

2025 Peak Season Playbook

The **GelatoConnect** guide to navigating economic headwinds and capturing on-demand growth

 GelatoConnect

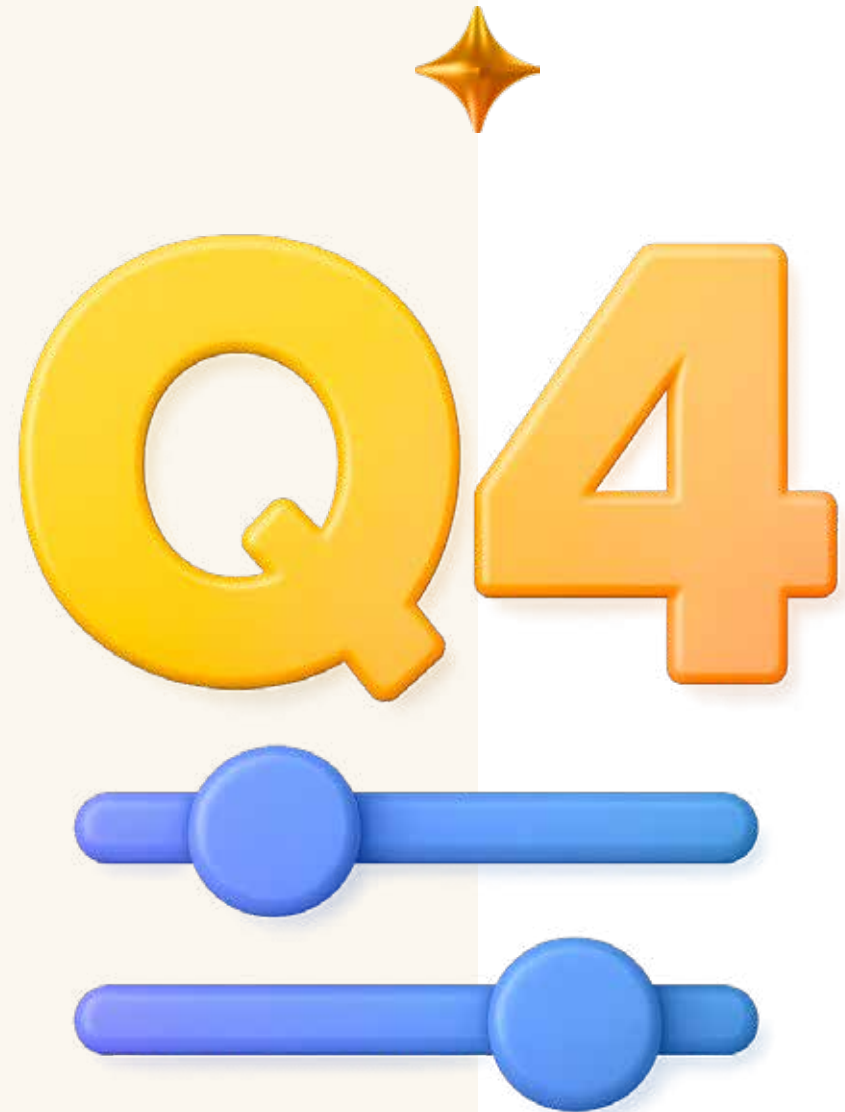


Table of contents

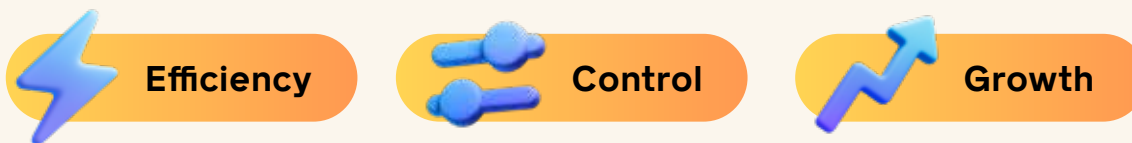
Introduction: Winning the 2025 peak season gauntlet in an era of contradiction	2
Section 1: The reality of the 2025 peak season	5
Section 2: The print industry's tectonic shift: on-demand, sustainable, and automated	11
Section 3: The GelatoConnect advantage: your operating system for peak season resilience	18
Section 4: The 2025 peak season playbook: strategic plays for PSPs & creators	24
Section 5: Voices from the front lines: perspectives on peak season preparedness	32
Conclusion: from surviving to thriving: your next moves to win the fourth quarter	37
Works cited	39

Winning the 2025 peak season gauntlet in an era of contradiction

Executive Summary

This playbook serves as an essential **strategic guide for Print Service Providers (PSPs) and e-commerce Creators** preparing for the 2025 peak season. The analysis within dissects a complex global landscape—one defined by the dual pressures of economic caution and heightened consumer expectations—to provide actionable "plays."

These strategies, powered by the GelatoConnect platform, are engineered to drive the three pillars of modern production success: **efficiency, control, and growth.**



The objective is to equip businesses not merely to survive the annual Q4 rush, **but to master it**, turning unprecedented challenges into unparalleled opportunities for profitability and market leadership.

