

Plug-in Technology for VDP

How it works, and why we like it!

Background Information

Plug-in technology has been available in the graphic arts marketplace for many years, but has not typically been associated with sophisticated software products or advanced data publishing systems. Most people still think of plug-in technology in terms of that \$49 Quark XTension they purchased ten years ago that added some special utility feature not yet available in QuarkXPress.

With the advent of Adobe InDesign, and advances in computer hardware and processor speed, all that has changed. Today, plug-in technology, especially the technologies offered for QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign, are incredibly powerful. Products such as DesignMerge Pro that have been developed using these technologies can take advantage of the power of the most advanced composition engines in the world, and extend that power to provide new, feature-rich applications.

In the case of DesignMerge Pro, we have developed a product that serves to supplement both QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign by adding special features for variable data printing (VDP) and data publishing applications. Combining QuarkXPress or InDesign with DesignMerge gives you one of the most advanced VDP solutions on the market today.

The following section is meant to provide a broader look at plug-in technologies and to answer some common questions. This section also compares the Meadows DesignMerge product to other variable data printing software products that utilize different technology approaches.

What is Plug-In Technology?

Plug-in technology is a general term that refers to a software module that is developed to work “in conjunction with” another third-party software application. In the graphic arts, the best examples of plug-in technology are XTensions modules for QuarkXPress, and plug-in modules for Adobe InDesign.

How does Plug-In Technology Work?

Both QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign provide a way for developers to write software that communicates with and controls their applications. In this fashion, the plug-in software is developed as a standalone component that “plugs into” the QuarkXPress or InDesign applications. The plug-in software typically serves to provide additional features that are not provided by the host application. Plug-in software cannot be run as a standalone module — it must be installed along with QuarkXPress or Adobe InDesign in order to function.

Is DesignMerge a Plug-in?

Yes. DesignMerge consists of a suite of approximately six different plug-in modules that work with either QuarkXPress or Adobe InDesign. DesignMerge extends the functionality of QuarkXPress or InDesign by allowing the user to link text, pictures, or articles to database information. The data is merged into standard QuarkXPress or InDesign pages, and replaces the identified variable areas. The merged document can then be output in a variety of file and VDP formats. DesignMerge is a feature-rich application that is impossible to fully describe in a single paragraph. For more information about DesignMerge, please visit the DesignMerge web site (www.designmerge.com).

What Are The Advantages of Plug-ins for VDP?

There are several advantages to plug-in technology in the VDP space. The most important advantage is that the software can utilize the two most powerful and popular composition engines in the world, QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign. All of the composition features that a user has grown accustomed to are fully supported by DesignMerge. Every aspect of the composition process, including kerning and letterspacing, hyphenation and justification, runarounds, colors, multi-page composition, styling, tables, etc. are all available for use. A user simply takes an existing document, and uses DesignMerge to "Make It Variable". The variable output will look just like a File/Print was done for each individual data record.

Another important advantage to a plug-in approach for VDP is the ramp-up and production time. Because the user is allowed to remain in the QuarkXPress or InDesign application the entire time, there is very little training required. It is not necessary to learn a brand new page layout tool. Rather, using the DesignMerge interface, the user can very easily identify variable elements in an existing document, start the merge session, and produce VDP output, all without having to leave the QuarkXPress or InDesign environment. This also makes it very easy to affect edits to the document, as the user can make them immediately, just like they are editing a "normal" QuarkXPress or InDesign document... because they are!

How Do Other VDP Programs Differ from the DesignMerge Plug-in Approach?

Many of the desktop VDP products on the market today all share a common flaw. They all utilize their own composition engines.

What does this mean? Well, the way that most of these packages work is to separate the "fixed" (non-changing) portion of a document from the "variable" portion of the document. Typically, the user is instructed to save the fixed portion of the job as a "background form" in PDF or some other format. If they are working in QuarkXPress or InDesign, it is up to them to delete or suppress the variable portion of the document, then save what's left out as a PDF file.

Once the fixed file is created, the user then runs a completely separate VDP application. Most of the standalone VDP applications are themselves page layout applications, and they provide tools that are similar to QuarkXPress or Adobe InDesign. The user places the background form onto the page in the VDP page layout software, and this becomes the fixed portion of the document.

Next, using the tools provide by the VDP program, they create and "overlay" the variable portion of the document on top of the fixed graphic, being careful to properly align the variable data so that when everything is printed, the composite piece is properly aligned. This is not always easy to do, especially when working with a small variable area where the positioning must be very accurate.

What is Wrong With The Approach of Other VDP Programs?

We feel that there are several disadvantages to this approach. The most important consideration is that the variable portion of the job does not look the same as the fixed portion of the job. The fixed background created in QuarkXPress or InDesign looks great, exactly like it should. However, because the variable portion of the text is created and printed using a separate VDP application, the quality of the output will not match the fixed background. Why? Because the text is composed using an entirely different composition engine, not QuarkXPress or InDesign.

The second problem is that many of the features that an operator is accustomed to using in QuarkXPress or InDesign are simply not available in other VDP applications. For example, features such as drop-shadows, drop-caps, type on an angle or curve, graphic image runarounds, multi-page composition, and tabular composition, may simply not be supported by these programs. And it is not hard to imagine why. A composition engine is a very sophisticated piece of software, and both Quark and Adobe have spent years refining their engines, and continue to add new features and improvements all the time. This means that the standalone VDP applications are in constant "catch up" mode, trying to match the features offered by Quark and Adobe. Practically all of the standalone VDP software applications on the market today are limited with respect to their composition capabilities.

There is also the issue of edits. Remember that it is necessary to create the fixed portion of the job using QuarkXPress, InDesign, or some other application and then place that as a non-editable graphic in the VDP software. Therefore, editing the fixed portion of the document requires backing all the way out to the original application, making the edits, and then re-positioning the background again. If the positioning of any of the fixed elements changes, you also then need to re-align the variable portion of the job. This can be incredibly time-consuming, and prone to errors.

Finally, there is the training and “comfort level” aspect, which we have found to be a very important issue with most users. A separate application means that the user must learn a new page layout program, and they are often reluctant to do so. We feel that remaining within the QuarkXPress or InDesign environment offers a distinct advantage, because the user already knows how to use these applications.

What's the Best Approach to VDP?

Obviously, we are big fans of plug-in development, and that has been our exclusive focus for more than 16 years. DesignMerge is a fantastic VDP tool for a large variety of VDP jobs, and has no limit on the number of records it can process. The average output speed of DesignMerge is much faster than the speed of most digital presses on the market today. However, as much as we like DesignMerge, we also feel that eventually, customers wishing to fully support VDP may ultimately wish to utilize more than one application.

For instance, if you are typically running VDP jobs with high-volume, transactional data (bills, statements, etc.), it may be necessary to look at a specialized VDP application. While faced with the limitations described earlier, the trade-off will be that the application will handle the transactional data more efficiently.

The “templated” approach to VDP addresses an entirely different segment of the market, where a VDP template is created and stored on the digital press. Then, an automated data stream is fed to the press and the entire merge and print process happens there. This approach is even more limited than using a standalone VDP application, but it does offer advantages for automated processes where the document design is relatively simple and the variable data is minimal. DesignMerge has output drivers for several template formats, but a manufacturer's code is required to install on your printing press.

Do You Have More Questions?

If you still have questions about DesignMerge, plug-in technology, or which VDP technology is right for you, please give us a call. Our professional sales staff have been fully trained and are very knowledgeable in the areas of VDP and data publishing. More information is also available on our web site, at www.meadowsp.com.