



coprinted.com

written in May 2017 by Eduard Boka

Launched in August 2012, coPrinted is a project set out to conquer the DIY and printable market. With over 1200 gorgeous designs and a design studio that empowers the user to customize his cards in any way he sees fit, from changing any design & text color, to changing text on the fly and fine-tuning it to perfection. It now has over 32000 registered members from which over 8000 members have purchased a subscription.

WHAT WAS THE PLAN?

In 2011 when we started building the project there was nothing like it on the market. We were shooting for the moon and it was all based on a crazy ambition on empowering people to generate high quality printable files straight from their browsers with minimal waiting times.

It needed to:

- be easy to use;
- generate the printable file instantly VS waiting for a designer to customize your invitation and send it back to you customized via e-mail;
- load designs quickly;
- enable color customization on the fly;
- have beautiful designs, more stunning than everything on the web

For the monetization part it was thought out to have a credit model and a subscription model with the minimum period being one month.

HOW WE STARTED OUT

The problem with the project is that there was only me and one super talented artist, [Dan Ianos](#) back then in the company. So we were a two man show. Dan had no experience with Illustrator and wasn't really keen on learning it and I was a mediocre programmer (at best) that had limited experience in programming with Actions Script 3 in Adobe Flash. Mind you, these were times when JavaScript was not as widely adopted as today across all browsers and the functionality it provided was minimal for what I was embarking on.

I did some research on manipulating BitmapData in Action Script, figured out how to asynchronously send the data over to the webserver (PHP) and try to save it as an image. Once I found a solution and the prototype was working, I started learning ActionScript and while learning I was building the coPrinted studio which is the heart of the project.

I quickly hired two artists which had very little knowledge of Illustrator (my budget was meager) but were willing to learn. And they gave their heart out to come up with amazing designs (at least we thought they were).

In under a year we had a complete project. I've built the studio, I built the site with help for the backend from a talented programmer, [Victor Munteanu](#) and we launched into the unknown.

FAILS, LESSONS & CHANGES

The assumption was that once we launch, people will find out about us and will be tickled to death with our amazing product. We even created a quick video presentation that's still available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rseT7XfktVA> (thank you Andrada!). I quickly invested all the money I had left (\$1000) into Google Ads to get traffic to our website and start rolling in the dough... but the dough didn't come.

Here are some of the fails & lessons we learned along the way.

PRICING STRUCTURE

We didn't have any selling experience whatsoever. We thought our product was awesome and people are going to cough up a lot of money for it. We went by the premise that as an Adobe Photoshop license was around \$900 we could charge ~\$1100/lifetime as our studio was like Photoshop and we also had over 1000 ready-made designs.

To make it even more awesome we added a bunch of pricing tiers to confuse the heck out of people. You could purchase credits (we got this idea from iStockPhoto) and with credits you could download a certain amount of printable files. The smallest tier was \$17 for about 25 credits. I think this landed you around 4 generated files. You could also purchase a subscription that enabled unlimited file generations with price starting from somewhere around \$100 per month.

From the marketing budget of \$1000 we've landed one customer for the \$17 tier. Bless you Stephanie Lane, wherever you are!

Now you can imagine that getting \$17 for \$1000 was not a lucrative deal so it was a no-go. This was a time when terms like growth hacking, A/B testing and the likes were non-existent or at least I haven't heard about them. In Romania we had quite a knowledge gap and there was no one to ask. There was no community and if anyone was working on something, it was everybody for itself.

In January 2013 I came to the realization that nobody is buying our stuff. In an act of *f*ck it all*, I removed the whole credit pricing modules, decreased the subscription price to \$3/month and let the site be.

Sure enough sales started appearing and we were selling about 10 subscriptions per month in February 2013, then about 30 in March and we got to about 150/month by the end of the year. Mind you I haven't marketed coPrinted at all, there was no SEO work involved. I was clueless that I can pursue such directions.

In 2014 we upped the pricing to \$6.99/month to see if the customers really valued what we actually had. And they were willing to pay the price. And we kept on growing the number of subscribers. The whole growth was done organically and I was finally content that something was at least happening. We also partnered up with McKenzie Crest Inc. a fantastic family-owned print company that helped us print our cards physically. This way we were able to offer our customers in the US custom printed cards.

In 2016, there was a decrease in subscriptions, mostly because new players have come into the market with newer technology and broader offering than us so I decided to give away the printable generation for free to anyone with an account with the hopes of increasing our traffic and driving it towards the print side of the business.

DESIGNS

When we started out, we imagined that our designs are phenomenal. I mean they looked nothing like what was going on in the US. We knew better: super detailed designs were the way to go... except they weren't. The market wanted simple designs, little customization options and the "American" feel. We were way off.

