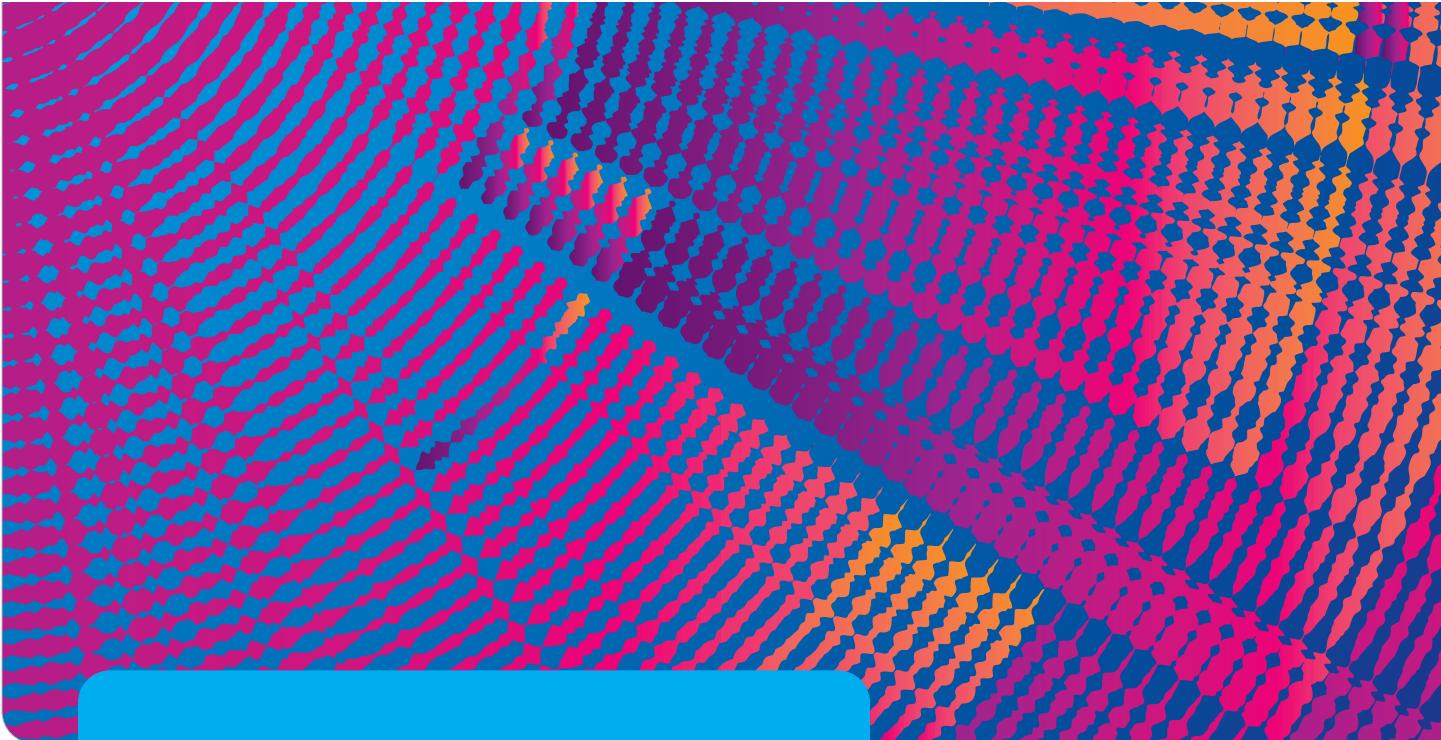


# Production Digital Printing 2026:

Accelerating Toward a Smarter,  
More Connected Future



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# WHO WE ARE



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# Production Digital Printing 2026:

## Accelerating Toward a Smarter, More Connected Future

The year ahead will challenge print service providers to evolve faster, think more strategically, and invest more intelligently.

In 2026, competitive success will hinge on how effectively printers harness automation, data, and digital production to drive profitability and create new customer value.