The central thesis: the great contradiction



THE GREAT CONTRADICTION

Extreme cost discipline vs.
premium consumer demands

The 2025 peak season presents a unique and formidable paradox for businesses reliant on digital commerce and physical production. On one hand, the global economic environment is characterized by slowing growth, persistent policy uncertainty, and rising trade tensions, fostering a climate of cautious consumer spending.

Forecasts from the world's leading financial institutions paint a picture of an underwhelming and divergent recovery, where downside risks dominate the outlook. This economic reality logically suggests a consumer base focused intently on price and necessity.

Yet, on the other hand, consumer demand has evolved in the opposite direction. Expectations have never been higher. Today's digital consumer demands **hyper-personalized products, verifiably sustainable manufacturing processes, and the near-instant gratification of seamless, rapid fulfillment.** They are willing to share data for tailored experiences and pay a premium for brands that align with their values. This creates a fundamental contradiction: businesses must operate with extreme cost-discipline in a challenging macro-environment while simultaneously delivering a premium, customized, and high-touch experience.

This convergence of opposing forces places unprecedented pressure on the entire supply chain, from material procurement to last-mile delivery. The old model of preparing for peak season—stockpiling inventory and scaling up labor—is no longer viable. It is too costly, too risky, and too slow to meet the demands of this new era.

This playbook **provides the blueprint for achieving that intelligent scalability**, transforming operational complexity from a critical vulnerability into a defensible competitive advantage.



**Success in 2025 is not
about scaling up;
it is about scaling smarter.**



01

The reality of the 2025 peak season

The reality of the 2025 peak season

As we enter the critical fourth quarter, the 2025 business landscape reflects a mix of economic pressure and changing consumer expectations. Recognizing this shift is key to preparing for a successful peak season. This section explores the trends shaping today's operating environment and why they call for a smarter, more resilient approach to

1.1. The global economic climate: Navigating complexity with resilience

The challenging and uneven economic trajectory forecasted for 2025 has largely materialized, creating a difficult backdrop for businesses planning for Q4. The year has been defined not by a full-blown recession, but by underwhelming growth shaped by a consistent set of factors that directly impact PSPs and e-commerce Creators:

Persistent inflation

Headline inflation, while easing in some areas, has remained above central bank targets in many key economies through 2025. This has put sustained pressure on margins for businesses unable to pass on full cost increases to a cautious consumer base.

Heightened trade tensions

The implementation of new tariffs and retaliatory measures has directly increased the cost of raw materials and finished goods, complicating cross-border logistics and introducing significant volatility into supply chain planning.

Elevated policy uncertainty

Unpredictable policy shifts have weakened both business and consumer confidence, leading to delayed capital investments by businesses and postponed discretionary spending by consumers.

These persistent challenges signal a structural shift in the global operating environment. For businesses in the e-commerce and print fulfillment sectors, where supply chain reliability is paramount, this new normal has created a powerful market dynamic. In an environment defined by volatility and disruption, the ability to demonstrate operational resilience—to absorb shocks, maintain service levels, and guarantee delivery and quality—has become a premium attribute. Customers now show greater loyalty and a willingness to pay more for partners who can provide stability and predictability.



1.2. The 2025 consumer and the direct impact on Print Service Providers

This economic climate has shaped a complex and often contradictory consumer. While purchasing behavior has become more considered, expectations for quality and service have simultaneously intensified. For PSPs, these are not abstract market trends; they are direct pressures that fundamentally reshape the production floor.



The behaviors adopted during the pandemic have become permanent fixtures of daily life, creating what McKinsey terms a "bring-it-to-me" mindset. Consumers now have a dramatically lower tolerance for friction and higher expectations for speed.

Layered on top of this is a powerful, values-based mandate for sustainability, which has transitioned from a niche concern to a mainstream demand.

58% of global consumers state they are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products

A remarkable **58%** of global consumers state they are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products. Finally, the demand for personalization has reached a fever pitch, with **83%** of consumers stating they are ready to share personal data in exchange for more personalized experiences.



83% of consumers stating they are ready to share personal data in exchange for more personalized experiences

This has redefined "value" beyond price alone into a sophisticated calculation:

$$\text{Value} = (\text{Quality} + \text{Personalization} + \text{Sustainability} + \text{Convenience}) / \text{Price}.$$

For Print Service Providers, these consumer mandates translate directly into operational realities:



The Demand for Speed requires rapid, frictionless fulfillment. This puts immense pressure on production turnaround times and necessitates highly efficient, automated workflows that can handle orders from intake to dispatch with minimal delay.

