E-commerce, Two Years After the Bubble…

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Abstract

On the verge of the new millennium the new economy was going to replace the old one. E-commerce was the key to growth. But what's left of it? Is ecommerce still alive? The numbers of companies is still quite high, although several ceased operations or merged. But the real focus now is on e-production: using the Internet to facilitate the production flow.

Introduction

At the end of the previous century, everything was about to change. The new economy would replace the old economy. The amount of new companies with groundbreaking ideas was really huge. Stock markets exploded; venture capitalist didn't want to miss an opportunity and flooded new companies with seed money.

After the bubble burst, it seemed that nothing was left of this ideal new world. The reputation of e-commerce went downhill. To see what's left of it, we at VIGC did a small research, based upon previous research from 1999. And to our surprise, more e-commerce companies survived then we expected… But the most interesting thing is the fact that we see a shift to e-production. Something that definitely makes sense, just like we reported at DPP2003: when the proper tools are used, it can strengthen the relationship with the customer.

The Survivors

To see which companies survived the crash, we've taken a look at the dot-com watch from our friends at WhatTheyThink.com. Although more than 60 providers of some kind of e-service ceased operations, their list still contains over 200 companies that still offer some kind of e-service. Some of these are print shops, but we even retrieved more than 22 auction and bid sites. So it seems that e-commerce did survive, only they aren't as visible as they used to be. In the late 90s, the largest amount of space in many exhibitions was rented to e-commerce providers, now you will only find a few.

The fact that many people still believe in some kind of e-commerce, was shown by the battle to obtain PrintCafé this spring. When PrintCafé started (late 90s), they acquired several vendors of MIS-systems. The goal was to open these up to the Internet. That made PrintCafé an interesting partner for vendors of pre-press workflow solutions: the next big thing is connecting the administrative and production workflow. Eventually EFI won the battle, Creo lost.

E-Production

A new line of solutions can be placed under the title 'e-production'. Already several years ago there were several vendors and print shops with production tools for stationary like business cards. These template based systems are interesting, but only for a limited type of jobs and therefore for a limited amount of printing companies. Often printing jobs are too complex to put them into a template.

Remote proofing is one of the new examples. There are different possibilities. The most obvious is remote soft proofing. This can start with a simple PDF-file that is send to the customer for approval. When color is critical, the receiver must have a calibrated viewing environment. However, most of the time this isn't the case. Specialized equipment has been shown at exhibitions where the viewing conditions are standardized and the quality and calibration of the monitor can be controlled from a central server.

Within the field of remote soft proofing, the company Real Time Image (RTI) offers a very specific service. Many other companies have OEM agreements with RTI. The system works as follows: the printer can upload the images to a central server. The customer can access these images and can, via a dedicated tool, perform all kinds of actions. The viewed images are the actual high resolution images. The customer can also view individual separations, can add annotations, and can measure color, …

Next to remote soft proofing, also remote hard proofing is possible. A customer printing a PDF-file on his printer can be a kind of remote hard proofing, but also controlled environments do exist. In these cases, the printer sends the proof to a digital proofing printer that is located at the customer's site. Because the complete environment can be controlled and calibrated, the results will be the same as when printed locally at the printer and send with FedEx or another service.

A last e-production tool has to do with the creation of PDF-files. There are some on-line services to create PDFfiles. But the most interesting developments are Adobe PDF Transit and Jaws PDF Courier. Both are SDK's and have the same philosophy. A printing company creates a small program for his customers. When the customer installs this, it will create a new printer, one that will create PDF's based upon the specifications of the printer. Next to the creation, the PDF-file will be sent via a secured Internet connection to the printer, together with a job ticket.

The Future

And what will the future bring? Even more integration between the printer and the customer, via the Internet of course. Customers will be able to look at their orders within the workflow system. The workflow system will be connected to the administrative system, offering even more possibilities. And project management tools might finally become the next big thing.

Intellectual Property

Thus far everything is still looking fine, but there might be troubles ahead. Last year ImageX received several patents, and subsequently they sued iPrint.com for infringements of these patents. The patents handle all kinds of automation in print production and are probably much broader than just e-commerce or e-production.

Conclusion

It seemed that a lot had changed after 2000, but still many e-commerce companies have survived. Now the emphasis is not any longer on the 'commerce', but on the 'production'. All kinds of e-production tools are offered. Once again we have to ask ourselves: can it strengthen the relationship with the customer? If it does, then you should consider embracing the technology.

Biography

Eddy Hagen (born 9 October 1965) has a degree in Photography and in Communication Management. He has been active in the graphic arts industry for more than 13 years. First he worked with the Belgian Federation for the Graphic Arts Industry. Afterwards he worked as a prepress manager for a small editor and publicity agency. He has been involved with VIGC (the Flemish Innovation Center for Graphic Communications) from the start, in 1998. He is responsible for training and trend watching.