These are anxious times for print publishers, with new opportunities for electronic communication emerging every day and ink-on-paper revenues continuing to dive.

But print is far from over; it still makes too much money. And it remains to be seen which digital publishing platform—the Web, tablets, mobile, e-books or technology not even on the market yet—will end up atop the information heap. So publishers will likely manage multiple outputs simultaneously for a long time. Whether that becomes an expensive burden or an opportunity to grow readership depends on how multichannel strategies are implemented.

Fortunately, just as quickly as new channels are emerging, so is technology to integrate them into existing workflows. With the right tools, print publishers can leverage the assets and staff they already have to develop new channels and maintain the valuable old ones—without going broke.

The key is to use technology and smart planning to align separate channels, whether the content is single-sourced, slightly repurposed or drastically different for each of them, in a unified publishing process in which content is authored once and sent to many.

WHY MULTICHANNEL PUBLISHING?
All publishers want to get the most value out of their content. Exploring outlets beyond the printed page is a perfect place to start. Developing a plan that not only reformats existing print content for other channels but also adds value by taking advantage of the features and capabilities indigenous to each medium is crucial. To take an easy example, a map and set of directions on the printed page can be a link to a mapping site on a Web page and an expandable pinch-and-zoom image on the iPad.

This same plan should include a method for print production to continue as usual. This allows creative teams to support their current money-maker while expanding into new ones.

All creative professionals want to get in on the design opportunities presented by digital publishing. The most popular tablet-friendly features—animations, multistate objects, slideshows, pinch-and-zoom images, video and more—provide artists with a refreshingly creative freedom that can bring their concepts to life. HTML5 and other Web technologies offer even more possibilities.

And since much of the industry’s leading digital design software is constantly being updated with the functionality to build and execute these concepts without requiring specialized programming, it’s easier than ever for creatives to use their favorite tools to do new things.

Progressive publishing teams are always looking for ways to promote audience growth. Venturing beyond traditional print publishing is one of the best ways to attract new customers and expand the overall brand. But the level of interest for digital media might not be entirely clear to publishers who haven’t yet jumped on the multichannel bandwagon. An estimated 1.9 billion people use the Internet, 25 million iPads had been sold as of June 2011, and according to research for the Online Publishers Association, more than half of iPad users prefer using their tablet for reading.

Print readers aren’t gravitating toward new media just because it updates faster, but because it’s interactive, immersive and, frankly, more fun. And many readers aren’t just excited to see the groundbreaking innovations and augmented content that creative teams are building for various digital channels, they’re expecting them. If your team isn’t expanding its multimedia offerings, your audience might wonder why.

WHERE IS THE REVENUE?
Of course, any investment in new media needs to yield tangible results. Publishers have struggled for years to find an effective business model for digital content and subscriptions, and the results are far from conclusive, even for recent well-publicized initiatives.

- The New York Times pay wall went live this March, with subscriptions ranging from $15 to $35 for four weeks. Criticized at first, the strategy has garnered the paper some 224,000 paid digital subscriptions. (Note that The Times online is still a free add-on.
Most of The Wall Street Journal’s content has been behind a pay wall (currently $2.99 a week) since 1997. About half of its 2.1 million 2010 paid circulation is believed to come from WSJ.com subscribers. (The Journal has been combining print and web subscribers for reporting purposes since 2003.)

There’s even a trendlet, reported this August by The Columbia Journalism Review, of hyperlocal Web outlets actually adding print products for prestige, readership growth or profit. “Our print edition helped support our online edition for the first few years,” said Denise Greig of The Forum, which covers four towns in rural New Hampshire.

The emergence of tablets has created a timely opportunity to refresh the electronic subscription business model, and many companies are getting onboard with unique approaches. Conde Nast’s Wired and New Yorker iPad magazines have reported success in attracting readers with very different formats. Meanwhile, The Daily, the iPad-only newspaper launched in February by News Corp, is believed to be having less success making money with its built-from-the-ground-up approach, despite more than a million downloads of the free app from Apple’s App Store.