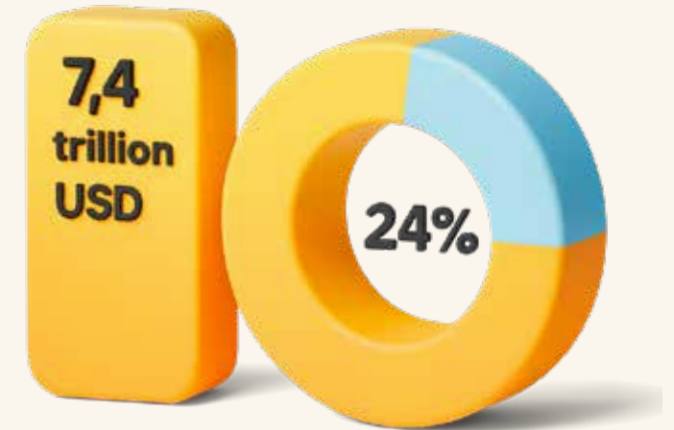
The Sustainability Mandate requires PSPs to adapt their entire supply chain. To win business from brands whose customers demand transparency, providers must offer and prove their use of eco-friendly materials, waste-reducing processes, and sustainable packaging. This has become a key competitive differentiator.

The Personalization Imperative fundamentally changes the nature of production. It shifts the focus from large, identical print runs to a high volume of unique, single-item orders ("lot size of one"). This dramatically increases operational complexity, rendering manual data entry and job setup impossible at scale and requiring intelligent automation to manage thousands of individual jobs without error.

1.3. E-commerce in 2025: Maturing growth and the battle for attention

The e-commerce landscape in 2025 has settled into a state of maturing growth and intensifying competition. With global retail e-commerce sales on track to reach \$7.4 trillion and account for 24% of total retail sales, a strong digital presence is essential for survival. In this saturated market, success depends on

Social commerce has evolved into a dominant force, now viewed as a primary avenue for growth by half of all e-commerce businesses. **Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are no longer just for marketing; they are full-scale marketplaces where the entire customer journey occurs within the app.** Amid this landscape, the Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) movement continues to gain strength, with a significant segment of consumers (15% globally) actively seeking to buy directly from the brands and creators they admire. This trend empowers creators but also places the full burden of production and fulfillment squarely on their PSP partners' shoulders.



E-Commerce sales in 2025



Social platforms become full marketplaces.





02

The print industry's tectonic shift: on-demand, sustainable, and automated

The print industry's tectonic shift: on-demand, sustainable, and automated

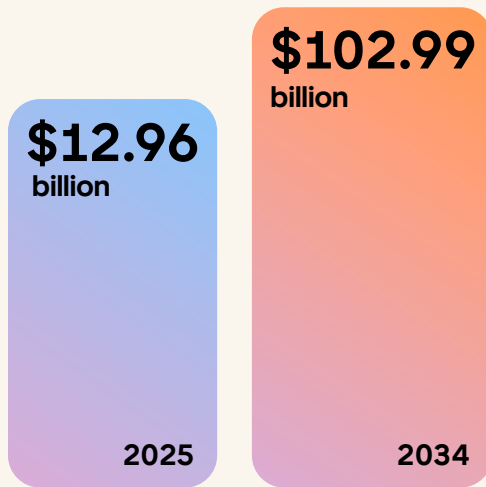
The macro-economic and consumer trends detailed in the previous section are not abstract forces; they are actively reshaping the printing industry. These shifts are creating a new set of rules for competition, rendering legacy business models obsolete and creating a powerful opportunity for those equipped to embrace the future. The industry is undergoing a **tectonic shift toward a model that is on-demand, sustainable, and deeply automated.**

2.1. The Print-on-Demand (POD) revolution: from niche to a \$100 billion mainstream

Print-on-demand is no longer a niche segment or a passing trend; it is the core engine of growth for customized product fulfillment, experiencing an explosive expansion that directly mirrors the rise of the global e-commerce and creator economies. The market's trajectory is staggering, signaling a fundamental change in how personalized goods are produced and sold.



The POD market is in hyper-growth, set to redefine the printing landscape.



Global POD market growth

Market forecasts, while varying slightly in their precise figures, are unanimous in their projection of meteoric growth. One comprehensive analysis projects the **global POD market will surge from \$12.96 billion in 2025 to an incredible \$102.99 billion by 2034**, expanding at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 26%. Another credible source forecasts a **CAGR of 23.3%**, with the market expected to reach **\$57.49 billion by 2033**. Regardless of the specific endpoint, the message is clear: the POD market is undergoing a period of hyper-growth that will redefine the printing landscape.

This phenomenal expansion is not happening in a vacuum. It is propelled by the powerful confluence of several key drivers:



Rising demand for personalization

As established, consumers have a voracious appetite for products that reflect their individuality. POD technology is the essential enabler of this trend, allowing for the cost-effective creation of one-of-a-kind items.



The creator economy

The rise of independent artists, influencers, and online entrepreneurs has created a massive new class of merchants who need to sell branded merchandise without the financial risk of holding inventory. POD is their business model of choice.



Seamless e-commerce integration

The success of POD is inextricably linked to its seamless integration with major e-commerce platforms like Shopify, Etsy, Wix, and WooCommerce. This "plug-and-play" capability allows creators to launch stores and sell products with minimal technical expertise.

Within the booming POD market, certain product segments are leading the charge. **Apparel, particularly custom t-shirts, remains the largest and most established category, representing a market expected to reach \$5.68 billion on its own in 2025.** However, the fastest-growing segment is home décor.

