

Microsoft's Document Solution

By John Giles

Get ready for more confusion in dealing with customer created files and start saving your money for new computers and RIP updates. When Microsoft started shipping its new Vista operating system it included a new document format called XPS. The new format is expected to gain wide acceptance over the next few years and become a document format customers will expect commercial printers to support.

What this means for printers is the need to support a new file format that will require more robust computers, updated RIPs, and new file handling procedures.

The XPS document format is a paginated representation of electronic paper described in an XML-based format. This is an open, cross-platform document format that allows a user to create, share, print, and archive paginated documents. XPS will also be the new print format for Vista.

Windows Vista is going to require a fairly powerful PC with a lot of storage space, a faster CPU, more memory, and larger hard drives. The new operating system itself takes up something like 16GB. Experts recommend that you not upgrade to Vista, but buy a new machine instead.

XPS vs. PDF

No one is quite sure how Vista and XPS are going to affect the printing industry. Microsoft is taking on Adobe again in the standards arena. The last time Adobe and Microsoft faced off it was over font formats. That led to the development of TrueType fonts that choked most imagesetters and platemakers. It wasn't until new RIPs were developed and font outline procedures created that TrueType fonts became less of a factor.

Experts expect a new battle to ensue as Microsoft tries to make XPS the de facto standard for portable files. No one is quite sure what an XPS file is going to look like when it is printed on the various types of professional printing equipment now sitting in printing companies around the world.

Some experts also say that although it shares many similarities with PDF files, XPS is not a dynamic document format and is designed primarily to transform onscreen content such as websites into static, printable documents. Others say XPS supports rich graphical representations such as fills, strokes, smooth graduations, transparencies, and a broad selection of color space, including CMYK and spot.

According to Web reports, XPS will greatly improve publishing from Windows computers by commercial printers. RIPs will need to be upgraded to provide not only the Postscript and PDF support they have today, but also the ability to RIP XPS files. In the long run, it should make printing Word documents and Publisher files easier.

Printers can expect problems with security issues and permissions. The XPS files can be controlled at the user level by IT administrators, which may cause delays when a customer sends an XPS file that is locked down for security. As with secured PDF files, hackers can be expected to develop software to open locked XPS files.

Microsoft says XPS holds several advantages over PDF. Because it will be based on XML and adhere to the Open Packaging Conventions, it is expected to work well with other technologies, such as Microsoft's digital rights management technology and the ZIP compression technology, a component of the conventions. Another advantage is that XPS documents will be independent of

software and hardware. That means users won't need a separate reader to open and read XPS documents if they are running IE 7.0 on Windows Vista, XP, or 2003 Server if Net 3.0 Framework is installed. Microsoft is planning a stand alone XPS Viewer that's similar to Acrobat for 2000, XP, and 2003 Server. Not surprising is that Microsoft has not yet developed an XPS Viewer for the Macintosh.

Long Term Influence

Global Graphics, a major RIP manufacturer and expert on open document and print solutions, has been demonstrating RIPs with the XPS technology since 2004. According to the company's chief technology officer Martin Bailey, speaking at the PODi conference in Anaheim in February, there should be a massive potential market of new print buyers who usually would pay for high-end commercial work seeking output of their files. He sees the XPS formats penetrating the copy shop and small commercial printing environments first. He also predicts many of the problems associated with Publisher and PowerPoint files could disappear as users embrace XPS. Bailey sees the graphic arts industry having to support both the PDF and XPS file formats for a long time to come.

The move to XPS support will be driven by customer demands. Some printers still avoid customer created files, and others have yet to adopt PDF workflow procedures because they haven't been pressured by their customers to do so. Typically these are smaller print shops with older equipment.

More successful printers are implementing a PDF workflow and taking advantage of the technology offered by RIP manufacturers. It is becoming common practice to have customers use an automatic PDF creation program on their computers to transmit files to the printing company electronically. Once the printer receives the PDF file it is entered into the workflow where it is preflighted, corrected, paginated, and output. The prepress staff can handle more files since they only have to work with files that require human intervention for corrections.

The good news is that printers do have time to get ready for the onslaught of XPS files. The new operating system will require a bigger, faster computer, so most users will make the move to the new operating system when they are ready to buy a new computer. It should also be possible to convert the XPS file to a PDF file for production workflows.

XPS can either be a blessing or a curse. It could generate more printing from businesses using Microsoft products. It could also slow production as printers invest in training and new technology. Whatever it ends up being, printers will have to contend with it. It took PDF more than a decade to have an effect on the printing industry. It may only take XPS months. At least printers will get fair warning and support from vendors to make the transition easier.

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