Marketplaces such as the Apple’s App Store have helped instill in readers the mindset that it’s acceptable to spend money on tablet content (as opposed to consuming free content on news websites). And even though many publishers were initially discouraged by Apple’s original approval process, the company recently made it easier to quickly monetize tablet publications by easing the rules for how subscriptions to iPad publications could be sold.

Money-savvy publishers also need to consider the new opportunities that electronic media, especially interactive platforms, offer their advertisers.

Many tablet publishers have already incorporated interactive ad campaigns into their content with positive results. Ad Age reported in March that third-party research is supporting this conclusion. For example, readers of the iPad edition of Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issue had higher ad recall than readers of the...
print issue. Even without Flash (widely used in online advertising but banned from the iPad by Apple), advertisers are enlivening their iPad ads with slide shows, videos, animation and social networking options. QR codes linking to special offers are another innovation.

WHERE ARE THE COSTS?
Adding new workflows to existing production systems and maintaining multiple workflows takes time and manpower, and the costs have to be weighed against their implementation.

It’s important to acknowledge from the start that producing for multiple outputs will multiply the amount of work, even with efficiencies like automation.

Thrifty organizations will utilize their existing staff as much as possible when deploying a new system, and software developments and services are making this easier every day. But some staff members will inevitably be taking on more work.

Initial investments in software, including add-ons and upgrades for existing tools and new hardware, will likely be required. And even if no additional hires are brought on, time and cash must be allotted for training. Some operations will find it cost-effective to contract with an outside company to develop custom solutions, help with design or manage the transition.

It’s also important to factor in new fees, such as hosting. Some of these expenses are based on the number of downloads, while others are based on download size and other somewhat unpredictable variables. All of this must be taken into account.

EDITORIAL/PRODUCTION ECONOMIES
The key to efficient multichannel publishing is setting up a system that keeps editing in one unified stream, minimizing the number of times individual objects have to be handled for different outputs. Publishers should look for a publishing solution that lends itself to the “author once, send to many” principle, with flexible, built-in options for multichannel publishing, such as the vjoon K4 Cross-Media Publishing Platform.

It also helps to adopt a solution that relies on the editing software already in use. Sticking with familiar software saves time and money by flattening the learning curve for editing and production teams, and also makes it easier to repurpose existing content or take care of what’s in the pipeline than starting from scratch with unfamiliar formats and processes. Many up-to-date solutions for multimedia publishing, including K4, are based on Adobe InDesign, which is widely used in creative shops.

On the other hand, for publishers who have been limping along with older, print-only systems—especially systems that are no longer supported by the vendor—the need to make the move to multimedia is a good justification for upgrading.

Either way, if it’s necessary to bring in any freelancers or other outside consultants, a well-defined workflow based on core technology can be particularly beneficial. Using industry-standard tools, publishing teams will find it much easier to get new users onboard with minimal training.

Ideally, a publishing team would centralize its editing process by feeding all content through a common workflow hub that would manage output to all channels. Intelligent cross-media management systems like vjoon K4 allow content to be created and directed to as many user-defined output channels as needed. Each object workflow can have one or more defined output channels, with each output channel having its own workflow and its own tasks. In K4, this is accomplished through a powerful configurable database setup. The K4 plugins include dedicated options for XML conversion for the Web and other media, as well as for producing iPad editions with the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite, the emerging standard for tablet publishing. DPS is a complete InDesign-based solution that allows creative teams to create, distribute, monetize and optimize publications for tablet devices.

FOCUS ON CONTENT
New technologies are emerging every day to help put out information in a multitude of media. Publishers who are able to adapt will make content itself the key rather than any single output channel. Print isn’t dead, but “print publisher” as a job description is.

By developing smart production workflows where content is “authored once, sent to many,” content publishers can ensure that they have a future as well.