This surge is largely attributed to the cultural shifts following the pandemic, with more people working from home and investing in enhancing their living spaces. This diversification into new product categories like wall art, mugs, and other household items is a critical growth vector for the industry.



\$5.68
billion

2025

The POD revolution is a global phenomenon



While North America currently stands as the largest market by revenue, the Asia-Pacific region is projected to be the fastest-growing, with a **CAGR as high as 28%**.

This highlights the universal appeal of the on-demand model and the necessity for PSPs to have a global mindset and production capabilities.

2.2. The new industry mandates: sustainability and technology adoption

To compete and thrive in this rapidly evolving print landscape, it is no longer sufficient to simply have high-quality presses. PSPs must now master two non-negotiable, intertwined mandates: a deep, demonstrable commitment to sustainability and the comprehensive adoption of modern automation technology.

Sustainability as a core business differentiator

Green printing has moved from a "nice-to-have" marketing point to a core business requirement. A significant and growing segment of consumers and B2B clients actively demands environmentally responsible practices, making sustainability a powerful source of competitive advantage. Excelling in this area requires a multi-faceted approach:



Eco-friendly materials

This involves the proactive use of papers with high post-consumer recycled content, inks that are soy- or vegetable-based to reduce volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and exploring innovative alternative fibers like hemp or bamboo.



Systemic waste reduction

The print-on-demand model itself is inherently more sustainable than traditional offset printing by eliminating the massive waste of overproduction. PSPs can deepen this advantage by using software to optimize trim sizes and leveraging AI to minimize material usage during production.



Sustainable partnerships and processes

True sustainability extends across the entire value chain. This means working with paper suppliers certified by organizations like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC[®]) or Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI[®]), and utilizing eco-friendly packaging materials that are recyclable or compostable.

The imperative of the technology pivot

The printing industry is in the midst of a profound technological transformation, moving decisively away from fragmented, analog workflows toward integrated, digital-first operations. Several technologies are at the forefront of this shift:



Web-to-print (W2P)

W2P solutions have become the new digital storefront for the printing industry. They are the essential bridge that enables customers to design, customize, and order products online. This market is expected to reach \$2.17 billion by 2031, underscoring its foundational importance.



AI and automation

Artificial intelligence is being deployed across the production floor to optimize print quality, predict maintenance needs, and minimize waste. More broadly, workflow automation is being used to handle everything from job ticket creation and pre-flighting to production scheduling and shipping logistics. This automation is critical for improving efficiency, reducing errors, and freeing up skilled staff to focus on higher-value tasks.



Cloud integration

In an environment with multiple software systems (W2P, MIS, shipping), cloud integration has become a "must-have." Connecting these disparate cloud-based applications into a unified digital ecosystem is the only way to achieve true end-to-end visibility and efficiency.

The convergence of these powerful trends—the explosion of product variety and personalization, the demand for speed, and the adoption of new, often disconnected technologies—is creating a significant challenge for many print businesses. This can be described as the "**Complexity Crisis**". A typical PSP today must manage an exponentially greater number of SKUs, from a wider array of order sources (Etsy, Shopify, B2B portals, direct APIs), using a more diverse set of materials and print methods (DTG, DTF, sublimation, paper), all while processing shorter, more complex jobs at a faster pace than ever before.



Print businesses are in a ‘Complexity Crisis’—more products, more channels, faster than ever.



Legacy software, manual processes, and spreadsheet-based workflows were never designed to handle this high-mix, low-volume, high-speed environment. Under the strain of modern e-commerce demand, these outdated systems begin to break. They create data silos, introduce errors, and cause operational bottlenecks, crippling a PSP's ability to scale profitably. This crisis of complexity is the single biggest obstacle to success in the modern print industry. It is also the precise problem that a comprehensive, end-to-end operating system like GelatoConnect is purpose-built to solve. It is not merely another piece of workflow software; it is an "operating system for complexity," designed to unify these fragmented systems, automate manual tasks, and transform chaotic data streams into a single, manageable, and powerful platform.



03

**The GelatoConnect advantage:
your operating system for peak
season resilience**

The GelatoConnect advantage: your operating system for peak season resilience

In the face of the economic headwinds, evolving consumer demands, and the internal complexity crisis facing the print industry, a new approach is required. Success is no longer determined by the speed of a press, but by the intelligence of the entire production ecosystem. This section introduces GelatoConnect as the specific, purpose-built solution to these modern challenges, moving the conversation from the "what" and "why" of the market shifts to the "how" of operational mastery.

3.1. Introducing the end-to-end solution for modern print production

GelatoConnect is the AI-powered operating system engineered specifically for the realities of the modern print industry: shorter production runs, higher product and order complexity, and the relentless, on-demand pace of e-commerce. It is not another point solution or a standalone piece of software. It is a single, unified platform designed to manage and optimize the entire production lifecycle—from procurement and inventory management, through workflow and production, to logistics and final delivery. Its fundamental purpose is to replace the fragmented, inefficient, and often custom-built legacy systems that hold print businesses back, and to provide a seamless, intelligent foundation for growth.