Drawing on research studies and market analysis from Alliance Insights, the research division of PRINTING United Alliance, this report identifies 10 key trends that will shape production digital printing in the coming year. These trends reveal where opportunity is emerging and how providers can demonstrate resilience, strengthening their efficiency and innovation to thrive in an increasingly competitive and fast-evolving market.

### 1. AUTOMATION RESHAPES THE PRINT WORKFORCE

Automation is redefining the way print work gets done. As production processes become increasingly digital, data-driven, and interconnected, print operations are evolving from labor-intensive environments into technology-enabled workplaces. This shift is helping companies streamline routine tasks, reduce errors, and empower employees to focus on higher-value responsibilities that demand creativity, problem-solving, and technical expertise.

Across Alliance Insights studies, staffing challenges remain one of the top barriers to growth. As skilled prepress, press, and finishing operators retire, automation is assisting printers to bridge workforce gaps and maintain production consistency. Many leaders view automation not only as a cost-control measure but as a means to build agility — enabling smaller, more nimble teams to manage complex, multi-application workflows efficiently.

Alliance Insights research indicates that this transformation is already underway. In an Alliance Insights' 2025 survey of print providers, 87% expect automation to make their operations more resilient and 56% report that automation has improved employee satisfaction. Organizations further along in their automation journey were also more likely to describe their culture as technology-driven and innovative — a key factor in attracting younger, tech-oriented professionals.

### TOP TRENDS 2026

1. **Automation Reshapes the Print Workforce**
2. **AI Becomes a Key Competitive Differentiator**
3. **Finishing Automation Moves to the Forefront**
4. **Production Inkjet Drives the Next Productivity Leap**
5. **Books Reimagined: Supply Chains Go Local**
6. **Direct Mail Reinvents Itself With Data And Design**
7. **Intelligent Marketing Services Taking Center Stage**
8. **Workflow Automation Unlocks Profit and Speed**
9. **Production Inkjet Expands In-Plants' Value**
10. **Packaging Drives Strategic Diversification in Print**

Additional findings from Alliance Insights' *AI in Print: From Concept to Competitive Advantage* report reinforce this evolution. Thirty percent of respondents credit AI with freeing staff from repetitive tasks, and nearly two-thirds (63%) disagree that AI will lead to job reductions. While 87% of respondents recognize the value of employees with AI skills, only 23% are currently hiring for those roles — highlighting a gap between awareness and action. These findings illustrate that AI and automation are augmenting — not replacing — the print workforce, reshaping roles around technology management and creative problem-solving.

Successful automation adoption depends on how effectively companies align technology investment with their people. Alliance Insights research shows that high-performing print providers pair technology investment with employee engagement strategies, such as cross-training, process ownership, and data skills development. These practices build confidence and foster a sense of shared progress as technology transforms traditional roles.

As automation and AI reshape production roles, they are also reshaping perceptions of what a career in print looks like. By positioning the industry as a modern, connected, and purpose-driven field, print providers can attract a new generation of skilled workers who see technology not as a replacement for talent but as a platform for innovation and growth.

## 2. AI BECOMES A KEY COMPETITIVE DIFFERENTIATOR

Artificial intelligence (AI) has evolved from buzzword to business driver, and in 2026 will become even more of a defining competitive differentiator across the printing industry. What started as early experimentation with generative tools is moving to broader industrywide implementation to embed intelligence into workflows, decision-making, and customer engagement. Alliance Insights' study *AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage* identifies how printers' AI usage has advanced, the benefits they've realized, competitive gaps to overcome, and offers strategies and practical "how-to" guidance for successful implementation.

The research also quantifies how strongly printers now associate AI with strategic success. According to the 2025 Alliance Insights' AI survey:

- **85%** of respondents believe AI is critical to future competitiveness.
- **83%** view AI as a source of new business opportunities.
- **42%** believe that firms that fail to adopt AI will not survive long term.

These survey responses underscore the importance of AI and reasons print providers are pursuing it. The printing organizations that will pull ahead are those that treat AI as integral to strategy and operations.

