

O'Brien: Our Desire To Hit 'Print' Hasn't Dimmed

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Mercury News 01/23/2010 Despite the accelerated pace of this digital age, there are still some things we do that remain stubbornly resistant to change.

Think about our deeply held desire to print out lots and lots of stuff, for instance. Documents. Photos. Web sites. You name it. Hitting the print button remains embedded in our DNA.

Of course, at the dawn of the PC age, futurists heralded the coming of the paperless office. But instead, the volume of printing exploded, rather than ebbed. The paperless office remained a fantasy.

So I was intrigued when I read a story about Hewlett-Packard by my colleague Brandon Bailey that explored the struggles of its famed printing business. The story raised, for me, some intriguing questions: Were people printing less? And if so, was it because of the economy or was the long-predicted shift in behavior under way?

So I recently chatted with Tuan Tran, vice president and general manager of HP's Inkjet Consumer Solutions. Having worked at HP since the early 1990s, you could say Tran is a man with printer ink in his veins. And after listening to my hypothesis, he delivered a clear verdict: We're still addicted to printing.

Tran estimates that the amount of stuff being printed has grown between 4 and 5 percent annually since the early 1990s. HP does a lot of behavioral and ethnographic research, and none of it has shown signs of any fundamental shift in our attachment to printed material.

"That need is a pervasive human need that will stand the test of time," Tran said. "From the cave man to today, there is a need that will always be there. We like something and we want to share it in a very personable way, and printing it is still the way to do that."

What's changed is that we print a much smaller percentage of the stuff that we have. But because the amount of stuff we're creating has grown exponentially, the lower percentage still translates into an increase in printed material. Consider that HP's Snapfish has 10 billion digital photos stored there. Or that Facebook gets 2.5 billion photos uploaded every month, Tran said.

HP breaks the reasons for our love of printing into three distinct categories: documentation, comprehension, and cherishing.

Documentation is a big driver of printing volume, with many official agencies still requiring printed versions of everything from legal filings to mortgage agreements.

Comprehension refers to cases where someone wants to more deeply consider the nuances of something, or the written material is in longer form and thus more awkward to read on a computer screen.

And cherishing comes from a central emotional need that comes from touching something, say, a photo in an album rather than on a screen.

"I spent hours over the holiday break taking all of our photos and putting them in a leather-bound album," Tran said. "It's a much more personal thing to hand someone. It's an emotional, communicative thing."

So the printing instinct remains. But at the same time, our printing behavior faces a new hurdle. And therefore, so does HP. As the world goes increasingly mobile, and wireless, how do we print anywhere, at anytime?

"The way we think about giving people access to printers is stuck in the 1990s," Tran said. "We need to change that." By that, Tran was referring to a PC tethered in some way to a printer.

How to reinvent that for this century? When I'm walking downtown with an iPhone and I want to print something, how am I going to be able to do that?

"You're describing a use case that we're working on actively," Tran said. "I'll have something to tell you this summer. We can't preannounce these things. But if we talk on the phone in six months, and we don't have something that fundamentally changes the way we think about printing, then I'll buy you dinner."

Deal. Though since I'm always eager to see something mind-blowing, this is a bet I'd be happy to lose.

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