The power of the Gelato ecosystem lies in the powerful, symbiotic relationship between its two core platforms:



GelatoConnect

Enables print service providers (PSPs) to manage digital production efficiently, reduce costs, and scale profitably.

GelatoCreate

Helps creators and entrepreneurs launch and grow global businesses without inventory risk or upfront investment.



GelatoConnect for Print Service Providers, **GelatoCreate** and other volume owners like Cloudprinter, Ciloo and Printerpix for e-commerce Creators. This creates a virtuous cycle, or a "flywheel effect," that benefits the entire network. When PSPs deploy GelatoConnect, they become dramatically more efficient, cost-effective, and scalable. This enhanced capability directly benefits the thousands of creators on the GelatoCreate platform, who gain access to better service, faster and more reliable delivery, a wider range of high-quality products, and more competitive pricing. As these creators thrive and their businesses grow, they drive more volume and more diverse orders back to the PSPs on the network. This powerful feedback loop accelerates growth for every participant, creating a global manufacturing ecosystem that is smarter, faster, and more sustainable.

3.2. The three pillars of peak season success: control, efficiency, and growth

The value of GelatoConnect is delivered through three core pillars, each directly addressing the most critical needs of a modern print business preparing for peak season. These pillars—Control, Efficiency, and Growth—are not abstract concepts; they are the tangible outcomes delivered by specific features and validated by real-world results from PSPs across the globe.



Unprecedented CONTROL

The problem

In a complex production environment with multiple order sources, machines, and workflows, a lack of real-time visibility is a critical vulnerability. It leads to production errors, missed deadlines, an inability to proactively solve problems, and decisions based on outdated or incomplete information.

The solution

GelatoConnect provides total, end-to-end visibility and control over the entire operation. It transforms the production floor from a "black box" into a transparent, data-rich environment.

Key features

Real-time production tracking: Gain full, granular visibility into every print job from the moment of intake through every production station to final dispatch. Operators can scan and update job statuses directly from mobile devices, giving managers immediate insight into the flow of work across the entire facility.

The GelatoConnect mobile app: This puts the entire operation in the palm of a manager's hand. Track orders, monitor inventory levels, and check dispatch progress in real-time from anywhere, enabling informed, on-the-go decision-making.

Unified dashboard: A single, clear, and actionable dashboard provides a holistic view of the entire journey—from order intake and inventory to production and packaging—eliminating data silos and providing one source of truth.

The proof

This level of control delivers quantifiable improvements in quality and reliability. PSPs using GelatoConnect consistently achieve 98% on-time dispatch rates and production error rates of less than 0.35%, thanks to superior visibility and automated quality control checks.



Radical EFFICIENCY

The problem

The convergence of rising labor, raw material, and shipping costs, combined with the inherent inefficiencies of managing increased complexity with manual processes, is relentlessly crushing profit margins for many PSPs.

The solution

GelatoConnect leverages sophisticated AI and end-to-end automation to systematically drive down operational costs, eliminate waste, and maximize the productivity of existing resources.

Key features

AI-Powered procurement: The Procurement module automates inventory management, tracking stock levels in real-time and triggering automated replenishment orders to prevent stockouts while minimizing costly overhead. This gives PSPs enhanced negotiation power with suppliers.

Intelligent logistics: The Logistics module provides access to a global network of nearly 100 carriers. It employs intelligent carrier selection to automatically choose the most cost-effective shipping option for every single order, while also automating address validation to prevent costly delivery errors.

End-to-end workflow automation: By automating routine tasks like file adjustments, job ticket creation, and production scheduling, GelatoConnect significantly reduces the need for manual intervention, which in turn reduces labor costs and the potential for human error.

The proof

The efficiency gains are dramatic and well-documented across the GelatoConnect customer base:



ESP Colour saved over \$300,000 and freed up \$500,000 in working capital through the platform's AI-powered procurement and inventory automation.



Xpress, a growing PSP, cut its shipping costs by a remarkable 40% and reduced its paper waste by 25%



Bennett Graphics used the platform's optimization tools to reduce its material waste by 75%, from 41% down to just 10%.



Exakta leveraged advanced logistics capabilities to achieve a 50% reduction in its packaging time, allowing it to handle higher order volumes without increasing headcount.



Unlocked GROWTH

The problem

For many PSPs, growth is a double-edged sword. Onboarding new customers, especially high-volume e-commerce brands, is often a slow, manual, and resource-intensive process that can take months of engineering effort. Similarly, expanding into new product categories or geographic markets is perceived as risky and requires significant capital investment in new machinery and infrastructure.

The solution

GelatoConnect is engineered to be an engine for scalable and capital-efficient growth, removing the traditional barriers to expansion.

Key features

High-speed, no-code onboarding: The platform features an AI Onboarding Assistant and seamless, no-code integrations with the world's leading e-commerce storefronts (including Shopify, Etsy, WooCommerce) and B2B web-to-print platforms (like Infigo and Pressero). This allows PSPs to connect and start processing orders for new customers in minutes, not months.