### Adoption Expands Beyond Early Use Cases

The research shows that print providers are moving from isolated AI experiments to integrated applications. Early adoption focused on customer-facing and creative functions, such as content generation, marketing automation, and personalized campaigns. Now, momentum is extending into core production and business processes — from estimating and job scheduling to prepress optimization and predictive maintenance.

Alliance Insights research across multiple studies finds that printers are increasingly using AI to anticipate maintenance needs, balance press loads, and improve estimating accuracy. Image recognition and layout optimization tools are minimizing manual steps in prepress, while generative models support design ideation and variable-content creation. As these tools integrate through automated workflows and MIS systems, printers gain more complete operational visibility from estimating through delivery.

## Intelligence as the New Differentiator

Historically, print competitiveness has centered on faster presses, lower costs, and operational efficiency. AI redefines that equation. The differentiators of the future are insight, adaptability, and foresight — the ability to make smarter decisions faster and turn data into value. AI allows print providers to analyze thousands of variables, from customer buying behavior to machine utilization, and continuously optimize for profitability and customer experience.

The Alliance Insights 2025 AI study findings emphasize that leading companies are not waiting for perfect systems. Instead, they are implementing AI where it provides immediate, visible improvement, building confidence through early wins, then layering more advanced applications over time. These firms are also investing in workforce readiness, data governance, and integration planning to ensure AI becomes a sustainable business capability rather than a one-off experiment.

## The Future of Intelligent Print

The printing industry's digital transformation is entering a new phase that is defined by intelligence rather than automation alone. AI is becoming the connective tissue between creativity, production, and strategy, giving printers new ways to reduce waste, personalize output, and anticipate customer needs.

Alliance Insights' research finds that adoption is no longer just about efficiency but about building competitive advantage. Printing companies using AI to learn faster, make smarter decisions, and execute with greater precision are already setting themselves apart. For those still waiting to explore its potential, the competitive gap is widening — making now the time to act.

## 3. FINISHING AUTOMATION MOVES TO THE FOREFRONT

Finishing has long been one of the most labor-intensive and bottleneck-prone stages of print production. As digital press speeds rise and run lengths shrink, printers are investing in automated trimming, binding, folding, and stacking systems to keep pace with upstream productivity. By integrating finishing more tightly with digital workflows, printers are reducing manual intervention, cutting turnaround times, and improving consistency. Finishing automation is now central to achieving end-to-end efficiency and unlocking the next stage of productivity gains.

As printers continue to optimize workflows and shorten turnaround times, finishing automation is becoming a top operational priority. Automation in cutting, folding, diecutting, and embellishment ensures that postpress processes keep pace with faster digital print engines, reducing bottlenecks and maintaining overall throughput.

Recent findings from the Alliance Insights State of the Industry Survey (sponsored by Canon U.S.A.) highlight this shift in investment focus. Half of commercial printers (50%) reported that their next major capital investment will be in bindery and finishing systems, underscoring the growing recognition that true productivity gains depend on optimizing every stage of production, not just printing. This investment priority aligns directly with respondents' top business goal for 2026 of improving productivity, cited by 77% of respondents.

Finishing automation plays a central role in achieving that goal. By reducing manual touchpoints, standardizing quality, and integrating directly with digital print workflows, finishing systems enable faster job changeovers and consistent output across shifts. For operations managing a mix of short-run, on-demand, and versioned work, automated finishing represents a critical link in achieving full workflow efficiency, and a key factor in meeting customer expectations for faster, more flexible production.

According to [Printing Impressions' article "Navigating Bottlenecks with Smart Finishing"](#), many printers that installed faster inkjet and toner presses have realized their postpress operations couldn't keep up, creating new workflow imbalances. One commercial printer quoted in the article explained, "We had more press power than we had bindery equipment. When you get a backlog and you can't get things out on time, customers aren't happy." The article reports that integrating automation in finishing has become essential to maintaining throughput and avoiding costly production delays.

