

Artwork Automation in the European Promotional Products Market



FastEditor



**Artwork automation is no longer an operational detail.
It is a P&L driver.**

Introduction – Europe Is Under Pressure First

European promotional product companies operate in a structurally more complex environment than the US.

Average operational cost per order:

- Europe: €40–€60
- United States: \$35–\$50

Since 2019, European operational cost per order increased from €30 to €52. Europe is experiencing profitability pressure earlier, and more intensely, than the US.

Structural Differences

US companies tend to outsource more operational work (vectorization, digitizing, customer service) to Asia. This reduces direct labor burden.

European companies more often:

- Keep artwork operations local
- Operate across multiple languages
- Manage complex compliance environments
- Maintain tighter supplier collaboration

Additionally, US average order values tend to be higher, making operational overhead easier to absorb.

Factor	Europe	United States
Operational Costs per Order	€40–52	\$35–45
Outsourcing of Operations	Lower	Higher
Average Order Value	Lower	Higher
Margin Pressure	Immediate	Emerging

Strategic Insight

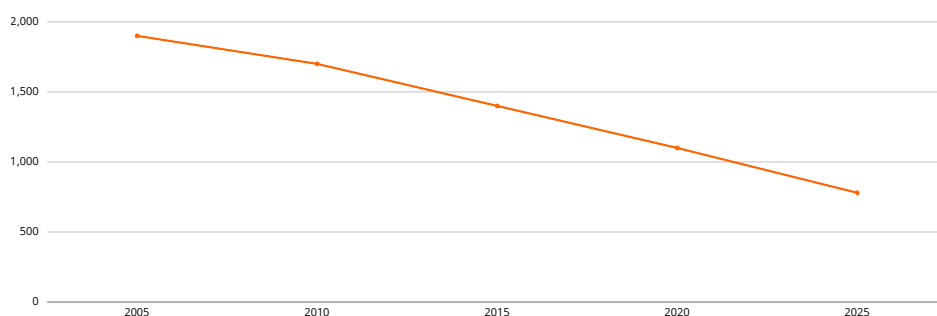
Europe may be several years ahead of the United States in experiencing the full impact of customization-driven margin compression.
That positions Europe not as lagging, but as leading the necessary transformation.

Trend 1: Lower Order Values

Fragmented Order Volumes

The market for promotional products and merchandise is quickly becoming more and more “on demand”. Instead of buying big bulk orders, customers are moving more to flexible models where they order what they need, when they need it.

This results in significantly lower order values. Instead of buying an item in bulk (quantity 1000) and stock in their own location, it becomes normal to place 5 orders of 200 items. This reduces the average order value heavily.



An example of an European reseller and the average items per order.

Operational effort per order does not scale with volume.

Whether the order is 25 units or 500 units, the workflow remains largely identical:

- Artwork checking
- Proof creation
- Customer revisions
- Production file preparation

Margin Erosion: Visual Explanation

Example: Hard Promo Product

- 150 units
- €1.50 selling price
- €225 revenue
- 30% gross margin target = €67.50
- Full-chain operational artwork cost: €45

Margin Flow

Revenue: €225

Gross margin pool: €67.50

Artwork cost: €45

Remaining margin: €22.50

Effective margin: from 30% to 10%

Artwork handling consumes 66% of the margin pool.

Ecosystem Scale

At 100,000 similar orders annually:

€45 × 100,000 = €4.5M in artwork handling cost

A 25% efficiency improvement = €1.125M margin protection across the ecosystem.

This is not incremental. This is structural EBITDA impact.

Trend 2: Higher Salaries & Operational Costs

From 2019 to 2024, the operational costs per order have risen from €30 to €42 per order (average Europe)

Main drivers for the increase:

- 15–30% wage increases for DTP & customer service
- 30–50% employer contributions in Western/Northern Europe
- Skilled labor shortages
- Inflation adjustments

Labor will not structurally decrease. Manual workflows amplify this pressure.

Trend 3: Customer Expectation Acceleration

There are new customer segments developing in the market with different needs than the traditional customer segments. Younger generations are inclined to not seek personal contact via phone, or even mail and chat, and are demanding fast order processing and delivery.

They don't want contact with their supplier on print proofs and approvals, and don't want to be bothered by "vector files" or "too low DPI". They expect the customer journey to be as close as they know from Amazon, Zalando and Uber Eats.

Modern buyers expect:

- Instant previews
- Real-time product visualization
- Immediate proof approval
- Seamless UX

Next to that, they believe that getting their logo production ready is not their job. They want to upload what they have available, and let the company where they purchase deal with clean ups and improvements.

Yet workflows at resellers in Europe and the US are still very traditional. After uploading the logo as a customer, you are lucky to get a print proof within 24 hours. In the 30% of the time that there are no revisions needed, the customer is lucky to get their production in production within 3 working days. If there is rework to be done, the timelines are compounding.

The results in the gap between expectation and workflow is widening.

Impact on the Value Chain

The traditional processes have a massive impact on the value chain, both at the distributor/reseller and the supplier level. The processes between distributor and supplier are often disconnected, which leads to many activities that happen on both sides.

Distributors

Distributors often focus on artwork intake and communication with the customer on the print proof. Print proof creation is often time consuming and having strong dependencies on the supplier or internal teams. After approval of the print proof, there artwork is often still far from production ready.