Intelligent order routing: GelatoConnect's "SmartRouter" functionality allows a PSP to accept any order, even if it falls outside their in-house production capabilities. The system can automatically and intelligently route that job to a trusted partner within the global Gelato network, allowing the PSP to retain the customer and the revenue. This also enables risk-free testing of new geographic markets.

The proof

GelatoConnect users are achieving remarkable growth without the traditional associated costs:



Apparel specialist TidyMerch achieved 100% revenue growth in its first year on the platform, without adding a single person to its workforce or production line.



Oschatz Visuelle Medien GmbH increased its production capacity by 25% and grew its revenue by 20%, all without hiring new staff.

DPI Direct, a leader in print and packaging, experienced exponential growth after integrating with Gelato, expanding its global reach and reducing turnaround times.



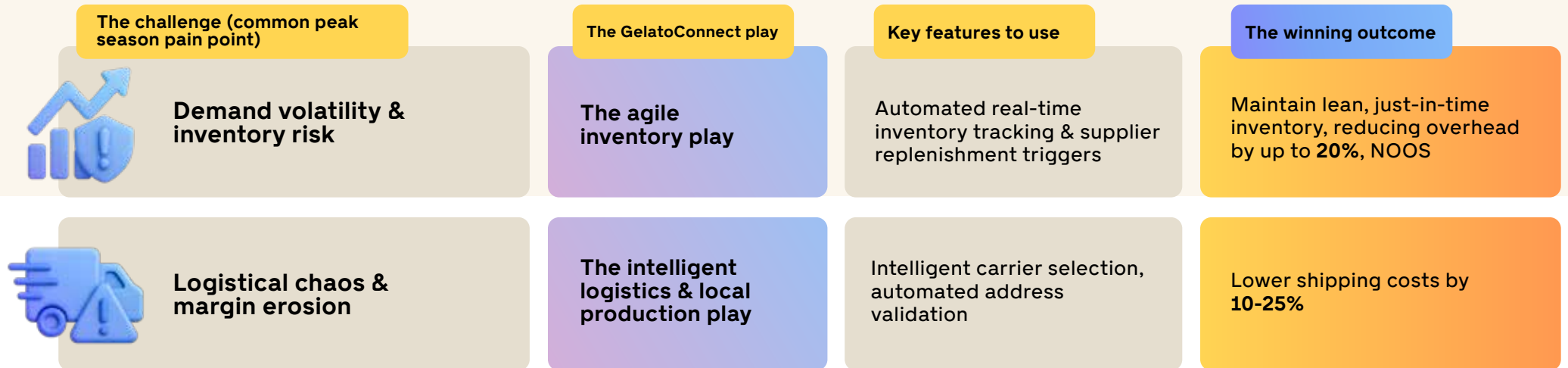


04

The 2025 peak season playbook: strategic plays for PSPs & Creators

The 2025 peak season playbook: strategic plays for PSPs & Creators

Preparation for the 2025 peak season demands more than simply hiring temporary staff and pre-ordering inventory. In an environment defined by volatility and complexity, success requires the implementation of intelligent, technology-driven strategies. This section provides a practical, actionable blueprint for winning the fourth quarter. It is structured as a series of "plays," each designed to counter a specific, common peak season challenge using the capabilities of the GelatoConnect platform.



The challenge (common peak season pain point)

The GelatoConnect play

Key features to use

The winning outcome



Operational bottlenecks & scalability ceiling

The scalable throughput play

No-code integrations with e-commerce storefronts (Shopify, Etsy) and W2P platforms (Infigo, Pressero), pre-configured machine workflows

Increase production throughput and capacity by **25-100% without extra hiring**



Lost revenue opportunities

The "never say no" play

Intelligent order routing (SmartRouter)

Fulfill every single order by automatically outsourcing jobs you can't produce in-house



Slow, costly, & risky growth

The high-speed onboarding play

AI Onboarding Assistant, AI Product Builder, pre-built, no-code API integrations

Reduce new customer onboarding time from months or weeks to as little as **5 minutes**

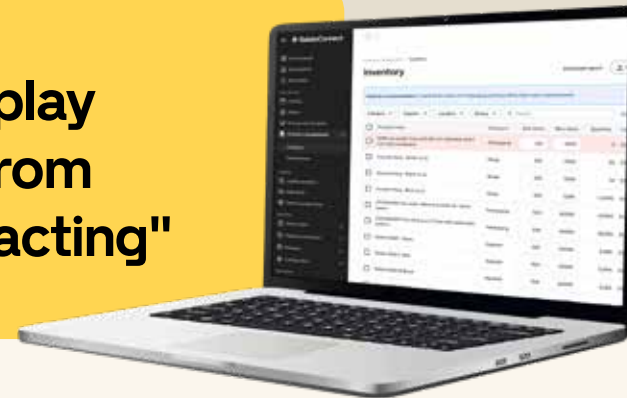
Elaborating on the plays

Play 1: The agile inventory play

The core challenge of peak season inventory is the high cost of uncertainty. Inaccurate demand forecasting, a common pain point, leads to a painful cycle of stockouts on popular items and overstocking on others, resulting in both missed sales and costly write-offs.