These same dynamics are reshaping every segment of print, from high-volume commercial operations to short-run publishing. For book printers, finishing automation has become a linchpin for short-run and print-on-demand workflows. Automated binding and book-block systems now enable near-zero-touch transitions between orders, supporting the rise of local, just-in-time book production. Today's finishing systems feature automated setup and self-adjusting trim and binding functions, enabling book printers to manage short-run and on-demand jobs efficiently while maintaining consistent quality.

Direct mail providers are experiencing similar shifts. Shorter, data-driven campaigns require more versioning, smaller batch runs, and faster turnaround times. Automation allows finishing systems to handle variable-data jobs seamlessly, using barcode-driven setups and automatic folding and inserting.

Finishing automation is also reducing the need for specialized labor at a time when skilled bindery operators are difficult to find. Newer finishing systems offer automatic makeready, job-preset storage, and AI-assisted quality inspection to ensure consistent output across shifts.

For commercial printers, the opportunity is twofold: to align finishing throughput with faster digital presses and to use automation as a competitive differentiator. Inline and near-line finishing solutions now allow seamless transitions between offset and digital work, enabling mixed-production environments to run more efficiently. For example, automated cutting, folding, and booklet-making lines can dynamically switch between jobs of different sizes and pagination, reducing makeready waste and shortening job turnaround from hours to minutes.

Looking toward 2026, finishing automation will take a front-line role in completing end-to-end workflow integration. The next stage of advancement will emphasize connectivity, linking finishing systems with MIS, scheduling, and production dashboards to enable real-time job validation, performance tracking, and predictive maintenance.

Printers that integrate automated folding, trimming, stacking, and binding systems within their digital workflows can eliminate production friction, improve profitability, and better meet next-day delivery expectations. In 2026, the most successful commercial, direct mail, and book printers will be those that treat finishing not as the end of the line but as the engine of continuous, connected productivity.

## 4. PRODUCTION INKJET DRIVES THE NEXT PRODUCTIVITY LEAP

Production inkjet printing continues to redefine productivity and profitability across the commercial, in-plant, direct mail, and book printing sectors. Once positioned primarily as a complement to offset and toner systems, inkjet has become the catalyst of automation, cost efficiency, and growth in today's high-performance print operations.

### A New Standard for Speed and Quality

Next-generation inkjet systems — both cut-sheet and high-speed web-fed — are delivering offset-class quality at high speeds, expanding applications in commercial print, high-impact direct mail, and book manufacturing. Advances in printhead precision, pigment ink chemistry, and paper compatibility have pushed inkjet output quality to parity with offset while enabling economical short runs and rapid changeovers.

According to Alliance Insights' 2025 study, [\*Next Generation Inkjet Investment\*](#), productivity and automation remain the top reasons for investment in inkjet technology. Among survey respondents that are planning to add production inkjet:

- **57%** aim to move offset volume to inkjet.
- **47%** seek a lower cost of ownership versus toner.
- **43%** plan to boost productivity and throughput.

## The Automation Advantage

Inkjet presses have become a foundation for end-to-end workflow automation. Respondents to *Next Generation Inkjet Investment* reported an average 10% reduction in production waste, a 9.4% increase in profits, and one fewer operator per press after installation.

Additional findings from a different Alliance Insights' study [\*The Production Inkjet Application Revolution\*](#) (2024) reinforce inkjet's business impact, as users reported it:

- Reduced per-job costs (**58%**).
- Generated new business opportunities (**52%**).
- Increased personalization and versioning capabilities (**48%**).

## Workforce and Sustainability Synergies

Inkjet's productivity advantages also intersect directly with two of the printing industry's most persistent challenges: workforce limitations and sustainability pressures.

Across the industry, print providers are contending with an aging workforce, difficulty recruiting younger employees, and rising labor costs. According to Alliance Insights' *Commercial Print Trends and Strategy Service* (2024), 72% of print providers report difficulty hiring production staff, and 83% cite rising labor costs as a top concern. Production inkjet technology addresses both issues by simplifying complex production steps, automating color and job management, and enabling a single operator to manage multiple systems. The result is a production model less dependent on specialized labor, one that also appeals to a more digitally skilled, tech-oriented workforce.

