

Executive Briefings

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Balancing Print and Digital Media

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The publishing industry has experienced an upheaval in the past decade or so. The “long tail” of sales of existing books via Web sellers such as Amazon and the improvement in software and hardware technologies that can replicate the experience of reading a book or magazine means publishing houses are printing and selling fewer new books. As a result, many of these companies are venturing into digital publishing.

“All the publishers are shifting from print to digital,” said Dev Ganesan, COO of Aptara, which specializes in content transformation. “That’s a huge change. What that means for software companies is that they need to develop platforms for content creation that meet the needs of every customer. At the same time, customers are looking at publishing in terms of handling content in terms of authors, editors and production employees. On top of that, they’re trying to automate parts of the production process. And companies must be willing to market products using traditional and new media to reach the widest possible audience. So there are a lot of challenges, but a lot of opportunities, too.”

The upshot of all this is that learning professionals now can deliver content more flexibly and at a lower cost. They can make static content dynamic by taking a body of knowledge in print — such as a book — and converting it to a digital format. They can then chunk that content into smaller sizes and organize those nuggets of information according to learners’ needs.

Moreover, they can get content published and distributed much more quickly via digital, online media. This is critical in an industry such as health care that faces rapid changes due to technological innovation and regulation, said Ranjit Singh, president and CEO of Aptara.

“In addition to the cost savings, they want to turn it around much faster,” he said. “Time to market is becoming paramount because there’s so much innovation going on. If they don’t have their print products out faster, they fall behind.”

This isn’t to say that digital content will completely wipe out its print counterpart. Research shows that people typically retain more information when they read print text than when they study the same content delivered through a digital medium. Additionally, they can sustain reading longer, as a printed page is easier on the eyes than a glowing screen.

It all comes down to finding the right balance between the two. Generally speaking, print should be used as a reference and cover subjects that are less likely to change over time, whereas digital content should be used as a performance-support tool that deals with topics that may have a shorter shelf life.

“You should have the ability to get the content in any way, shape or form,” Ganesan said. “If you have that flexibility, then you can pick and choose how you want to publish based on marketing strategy, readership and so on.”

As learning leaders evaluate how they can maximize digital media, they need to keep some key questions in mind, said Mike Stacy, Aptara’s vice president of enterprise.

“How can we get high residual value from the content? What are the core principles that make it more effective? How do we focus on specific and intentional learning outcomes? It’s all trying to get that sustainable change in performance and behavior.”



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