In 2013 we created about 500 designs that were more in the look that people wanted and they automatically became the most visited and the most used designs. The lesson to take from here is that if you ever consider going into a market that you have no clue about... do some research and see why people are doing things a certain way. Do some testing, don't get enamored by your idea – there's a good chance you're wrong.

TECHNOLOGY

In 2012 Flash was going strong. All the banners were animated in Flash. All web games were developed in Flash. It was A W E S O M E, except it had some security loopholes that were getting patched up too late by Adobe and created so much frustration with security people working on browsers that they started killing & cutting support for the Flash Player altogether from the most popular browsers.

Then Apple cut the support from Safari and Firefox was showing annoying click-through messages like "You're in danger. Are you sure you want to enable this stuff?". Chrome was playing nice and even integrated its own version of the Flash Player. It ran the coPrinted studio fine as the studio was running in Flash Player version 11. At the time of writing this article, Flash Player is at version 24.0.0.194 **gasp**.

Also a mobile trend started emerging and at the time of this writing at least 35% stuff goes through mobile. Obviously the Flash Player is not mobile friendly.

While the Flash Player was struggling to gain credibility and clear its name, JavaScript was gaining popularity and features. We can safely assume that by 2016 it reached and even surpassed the capabilities of what could be done in Flash.

VISION

The roadmap for coPrinted wasn't really clear. I had a very limited budget and I wanted to build something. I learned how to program, I learned how to market, I learned SEO, I learned how to sell. All of this took time. I imaged coPrinted a place where anybody can come and download high quality graphics for a fraction of the cost. I wanted to move into the business side of things and offer business cards, flyers and the like for businesses too, maybe a little expansion from the usual DIY-er that came to visit us.

The lack of vision on how to continue building the project out, the lack of funds to make it happen and the lack of knowledge on how to make it great eventually got us outsmarted and outplayed by the competition.

MARKETING

We didn't know how, we didn't know what. The obvious answer to hire somebody knowledgeable became clear to us only in 2015 when we've already missed the train. We rebranded ourselves, wrote a bunch of content (because content is king, right?) and tried to get things moving.

The only problem is that we were not alone in the market anymore and the battle became very difficult. After a year, we gave up as we couldn't come up with a marketing strategy good enough to move the market penetration needle. We tried a bunch of things but the competition was fierce - very fierce.

Takeaway here is that even if you write a bunch of content (over 1500 articles) if they are not relevant, they are not shared, accessed and read by people it's like they don't even exist. Google doesn't give them any relevance... and it's normal that they shouldn't. But we were focused on our keywords and trying to build stories around them. **Don't.**

COMPETITORS

Another hard lesson learned was the fact that the competition doesn't sit tight and doesn't wait for you to play catch-up. It goes forward.

That was the case of Canva that came out in August 2013. They did everything right from my point of view and are leaders now in the field. They had a vision and made it come true even if coPrinted was launched a year before it.

They used JavaScript for their file generation and they bridged the gap for the business side of things. Through perseverance, opportunity and knowledge they pitched their startup to investors and got funded (\$3.6 million in March 2013). In April 2014 Guy Kawasaki Joined as Chief Evangelist and the rest is history. Meanwhile in 2015 we were just starting to get our feet wet in the world of big-player marketing.

Now [Canva](#) is my perfect example as they were the first to come after us with a similar product. Now they are expanding into print as well. The competition is starting to get even more fierce as there are a ton of businesses and services that offer what we or they offer at different value propositions. For example [PixTeller](#) is a great contender coming from Romania. I wish them all the best and hope they can make a dent in the market.

ETSY PRESENCE

To test the Etsy ecosystem and to rise our margins we've opened an [Etsy](#) shop in 2016 for the print side of the business where we offer amazing customer service & support. It's been a great experience to learn about the marketing work that goes into an Etsy store and to build a solid testing ground. We usually run all new designs on Etsy first to see if people inquire about them and how our keywords perform.

COPRINTED v3

In April 2017 we've launched the third version of our website focusing exclusively on prints. Our vision and mission are clear – we want to offer the best customer support and service out there in the stationery market.

The website is now mobile friendly (took us long enough!) and the process is straight forward. Using the feedback from our customers we've catered to all of the problems they were facing. Functionality is still a bit rough, but we're working on getting it where it deserves to be.

FUTURE

Our focus is being redirected to the exciting world of marketing. We plan on building some fantastic tools to make businesses move forward and avoid making the same mistakes that we did. We've learned a lot and we're ready to share. Of course we'll be using coprinted as our playground as well and improve on it continuously based on our customer's needs and **not ours** like we did in the past!

Thank you for reading through. I hope this case study gave you a bit of insight of what problems a new business can face. I hope you'll do a bit more research than I did in the beginning and find some mentors to guide you through the process and protect from burning through precious time. Until next time, see you at [Demoki Interactive](#) !