONS

Many industries purchase wide format applications, but some spend more than others. A research study by Keypoint Intelligence – InfoTrends identified the percentage of print budget spending on signage by key industries. The study surveyed over 1,000 small and medium-sized businesses across 12 industries. Respondents were asked to think about the communication materials that they printed and were then asked to specify the percentage that signage (e.g., posters, banners, presentation boards) represented for overall print spending. The results were as follows:

- Hospitality: 21%

- Retail: 13%

- Real Estate: 12%

- Government: 11%

- Non-profit: 9%

- Education: 8%

- Personal Services: 7%

- Healthcare: 7%

- Insurance: 5%

- Manufacturing: 5%

- Professional Services: 3%

- Financial: 2%

CONSIDERATIONS FOR OFFERING APPLICATIONS

TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

The possibilities for wide format applications are endless and may seem a bit overwhelming as a result. An important step in determining which applications to offer is ensuring that you have the right printing equipment. Wide format inkjet printers can vary widely in size and price depending on the indoor/outdoor graphics or specialty applications that they are used to produce. Inkjet printers use piezoelectric print heads to deposit tiny droplets of ink directly onto a substrate. The ink is bonded or cured to the substrate using thermal heat or light (e.g., a heater or UV lamp system), depending on the type of ink used.

There are three primary types of wide format printers, including flatbed, roll-to-roll, and hybrid systems (capable of printing rolled as well as flat substrates). Each printing technology has its own strengths and limitations, so the applications you will be producing—now and in the future—can help dictate the printer type that is right for you.

SUBSTRATE CONSIDERATIONS

A key benefit of wide format devices is that they can print on a wide variety of media types. Overall, substrates can be rigid or flexible. Printing devices (roll-fed, flatbed, or hybrid) typically dictate the type of substrates (rigid, flexible, or both) that can be used, but there are many media options for each type. It is impossible to list all of the available substrates because there are so many, but the Table below provides a high-level description of common substrate types.

Table 1: Substrate Types

Flexible Substrates	Rigid Substrates
Paper	Thick Plastic (e.g., PVC, coroplast, and acrylic)
Films/Clings	Board (e.g., styrene, gatorboard, enviroboard)
Vinyl	Glass
Banner Materials	Wood
Canvas	Metal (e.g., aluminum and dibond)
Textile/Fabric	Ceramics
Magnetics	3-D Objects

Here are some key questions to ask when selecting substrates for various applications:

- Will the print be exposed to sunlight, UV radiation, moisture, or extreme temperatures?
- How long does the print need to last?
- Will the print be displayed more than once?
- Where and how will the print be installed?
- What special effects are required?

THE ROLE OF SPECIAL EFFECTS AND INK TECHNOLOGY

Ongoing advancements in technology and ink are creating new opportunities to produce higher-margin applications that feature special print effects. These premium applications have the potential to ignite sales and accelerate profits. Here is a sampling of effects and techniques that can be considered.

White Ink

White ink expands both the range and quality of applications that can be produced. It is becoming increasingly popular, largely due to technological improvements related to opacity and printer productivity. By first printing an opaque white layer, printers can produce stunning images on an array of non-traditional substrates. White ink can also create a strong impact when printing on clear adhesives or dark or metallic substrates.

In addition to enabling printing on a broader array of substrates (including transparent and dark materials), white ink increases the type of work that an organization can add to its service offerings, including the creation of special effects. White ink is often required for package printing and prototyping, as well as for backlit displays and window clings printed on transparent media.

Clear Ink

Clear ink can be used to achieve certain visual effects. When clear varnish covers an entire printed sheet for protection or sheen, this is called a flood coating. Alternatively, spot varnish enables you to highlight areas of a printed piece, adding shine and depth to specific elements (e.g., a logo or image).

Backlight

Backlit displays offer a luminous quality and create the appearance of depth, making a graphic dynamic, interactive, and more memorable. In addition to creating an eye-catching focal point, backlit signage can deliver an unmistakable pop of color. Special techniques can be used to create dynamic dual day/night backlit displays as well.

Thermoforming

Thermoforming inks remove the limitations of working with thermoformed applications, opening new productivity routes for firms that want to increase revenues and gain a competitive advantage from high-impact 3D signs and graphics. These digital UV-curable inks enable wide format providers to print directly onto thermoplastic sheets, which can then be formed into deep draw, high-elongation parts with excellent retention of hue and opacity. These inks eliminate a number of labor-intensive and costly methods that once existed when working with shaped and irregular surfaces, such as hand-airbrushing.

STAFFING

Ongoing training of staff members on new applications and/or special effects is essential for supporting customers. Many equipment vendors will have a technical rep on staff that can help educate employees or provide other forms of training support. Industry trade shows and conferences can also play a key role in strengthening employee knowledge of print applications.

EDUCATION

Customers need to be educated on the types of wide format applications that are available and the value they deliver. Creating and distributing print samples, donating signs (including your company's contact information) to charitable organizations or schools, producing customer case studies on application successes, and hosting customer open house events are all great ways to educate customers while promoting your services.

Hosting a customer event is often an untapped opportunity. Letting customers and prospects into your operation to meet your staff members, see your equipment, and learn about the various applications can help customers better understand why they should purchase from your company. Social media is another important tool for education and marketing. It is great vehicle for highlighting your wide format applications. Wide format work is visual by its very nature, so leveraging social media to demonstrate applications in a real-world setting can show customers and prospects what you're capable of. Once they've seen what you can do, they're more likely to want it for themselves!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lisa Cross

Associate Director

Lisa Cross is the Associate Director for Keypoint Intelligence – InfoTrends' Business Development Strategies service. She is responsible for conducting market research, advising customers on communication strategy, overseeing content creation, and managing custom consulting projects. Previously an industry journalist, Cross has over 20 years of experience in covering and reporting on the graphic communications industry.

Eve Padula

Sr. Research Analyst

Eve Padula is a Senior Research Analyst for Keypoint Intelligence – InfoTrends' Business Development Strategies, Customer Communications, and Wide Format Consulting Services. Her responsibilities include the promotion and distribution of content, assisting clients and channels in building business development programs, supporting newsletter products, generating service content and multi-client studies, and managing the editing cycle for many types of deliverables.

Steve Urmano

Director

Steve Urmano is the Director of InfoTrends' Wide Format Printing Consulting Service. As Director, Urmano develops InfoTrends' annual global market forecasts for hardware and supplies used in the wide format printing markets. He is responsible for conducting multiple primary research studies annually in the wide format market both on a custom basis and as part of InfoTrends' syndicated research.

INTERNATIONAL SIGN ASSOCIATION

1001 North Fairfax Street, Suite 301 | Alexandria, VA 22314

info@signs.org | 703-836-4012 | www.signs.org