At the same time, sustainability has shifted from a marketing message to a measurable performance metric. Print buyers and brand owners are under growing pressure to document carbon emissions, reduce waste, and demonstrate responsible sourcing. Inkjet inherently supports these goals: it eliminates plates and make-ready waste, enables precise print-to-demand workflows that minimize overruns, and integrates with automated scheduling to optimize press uptime and energy use. Because jobs can be produced closer to demand and in the exact quantities required, inkjet can reduce both paper waste and transportation impact.

As rising costs, labor shortages, and environmental expectations reshape the print landscape, production inkjet offers a scalable path toward resilience. It brings automation, precision, and sustainability together in one platform — enabling faster and more profitable production.

## 5. BOOKS REIMAGINED: SUPPLY CHAINS GO LOCAL

For more than a decade, book manufacturing has steadily moved away from centralized, long-run offset production toward a distributed model powered by digital technology. What began as short-run digital printing for niche titles has become a structural shift in how publishers produce and distribute books. Production inkjet hasn't created this transformation — it has accelerated and scaled it, combining speed, quality, and cost efficiency to make local and on-demand book manufacturing a mainstream strategy.

### Local Production, Global Efficiency

Publishers and printers are redefining “local” production to mean not only geographic proximity but also operational intelligence. The traditional model of large offshore print runs and extended lead times is being replaced by agile, regionalized networks supported by automation, data integration, and digital workflow connectivity. These distributed systems print closer to readers and retailers, reducing transportation costs, turnaround times, and environmental impact.

[According to Smithers \(2024\), the global inkjet market is projected to grow](#) from U.S. \$117.7 billion in 2024 to \$162.1 billion by 2029, a 6.6% compound annual growth rate. Within that expansion, book printing is a key sector. I.T. Strategies reports that 25% of all book pages in 2022 were printed using inkjet presses, a share expected to reach 39% by 2028, a clear indication of inkjet's growing influence in publishing.

### Inkjet Accelerates a Long-Term Shift

Digital printing gave publishers the flexibility to manage risk and reduce excess inventory. As inkjet matured, it removed many early trade-offs on quality, speed, and substrate options. Its ability to balance short-run economics with high throughput has made it a preferred platform for book manufacturing.

Advanced automation is redefining production economics. Fully connected “smart-factory” lines integrate high-speed inkjet presses with robotic binding, trimming, and finishing systems that can operate with minimal human intervention. These intelligent workflows optimize scheduling, minimize downtime, and enable scalable short-run production.

Automation also helps offset the industry's labor shortage. As veteran offset operators retire and younger workers seek technology-driven roles, inkjet systems reduce reliance on specialized skills, allowing smaller, digitally trained teams to maintain quality and consistency.

### Distributed Networks and Nearshoring

Books are increasingly produced closer to where they'll be sold or read. Ingram's Lightning Source and Amazon's regional make-on-demand hubs exemplify how distributed networks are reshaping fulfillment, printing and shipping within 48 hours to thousands of outlets and enabling publishers to “print only what you sell.”

Returns, historically a major cost burden, have dropped sharply under these models. The [Association of American Publishers \(AAP\) reported](#) a 15.1% year-over-year decline in U.S. trade book returns as of November 2024, reflecting improved inventory alignment and data-driven production.

The pandemic underscored the need for resilient, nearshore supply chains. With inkjet's compact footprint and minimal setup, publishers can now reprint backlist titles, update editions, or version content regionally, reducing freight exposure and turnaround times.

## Quality and Creative Agility

Today's sheetfed and web-fed inkjet presses deliver offset-comparable quality on coated and uncoated papers. Publishers gain new creative flexibility — producing regional versions, frequent updates, or personalized editions economically and on demand. Publishers serving educational and professional markets can update modular content quickly, while trade publishers can revive niche or backlist titles without financial risk.