These difficulties lead together to the following impact for distributors:

- High DTP hours per order
- Low proof-to-order conversion (~40%)
- Margin compression on low-ticket items
- High operational pressure to support growth

Suppliers

Suppliers often have little control over the artwork process and are not in direct contact with the end customer. Some suppliers support in creating the print proof, and have severe operational costs doing this (including the rework). When print proofs are approved and orders confirmed, there are still many mismatches in artwork received versus the production specifications.

These difficulties lead together to the following impact for suppliers:

- High volume and pressure in print proof creation
- High percentage of rework
- Long time to get order in production and production delays
- Mismatch in end customer expectation and the product produced

Artwork complexity affects both sides: distributors and suppliers.

What Happens If We Do Not Automate?

If manual artwork handling continues:

1. Margin compression accelerates
2. Growth requires proportional hiring in operational positions
3. DTP becomes a bottleneck
4. Conversion rates lag behind digital-first competitors
5. Smaller orders become economically unattractive

The risk is structural competitiveness decline for individual companies, and serious risk in profitability for the complete value chain and industry.

Artwork Automation as the only Scalable Lever

Artwork automation is not a single, separated process but much more a deeply integrated and connected workflow. While small individual improvements can help, real impact is created by workflow design and systems that work between different industry players.

The distributor / reseller is the party that receives the (first version of) the customer's artwork and aligns with the customer about the print proof. However, the artwork needs to be aligned to the production specifications of the supplier, which creates a process that involves multiple parties.

To achieve full automation, there needs to be connectivity across the different steps in the artwork process, and across the different industry players. Customer, reseller and supplier needs to be connected in one, integrated process to find alignment and efficiency.

The following process parts need to be fully integrated to achieve maximum efficiency:

- Artwork upload and processing
- Artwork analysis
- Comparison to production specifications
- Artwork clean-up and improvement
- Product content and visualization (including personalization)
- Print proof creation
- Print proof approval
- Production ready file creation and sharing

Automation shifts artwork handling from labor-based (individual, linear work) to system-based automated, scalable work). This requires completely different business leaders, as well as software partners than before.

How FastEditor solves Artwork Automation

At FastEditor, we believe in connecting the complete chain (from customer to distributor to supplier) in an integrated process. This is the only way that high impact can be achieved in automation and efficiency, combined with the very best user experience for the end customer.

FastEditor brings this vision to life via its different software products.

Product Hub

FastEditor's Product Hub covers the biggest catalogue of promotional products and merchandise in Europe. Every product contains content for visualization, and the full production specifications of the supplier. These specifications, that are stored in the database, allow for direct comparison between the artwork the customer uploaded and what is needed for production.

The Product Hub includes (but doesn't limit to) the following type of suppliers:

- Promotional product suppliers like PF Concept, Solo midocean, XD Connects, Reflects, Passot Innovation, and many more.
- Niche promotional product companies like Bambook, Ayano Direct, Markclip, Promoplants, and many more.
- Apparel brands like Stanley/Stella, TH Clothes, New Wave Textiles, Fruit of the Loom, Bladklader, and many more.
- Textile decorators like Lynka, Texam, Brezo, Drukbaas, and many more.

Logo Editor

In order to automate the artwork process to the maximum extend, FastEditor prefers to review the customer's artwork as early as possible in the process. This way, it allows for direct analysis and comparison to the production specifications. After analysis, 85% of the uploaded artwork doesn't fit the production specifications completely, which can be caused by small or big issues.

The user interface of the Logo Editor gives the user direct feedback on what needs to be improved, and helps them with easy to understand screens:

- Backgrounds that are identified in the logo can be removed with one click
- When more colors are identified in the logo than the production technique supports, the user can simply merge the colors (or select the recommended color merging by the system)
- When too little details or line thickness is identified, the customer can remove or scale the selected elements

The user experience of the Logo Editor is optimized for simplicity for the end customer and building trust in the process. If qualities issues are identified that can be solved by FastEditor's technology, these improvements will happen in the background instead of creating uncertainty for the customer. This means that instead of "low quality warnings", the technology:

- Automatically upscales the quality of the artwork when the DPI is too low for production, and can achieve a 300% increase in quality.
- Automatically vectorizes pixel artwork to vector files when needed for the production technique.

When the artwork is improved by the end customer and the technology (this often happens within a few seconds), the artwork is automatically placed on the product. The end customer can change the position, rotate and scale to find the perfect location on the product.

When the user is done with editing, they see the print proof with all details. The user can approve the print proof (which is saved in the system), and returns back to the shopping cart to finalize the order. When the order is placed, the production ready files are generated and shared.

Studio Tool

Where the Logo Editor is optimized for e-commerce orders, the Studio Tool helps to increase efficiency and automation for offline orders. The Studio Tool allows sales and account managers (are internal design and DTP teams) to quickly create and download print proofs and production ready files, all within 30 seconds.

All products from the Product Hub are available in this tool, and all features and functionalities of the Logo Editor can also be applied. This leads to an enormous autonomy for sales and account managers, and having full control over their quotation scoring process.

Get an Automation Check by FastEditor

Do you want to explore artwork automation and advice on how it can impact your business? As part of the partnership with GXN, FastEditor offers a free consultation and product demo for GXN Members.

Send an email to rick@fasteditor.com with the Subject Line "GXN Member: Consultation and Product Demo" to book this directly.

For more information, check out [fasteditor.com](https://www.fasteditor.com).