



The Latest Trends in RIP Software

**CHOOSING THE RIGHT RIP SHOULDN'T BE AN AFTERTHOUGHT
WHEN INVESTING IN WIDE-FORMAT.**

BY KELLI RAMIREZ

As businesses navigate the new normal, there is reason to be optimistic that the wide-format printing industry will continue to grow as the economy awakens from its torpor. As Andy Paparozzi, chief economist for PRINTING United Alliance, recently noted, “according to the consensus of economists surveyed by *The Wall Street Journal*, they expect the American economy to grow robustly in 2021 — by its fastest pace in nearly 40 years. That will give the printing industry a big boost, flipping the mindset from cost reduction and survival to capital investment and growth.”

Print service providers looking to expand their wide-format services tend to focus primarily on the printer hardware, which is largely tied to the application type. While printer manufacturers often recommend a particular RIP software based on the application and/or hardware, the RIP must be considered alongside the hardware selection, not as an afterthought.

This is especially true when adopting hardware technologies that may be outside of a print provider's comfort zone, and is essential for business growth such as adding a flatbed or a textile printer for the first time. They all “put ink on the substrate;” however, the process and results will be different than printing on something familiar, such as paper or vinyl. RIP software plays a key role in successful production. This article will look at trends in RIP software, focusing on automation, color management, and integration.

THE GROWING NEED FOR AUTOMATION

Automation in RIP software continues to remain a focus of vendors, which are regularly automating tasks within the RIP to help print service providers optimize their workflow. Tasks such as image scaling, rotation, bleed, grommets, sewing marks, tiles, and cut paths can be automated to save valuable file preparation and print production time across print-and-cut workflows.

“In wide-format printing time is money, so any additional features that save the print service provider time are going to be their greatest asset,” says Michelle Johnson, director of marketing for SAI, makers of Flexi RIP software.

Jonathan Rogers, International marketing manager at Onyx Graphics, states, “being able to implement fast, effective automated print processes have helped print service providers be equipped to provide their customers with cost-effective and quality output that meets their needs in a timely manner.”

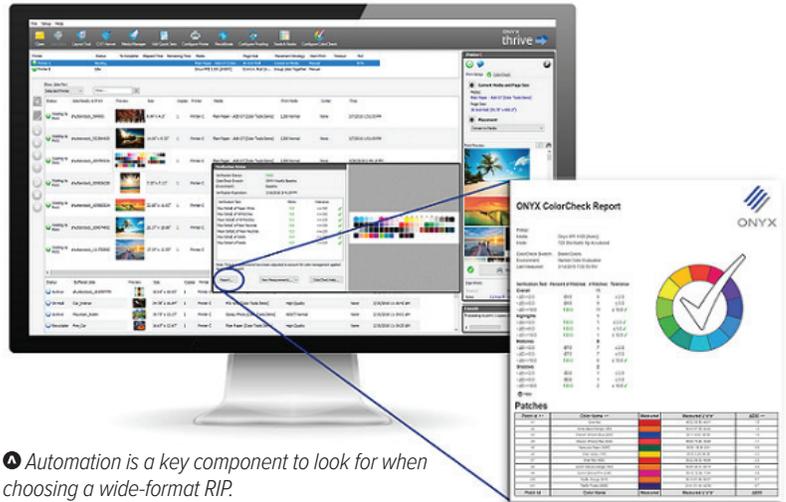
As well, the current economy is accelerating the adoption of technologies that streamline the e-commerce aspect of wide-format printing. For example, many print service providers are making it easier for their customers to order products via new “shopping cart” features on their websites. According to Mary Ware, founder of Wasatch Computer Technology, “we also see an increase in subscriptions from small, boutique providers of specialty printing [such as] Etsy shops.”

Automation also enables support for the application versatility happening in the market. The convergence of print has opened up new opportunities for all types of print providers to diversify their offerings to capture new market share. For example, while some commercial printers have already added wide-format flexible media printing services, many are now looking to expand into flatbed printing so they can offer rigid signage, displays, and packaging prototyping. Another example is established wide-format print service providers adding textile printers to supply flags, banners, custom wearables, and interior décor.

COLOR MANAGEMENT IS STILL CRITICAL

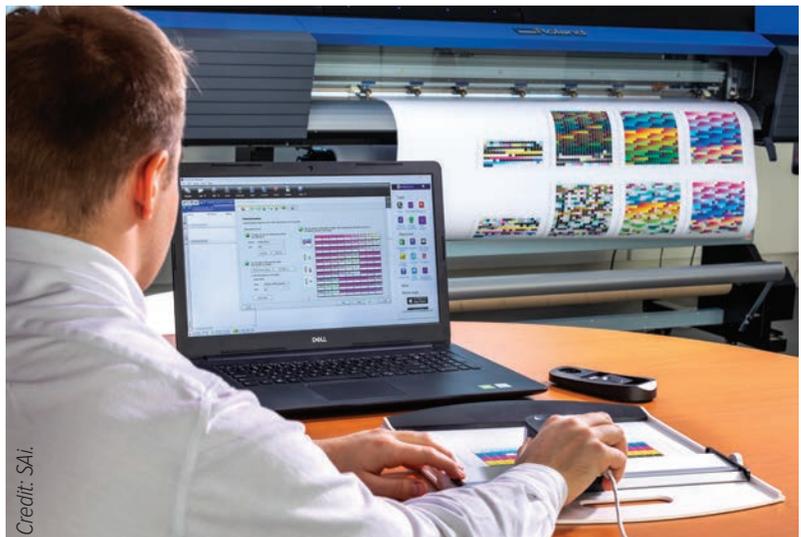
With convergence comes the need for color management. Digital print service providers are creative: they’ll look at a surface and figure out a way to get ink onto it. As new substrates and inks are introduced, color management becomes paramount to ensuring the results meet the client’s expectations. If a printed

Integration with e-commerce platforms is another feature to watch for.