In the year ahead, book manufacturers and publishers are entering a defining year for digital transformation. Production inkjet is now central to creating faster, more agile supply chains that can scale with real-time demand and evolving market dynamics. The companies investing in automation, data integration, and localized production will set the standard for efficiency and responsiveness, and position themselves to lead the next era of publishing.

## 6. DIRECT MAIL REINVENTS ITSELF WITH DATA AND DESIGN

Rising postal costs are forcing a strategic rethink of direct mail. With postage rates having increased multiple times since 2023 — and additional adjustments possible in 2026 — print and marketing service providers are under growing pressure to deliver greater value from every mailed piece. These cost increases have made it essential for mail to perform with higher precision, stronger engagement, and measurable results.

To meet these expectations, marketers are turning to data-driven targeting, intelligent design, and high-quality digital print to elevate mail's effectiveness and accountability. Digital production, especially high-speed inkjet, enables vibrant color, variable data, and versioned content, allowing every piece to be relevant to its recipient. Automation and analytics tools connect direct mail with digital workflows, making it possible to track performance and link physical engagement to online activity.

Recent findings from the 2025 U.S. Postal Service and Colorado State University study, [“Maximizing Marketing Impact: Why Direct Mail Deserves a Place in Every Multichannel Strategy.”](#) underscore direct mail's competitive advantage when measured against major digital channels. The research found that direct mail achieved a Return on Ad Spend (ROAS) of 55%, exceeding Google Ads (21%), Amazon Ads (15%), and Facebook Ads (4.7%).

Survey data collected from 260 consumers in the same study further validates direct mail's efficacy. The survey compared consumer perceptions of direct mail and digital advertising across key metrics such as purchase intent, brand discovery, and long-term engagement, revealing striking differences:

- 70% of respondents rated direct mail as “*very useful*” or “*extremely useful*” for making purchase decisions, compared to 50% for digital ads.
- 80% of recipients said they were more likely to seek additional information about a brand after receiving direct mail.
- Younger consumers (ages 18–34) were 25% more likely to make a purchase after receiving direct mail than older demographics.

These findings highlight direct mail's ability to cut through digital noise, engage younger audiences, and drive both immediate and long-term actions. Consumers also reported that direct mail feels more personal and trustworthy than digital ads, reinforcing its role as a tactile, emotionally resonant marketing channel that strengthens brand connection.

Production inkjet technology plays a pivotal role in enabling this evolution. Its ability to print high-quality, fully personalized content at production speeds allows marketers to deliver more targeted and responsive campaigns without sacrificing efficiency or visual impact. Inkjet's flexibility also supports shorter, on-demand runs.

Meanwhile, USPS postal promotions and incentives, typically offering 3% to 5% discounts for campaigns that use personalization, color, or interactive technologies, help offset rising postage costs. These programs reward innovation and encourage mailers to combine data, design, and production more creatively to boost engagement and ROI.

Looking ahead to 2026, success in direct mail will hinge on the ability to unite data, design, and digital production. Providers that integrate CRM data, predictive analytics, and automated workflows with high-speed inkjet will give marketers a channel that's both measurable and resilient amid cost pressures.

Postal increases have made one reality clear: mail must earn its place in the marketing mix. By leveraging data intelligence, advanced print technology, and design innovation, direct mail is evolving into one of the most accountable and effective tools in the marketing portfolio.

## 7. INTELLIGENT MARKETING SERVICES TAKING CENTER STAGE

Customer demand for intelligent marketing services is creating new growth opportunities for print providers. As organizations look to harness customer data, analytics, and multiple media channels to improve marketing performance, providers are expanding their capabilities to deliver integrated solutions. Forward-looking companies are adding marketing strategy, data modeling, and digital channel integration. This transformation enables them to deliver measurable results, build stronger client partnerships, and shift from transactional print jobs to programmatic, recurring campaigns that drive consistent revenue.

