



# Smart connected print

**Those of us working within print have a love for it. Surrounded by it every day we see its beauty, understand its power, and value its importance as a medium**

But, as humans, “we fear what we don’t understand” and many younger marketers lack exposure to print. They may not have learned about it in their studies and will have greater awareness of the digital channels. So, they harbour preconceptions and, as evidenced in the latest Canon Insight Report, often believe it to be;

- **Expensive** – because they don’t understand the Return on Investment (ROI) it can generate
- **Slow** – because they are unaware of print-on-demand and programmatic print
- **Inflexible** – because they know little of digital printing and how it differs from traditional print
- **Not targetable** – because they’re not familiar with Variable Data Printing (VDP) and personalisation
- **Not trackable** – because they don’t perceive it as a crucial element in multi-channel campaigns

All criticism which was once levelled, more accurately, at conventional printing techniques. But times and technology have changed, and today’s smarter, more connected print has ways to counter all of these arguments. These are some of them;

## QR codes

First introduced in 1994, QR codes have slowly become more popular. The pandemic meant people shied away from close-contact, so the ability to scan them “touch-free” made them suddenly more widely recognised and embraced.

Simpler than launching a browser and typing in a web address, they are extremely versatile. And, with better connectivity, and most smartphones cameras now automatically recognising codes, they’re fast too.

The real magic lies in the wealth of data QR codes can generate. Each scan reveals how, where, and when users are interacting with a printed piece. And, as destination URLs can be easily changed, a code can be repeatedly re-directed – a benefit that’s often overlooked.

While standard QR codes aren’t particularly attractive, creatives are increasingly finding ways with colour palettes, embedded images and icons to combat this.

## NFC

Near-field communication works in a similar way to a QR code but requires the user to tap either a printed tag applied to a piece of print, or one embedded within it.

## Encourage customers to think beyond those venue check-ins. How about: -

- A “submit a review” page from a restaurant menu
- A how-to video from a product leaflet or guarantee
- A specific landing page (gURL) associated with a campaign from a poster
- A personalised donations page (pURL) from a piece of fund-raising direct mail
- A LinkedIn profile from a business card
- An app download, automatic form completion, ticket purchase...the list is endless.



## Image Recognition

Lockdown created a surge in the popularity of printed catalogues. Some retailers who abandoned print in favour of online-only reassessed their value as consumers had more time to peruse them.

Many have had a makeover and, using a combination of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Image Recognition technology, are becoming “shoppable”. By holding a smartphone over an image, the user can be seamlessly directed to a product available for purchase through its app. No searching, no keying of product code, no delay and no errors.

All of the data and metrics that marketers would usually only associate with digital channels, but with the tactile and sensory qualities of print too. Win-win!

## Clever URLs

Specific landing pages are a rudimentary way for marketers to monitor the website traffic being generated by a campaign or tactic. Such generic landing pages (gURLs) give a better indication of success than simply driving traffic to a company’s homepage, but they provide no insight into individual site visitors, or any opportunity to capture data on them. There are better ways;

**pURLs** – Personalised URLs, which often display elements of a recipient’s name within the URL, grab attention and serve up a uniquely personalised webpage for each visitor. Creation of these requires a marketing automation platform – either yours or your customer’s - but printing them is no different to any other variable data job.

**Branded Short Links** – Link shorteners are used when a URL is long or clumsy, perhaps for a “deep link” within a website, or to a tweet or other social media post. Branded versions typically use an abbreviated version of a company name and are particularly useful in print where a link is not “clickable”, as it would be online.

Brands using these include Pepsi, whose short link starts “pep.si”, Virgin who uses “virg.in”, and many others.

Clever URLs simply re-direct a visitor but are trackable, in real-time, making them a perfect tool for evaluating the ROI of a printed piece.



## eXtended Reality

Now less “science-fiction” and more “science-fact”, Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and Mixed Reality (MR) are often confused;

**AR** – uses technology, usually a smartphone camera, to enhance a real experience by adding digital elements to it. Example: the image filters of Snapchat lenses.

**VR** – is more immersive and uses a device that effectively shuts out the real world. Example: Google Cardboard.

**MR** – is a combination of the two elements. Example: Microsoft’s HoloLens.

The use of AR is becoming more mainstream in print. For entertainment but also by adding rich, interactive content and huge incremental value to each piece. Images can be made 3-dimensional, characters given the ability to speak and move, and products placed and adjusted. The options and potential brand awareness, re-call, engagement and traction are limitless.

While the above are examples of print driving online activity, conversely it can also be the digital channels that trigger print.

## Programmatic print

Re-targeting, re-marketing and dynamic advertising are common digital tactics. When a website visitor “bounces” off a page or abandons a shopping cart they have indicated an intention but, for whatever reason, not fulfilled it. Automation is used to track them and expose them repeatedly to promotions and opportunities to re-engage; either on subsequent web pages or even by email.

The speed of digital production means that this can now be replicated with print. Where the data exists, these same consumers can be reached in their own homes using the more trusted and enduring medium of direct mail. This can be personalised to reflect their preferences, product choices and could include a discount or other offer.

Your customers may not even be aware that such applications exist. Or if they do, that you are able deliver them. Talking to them about such innovations and the opportunities they offer, not only opens their eyes to the exciting world of digital print but elevates you to the position of trusted and knowledgeable partner.



This article is one of a series supporting the **Canon Ascent Programme**, a business development initiative for Canon Professional Print customers. If you’d like to know more please contact your Canon Account Manager or search “Canon Ascent Programme”.