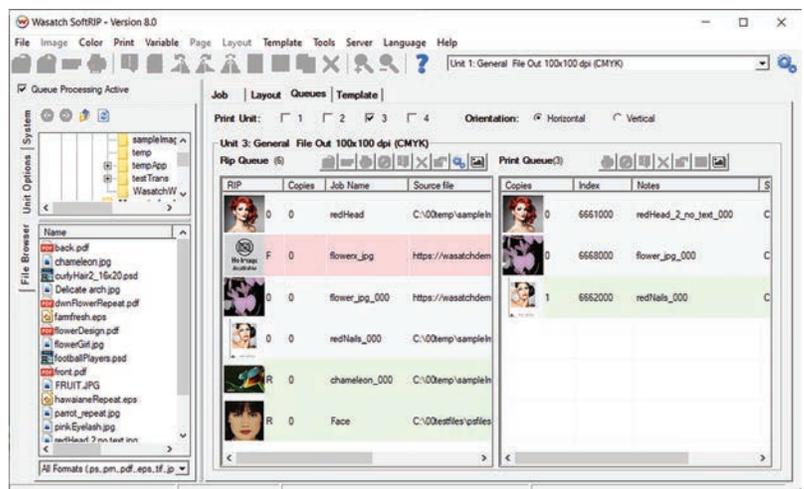
Automation is a key component to look for when choosing a wide-format RIP.

Credit: Onyx Graphics.



Credit: SAI.

Features that help save PSPs time and money should be at the top of the evaluation list.



Credit: Wasatch Computer Technology.

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product doesn't look like the provided artwork, it can become very costly to a print service provider, both in wasted ink and media for reprints, as well as the potential loss of repeat business.

“As commercial printers assess or adopt wide-format digital inkjet printing; or as wide-format digital inkjet printers start to assess or explore new print applications such as textile, from our experience, one consistent thread that joins them together is color management,” says Rogers. “Without this, it is impossible to compare what is wanted with what can be produced, creating wrong color output.”

Another trend from producers and clients is their desire for prints with more pop, according to Kerry Moloney, product marketing manager at EFI Fiery. “They don't just want the color-volume turned up, however, as this just results in more ink usage, and prints that are off-balance colorimetrically,” she says. “What they want to see is more saturation, gamut, and contrast, while still maintaining natural-looking skin tones and neutral grays.”

Digital print operators also need ICC profiles for the varied substrates and ink combinations, and while printer hardware

vendors offer libraries of their own, the industry has seen an increase in third-party providers of ICC profiles and color management systems. “An increased understanding of ICC color is making reliable color reproduction more available for all print shops,” says Ware. “In our particular markets, another trend is an increase in printing with fluorescent ink, and requests for ways to incorporate the new fluorescent inks into existing workflows.”

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER WITH SEAMLESS INTEGRATION

Along with automation comes the need for integration. Chris Des Biens, business unit manager at ErgoSoft, states that he has seen an increased demand for streamlined workflow and automated Web-to-print tools. “Integrating the RIP processes into the online order shop, and into the customer's ERP, along with a real-time module to track workflow through the process, is currently the holy grail of automation,” notes Des Biens.

The beauty of software is that it is relatively agile. With the more open scripting languages and open software architecture, RIP software vendors should be able to integrate into other business systems, such as shipping, with few problems. “This increased use of scripting languages allows many departments to ‘customize’ their needs working with the RIP vendor to get the desired end product,” says Ware.

Whenever software is being considered for a print workflow, integration with systems is essential. “As data shows us, automation is just one trend that print service providers are seeking out from their RIP vendors, even moreso over the past several months,” says Rogers. “To achieve automation, systems need to connect, so as a first step, in our experience, PSPs should assess their business needs — both today and how they see their business expanding in the future — to help select the best software solution for their needs.”

Another trend exacerbated somewhat by the new normal of the remote workforce is an increased emphasis on using remote management applications and cloud-based services offered by the RIP software companies. “While display graphics producers still need to physically be present to operate their machines, a great deal of management, monitoring, and tracking can be done remotely, which is key in an age where more staff are limited to working from home,” says Maloney.

One thing we know about digital print service providers is that they will continue to push boundaries for printing. As long as there are new substrates leading to more varied applications, RIP software will continue to be an integral component of wide-format printing. Taking the time to ensure the right RIP is paired with the right equipment is key to ensuring long-term success and profitability. ▾

▼ A single software solution that can tie together all the components of wide-format printing is the “holy grail” of automation.



Credit: ErgoSoft.