Intelligent marketing services combine data-driven insight, automation, and cross-channel delivery to help marketers execute campaigns that are more personalized, relevant, and measurable. These services connect print with digital engagement — using data to target the right audience, tailor creative and messaging, and track performance across multiple touchpoints. By aligning print with digital advertising, email, and web activity, providers can offer clients a smooth customer experience supported by analytics and attribution reporting.

To accelerate this evolution, print providers are building in-house agency teams or acquiring marketing agencies to add strategic and creative capabilities. These investments expand their value proposition from print execution to full campaign management that includes brand strategy, creative design, content development, and data analytics. This convergence of marketing intelligence and production capability is redefining how print providers create value, and technologies like production inkjet are making it possible.

Production inkjet technology is central to this shift, as it is a flexible and data-capable print platform, enabling high-quality, full-color personalization at production speeds. Its ability to output unique content on every page — matched to audience segments or individual recipients — makes it a critical enabler of integrated, data-driven marketing programs. Inkjet also supports the short-run, on-demand campaign model that defines today's intelligent marketing workflows, allowing providers to produce smaller, targeted batches profitably and respond quickly to campaign analytics or changing customer behavior.

For many print providers, this shift represents a business model transformation. Intelligent marketing services allow print providers to move beyond output-based pricing into value-based relationships centered on marketing performance. Clients increasingly expect their partners to contribute to measurable outcomes such as customer

acquisition and retention. Providers that combine analytics, automation, and production inkjet with marketing expertise are well-positioned to meet these expectations and become indispensable partners in marketing strategy and execution.

Looking ahead to 2026, intelligent marketing services will continue to gain momentum as print providers connect data, automation, and high-speed inkjet production. Print providers that offer integrated campaign execution, analytics, creative, strategic expertise, and fulfillment under one roof will play a pivotal role in helping customers communicate effectively in a marketplace where personalization, speed, and accountability define success.

## 8. WORKFLOW AUTOMATION UNLOCKS PROFIT AND SPEED

Print providers are navigating intense cost pressures alongside rising customer expectations. Escalating expenses for materials, labor, and energy continue to compress margins, even as buyers demand faster turnaround, shorter runs, and greater personalization. This combination of economic strain and market evolution has made automation a critical lever for maintaining profitability and competitiveness.

Alliance Insights research shows that end-to-end workflow automation is now central to both operational efficiency and profit protection. Automation is no longer an incremental improvement; it is a prerequisite for sustaining competitiveness. By reducing bottlenecks, accelerating workflows, and lowering error rates, automated processes allow printers to increase throughput without expanding headcount. Process automation also make it possible to deliver the speed, reliability, and customization that customers now expect. In effect, automation is both an economic safeguard and a customer-experience enabler.

Recent data from Alliance Insights underscores these pressures. In a 2024 survey of commercial printers, 78% identified maintaining profitability as a key business challenge, while 77% reported automating workflows specifically to reduce costs, address labor shortages, and eliminate production bottlenecks.

The Alliance Insights 2025 State of the Industry Update (sponsored by Canon U.S.A., Inc.) further found that 57% of respondents believe they can offset rising costs through increased productivity, an acknowledgment that efficiency, not pricing power, is a realistic path to margin stability.

Automation's benefits extend across every stage of production, from job onboarding and proofing to color management, scheduling, and finishing. By integrating these processes into unified workflows, printers eliminate handoffs and errors, gain real-time production visibility, and improve overall equipment utilization. Ultimately, workflow automation enables printers to achieve more with less, processing higher volumes of short-run, fast-turn work while maintaining quality and profitability.

As the industry moves into 2026, automation will remain a defining source of competitive strength. Print providers that streamline scheduling, production, and finishing into connected workflows will achieve faster turnaround, greater reliability, and the operational resilience needed to thrive in a margin-sensitive market.

## 9. PRODUCTION INKJET EXPANDS IN-PLANTS' VALUE

In-plant printing operations are redefining their role within the organizations they serve. Once viewed primarily as low-cost service providers, today's in-plants are becoming strategic production centers that deliver speed, quality, and security, all while managing cost and brand consistency.