The agile inventory play shifts the strategy from "forecasting" to "reacting"



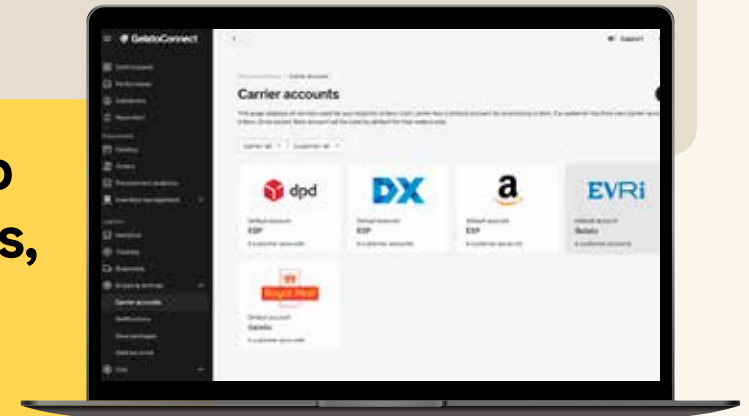
By using GelatoConnect's: **AI-powered Procurement module**, a PSP can maintain a lean, just-in-time inventory model. The system provides automated, real-time tracking of all materials, from ink to paper to blank garments. As jobs are processed, inventory is automatically deducted. When stock levels for any item fall below a pre-set threshold, the system can trigger **automated replenishment orders with suppliers**. This data-driven approach, visualized on clear dashboards, allows managers to move away from risky, capital-intensive stockpiling. The outcome is a dramatic reduction in carrying costs and waste, with some partners seeing **20% less inventory overhead** while ensuring they are "Never Out of Stock" on the items that matter most.

Play 2: The intelligent logistics & local production play

Peak season logistics are a minefield of rising costs and potential delays. Carriers impose peak surcharges, their networks become congested, and a single weather event or labor issue can disrupt the entire system. The Intelligent Logistics Play counters this volatility with data and distribution.



Produce closer, ship smarter: lower costs, faster delivery, greener impact.

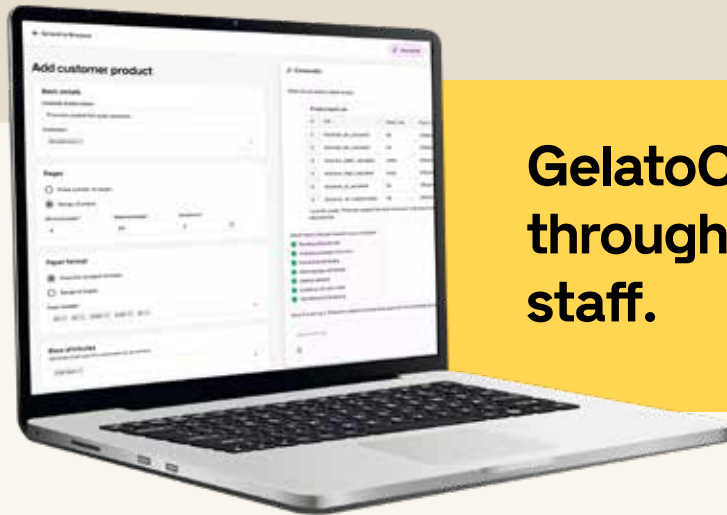


GelatoConnect's logistics module employs intelligent carrier selection, automatically analyzing rates across a network of nearly 100 global and regional carriers to select the optimal service for each package based on cost and delivery time.

This alone can **reduce shipping costs by 10-25%**. The more profound strategy, however, is leveraging Gelato's global network of over 150 production partners in 32 countries. By producing orders in a facility closer to the end customer, PSPs can drastically cut shipping distances, which in turn lowers costs, speeds up delivery, and significantly reduces the carbon footprint—a key factor for the 58% of consumers willing to pay more for sustainable options. This distributed model builds systemic resilience, insulating a business from localized disruptions.

Play 3: The scalable throughput play

For many PSPs, the true bottleneck during peak season is not machine capacity, but the manual processes surrounding production. Order intake from emails, manual data entry into production systems, and manual job routing are inefficient and error-prone processes that simply cannot scale to meet Q4 demand.



GelatoConnect doubles throughput with zero extra staff.



