

# drupa Essentials of Print



The print & packaging industry is a living world and once every four years, it is important for all its stakeholders to meet and share for a better future. At drupa, we promise you inspiration, innovation, knowledge sharing and networking. Each visitor will have his own places to go and must-see hotspots. On the way to this event, we release the “drupa essentials”, a series of articles from designers, brands owners, printers, converters, journalists and influencers. These articles will offer visitors an understanding of the print & packaging world that is transforming rapidly under the umbrella of digitalization, automation and sustainability. So, enjoy the reading and give free rein to your instinct and curiosity under the adage “to each his own drupa”.

**We are happy to provide you with this expert article and we would be pleased if you publish it.**

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**Your drupa Team**

## **Francesco Crotti: Books printing – all changed – a closer look to the new operating model**



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## Francesco Crotti: Books printing – all changed – a closer look to the new operating model

To illustrate an industry transformation, the book printing industry could be a prime example. I would like to focus on the book printing market, where printed books are still available, but the process of producing them has completely changed and will continue to evolve, primarily driven by a complete digital journey. Soon, we will all be gathered at drupa to share ideas and build a vision for this important industry using print at its best.

drupa is approaching once again. Many people are questioning the reasons to attend the show after eight years. During this time, we managed to survive without drupa 2020. Vendors were able to showcase their technologies through web presentations during the COVID period, and several Open Houses later, printing service providers (PSPs) have continued to invest despite market challenges such as paper shortages and the energy crises. On the other hand, I believe that now more than ever, it is crucial to generate new ideas, build visions, share professional experiences, and establish connections. Market dynamics continue to evolve, and structural changes are transforming the graphic industry profoundly. That's why visiting drupa makes a lot of sense.

One of the significant changes we have witnessed in recent years is related to the demand for books. According to several statistics, sales volumes are increasing both in Europe and the U.S. However, traditional bookstores and supermarkets are losing market share, as online and direct sales channels are increasingly preferred by customers, representing more than 45% of total revenue for publishers. The influence of "BookTok" trends has propelled certain books from relative obscurity to bestseller lists, leading publishers to reconsider their marketing strategies, especially for niche books. To manage such demand effectively, accurate forecasting has become crucial. Publishers need to serve the market on time while avoiding excessive printing that surpasses demand.

Sustainability in the publishing industry is becoming a top priority. Technological innovation and the use of local printing facilities help mitigate overproduction and overprinting, as well as address the issue of returns. These challenges can also be reduced by adjusting print runs based on pre-order data. However, smaller publishers might not have access to adequate technologies, risking stock shortages. Publishers are also exploring ways to reduce paper usage, such as moving book notes and bibliographies online (accessible via QR codes) or optimizing translation choices to reduce word counts. Format optimization is another option,

where subtle format changes (e.g., slightly smaller pages) can significantly reduce paper consumption. Furthermore, improving distribution efficiency and optimizing transport are sustainability drivers, requiring strong system integration among retailers, publishers, distributors, and printers.

Finally, the acceptance of digital printing for books has become definitive. Inkjet technology is highly productive and reliable, with a standard uptime of 90%. The crossover point between analog and digital lies at around 6,000 copies in black and white and 3,000 copies in color. From a quality perspective, many inkjet solutions are capable of printing on both coated and uncoated media, producing results comparable to offset printing. However, some analog printing vendors, like Timpsons, have exited the market - with the last Timpson presses built in 2006, making digital transformation the better choice for printing books in the near future.

As a result, a few book printers are seeking new value propositions and services, focusing on on-demand production of individual books, short Service Level Agreements (SLAs) from order to shipping, and digital integration with publishers and distributors. These companies are investing not only in digital equipment but also in software business platforms, firmly believing that robust automation is the key to competitiveness and profitability.

But how can printers embark on their digital journey? The marketplace offers numerous solutions, ranging from affordable options to more expensive ones. While many of these solutions excel at managing specific processes (e.g., imposition, order management, archiving, or job tracking), they often require heavy investments in integration and customization. Digital vendors do provide some solutions to enhance their equipment, but finding proven workflows that enable end-to-end automation of the entire book printing process remains a challenge.

In reality, automation encompasses various functionalities, from sales to administration, from production to logistics, from data security to quality management. This implies that an all-in-one book printing business management software should provide the following:

- Automation in managing accounts and orders: Instead of relying on emails and calls and arranging offers, sales teams

can save time and expedite their services by receiving orders and generating quotes through a web portal.

- Automation in receiving files, ready to be archived and printed.
- Automation in prepress pre-flight: If customers upload uncorrected files, the system should issue alerts, enabling customers to rectify issues on their own.
- Automation in job management and monitoring, from individual book production to large print runs: The software should collect orders and batch them according to paper type, printing quality, and finishing requirements. Simultaneously, printed rolls should be seamlessly moved through the production process via job lists, ensuring complete control and flexibility in production, from single books to large runs.
- Automation in tracking orders and shipments: After production, batches should be easily traceable, enabling book printers to arrange shipping, while publishers can monitor all operations.

Finally, a robust software platform should be compatible with different presses and finishing equipment setups, remaining independent from them.

However, investing in digital technologies requires in-depth IT knowledge at the company level and the establishment of a strong in-house IT department. Only a few printing companies possess such capabilities. Typically, these companies originated from the transactional printing business, but they often struggle to venture beyond their comfort zones despite declining revenues. Additionally, many book printers have transitioned to digital printing but with a narrow vision, focusing solely on cost reduction rather than adding value for their

customers, essentially using digital technology as an analog substitute.

Other printers have embarked on their own initiatives. These innovation-driven companies, such as [Rotomail](#) in Italy have been able to introduce applied solutions to the market before others, leveraging what is essentially already available as an idea and they made it real with a homemade applied solution, [Bronte](#). These companies foster a friendly, open-minded, and curious environment because true innovation begins by engaging people both inside and outside the organization. For them, partnerships represent real opportunities.

Each person attending drupa 2024 will have a specific agenda. However, for the book printing market, building relationships and partnerships will be strategic. Digitalization continues to accelerate, with automation playing a significant role through software developments that orchestrate components provided by various vendors. I hope to see you there and we have a lot to talk about.

#### Quotes

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*"Sustainability in the publishing industry is becoming a top priority."*

*"Book printing business management is about end-to-end automation."*