With parent organizations demanding faster turnaround, secure handling of sensitive data, and greater operational transparency, in-plants are turning to production inkjet as the next engine of transformation. Inkjet technology combines offset-class quality with digital flexibility, enabling in-plants to handle short runs, personalization, and diverse applications efficiently and economically.

According to Alliance Insights' 2024 study, *The Production Inkjet Application Revolution*, the leading reasons in-plants are investing in or considering production inkjet include:

- Increasing production capacity (50%).
- Lowering total cost of ownership compared to toner (50%).
- Migrating toner work to inkjet (40%).

Those that have already made the transition report strong performance improvements compared with their previous systems:

- **63%** reduced overall job costs.
- **58%** achieved more consistent color from job to job.
- **53%** consolidated multiple devices into a single inkjet platform.
- **47%** optimized workflows through automation and integration.
- **47%** enabled “white paper in, finished product out” production.

By consolidating capabilities, production inkjet allows in-plants to reduce outsourcing, lower per-unit costs, and deliver higher-value output with greater efficiency. It also enables cost-effective production of both monochrome and color jobs on the same device, extending digital's profitability and enhancing visual impact.

## From Service Provider to Strategic Partner

Inkjet empowers in-plants to move beyond cost-based competition toward value-based service. They can now offer faster, more secure, and more personalized communication — from transactional documents and employee communications to marketing collateral and training materials — all while maintaining strict brand control.

The technology also supports sustainability goals by minimizing waste, optimizing consumable use, and consolidating production into energy-efficient digital workflows.

## A Future Built on Speed, Intelligence, and Value

As print demands evolve, production inkjet is positioning in-plants for the future. It delivers the speed, flexibility, and intelligence required to operate efficiently in data-driven environments — transforming in-plants from production cost centers into strategic assets that enhance communication, reduce outsourcing, and generate stronger margins for their organizations.

## 10. PACKAGING DRIVES STRATEGIC DIVERSIFICATION IN PRINT

Packaging has become one of the most attractive adjacent markets for commercial printers seeking new avenues for growth. As traditional commercial print volumes have softened, packaging offers a higher-value, repeatable application area that aligns closely with printers' digital production strengths.

Alliance Insights' ongoing tracking of market convergence currently shows that 30% of commercial printers diversifying beyond their primary segments have moved into packaging. Folding cartons and labels are key entry points because they require relatively modest equipment adjustments while providing access to recurring, brand-driven work. For many commercial printers, packaging provides a pathway to supplement declining print volumes.

Digital printing has become the key enabler of this shift. The technology has lowered traditional entry barriers, such as high setup costs and operator specialization, making packaging production more accessible to commercial printers. Advances in hardware, software, inks, and substrates continue to simplify processes, automate workflows, and reduce variables, lowering both investment risk and production complexity.

Alliance Insights' 2025 *Digital Packaging: Maximizing Innovation and Impact* study underscores why packaging has become a natural diversification path. The research study found that 71% of packaging printers now offer digital printing, primarily to meet rising demand for short-run, fast-turn production and increased versioning as brand owners expect to expand SKUs by nearly 30% over the next two years. Digital production allows brands to launch seasonal products, targeted promotions, and region-specific designs without long lead times or costly inventories, advantages that print providers can leverage to position themselves as strategic partners.

Looking ahead to 2026, packaging will continue to drive strategic diversification for commercial printers seeking higher-value, repeatable revenue streams. Those that pair digital print with automated workflows and finishing capabilities will be best positioned to deliver agile, sustainable, and brand-focused packaging solutions.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The year ahead offers print service providers many opportunities to accelerate growth, enhance productivity, and strengthen competitiveness. In 2026, success will depend on how effectively printers connect automation, data, and digital production to create smarter, more responsive operations. The insights and trends outlined in this report highlight where the greatest opportunities lie, from workflow automation and intelligent marketing to digital packaging and AI-driven innovation.

Use these findings to guide your 2026 strategies, investment priorities, and performance goals. By aligning technology, talent, and customer value, print providers can move confidently toward a more agile, connected, and profitable future.