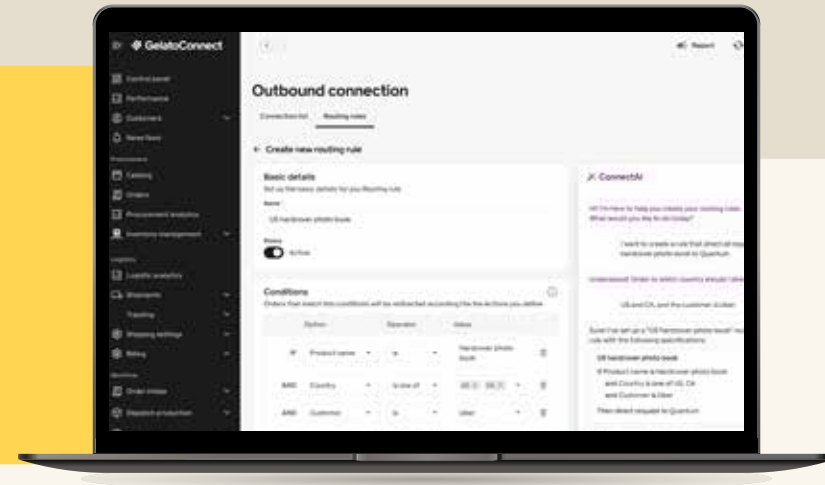
The Scalable Throughput Play focuses on automating these bottlenecks out of existence. GelatoConnect provides seamless, no-code integrations that pull orders directly from customer storefronts on platforms like Shopify and Etsy, or from B2B W2P portals like Pressero and Infigo, eliminating manual intake entirely.

From there, **AI-driven workflow automation takes over**, routing jobs to the correct machines based on pre-configured workflows. The result is a massive leap in productivity. Partners have seen their production capacity and throughput increase by 25% to 100% without adding any additional staff, transforming their operational capacity and unlocking new levels of revenue generation during the busiest time of year.

Play 4: The "never say no" play

Every time a PSP turns away an order because it's outside their capabilities or their facility is at maximum capacity, it's not just a single lost sale; it's a potential lost customer. This is a frequent and painful occurrence during peak season. **The "never say no" play** uses the power of the network to ensure 100% of customer demand is captured.

With GelatoConnect's SmartRouter, PSPs never say no—every order gets fulfilled, every customer retained.



Using GelatoConnect's **Intelligent order routing (SmartRouter)**, a PSP can set up rules to automatically outsource specific jobs. For example, if a loyal customer places an order for embroidered hats but the PSP only has DTG printers, the system can route that specific job to a certified embroidery partner in the Gelato network.

The PSP retains the customer relationship and the revenue, the customer gets their order fulfilled seamlessly, and a potential business disruption becomes a successful transaction. This same logic applies to capacity constraints; if a machine goes down or the facility is overloaded, work can be seamlessly offloaded to a local partner to meet deadlines. This transforms the business from a single production node into a flexible, resilient platform capable of fulfilling any order.

Play 5: The high-speed onboarding play

In the fast-moving creator economy, speed is a competitive advantage. High-growth brands and creators want to partner with fulfillment providers who can get them to market quickly. A slow, complex onboarding process that requires weeks of custom development is a major deterrent. The High-Speed Onboarding Play positions a PSP as the most agile and attractive partner.



GelatoConnect cuts onboarding from weeks to minutes, giving PSPs the speed to win high-growth creators.



GelatoConnect's **AI onboarding assistant** and **AI product builder** dramatically accelerate the process. The platform can ingest a new partner's entire product catalog—even one with over 100,000 SKUs—and use AI to map those products to the PSP's in-house capabilities in a matter of hours.

Combined with the no-code integrations for major platforms, this reduces the entire onboarding process from a multi-week engineering project to a task that can be completed in as little as five minutes. This agility allows a PSP to say "yes" to more partners and capture volume from the fastest-growing players in the e-commerce market.



05

Voices from the front lines: perspectives on peak season preparedness

Voices from the front lines: perspectives on peak season preparedness

To add a layer of peer validation and real-world context to this playbook's strategic recommendations, it is valuable to consider the direct perspectives of those on the front lines of peak season: the Print Service Providers who manage production and the e-commerce Creators who rely on them. The following insights, based on the results of targeted surveys, bring the challenges and opportunities of the 2025 peak season to life.

5.1. The PSP perspective: the quest for efficiency and growth

For Print Service Providers, the peak season is a period of maximum opportunity and maximum stress. The surveyed businesses represent a mature cross-section of the industry, with a combined **84.4% reporting annual revenues over \$5 million and 53% exceeding \$10 million.**

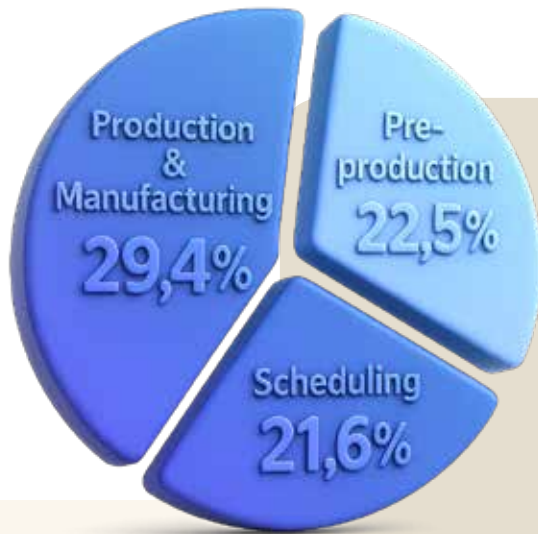
Despite significant revenue, profitability during the critical Q4 peak season (Oct-Dec) is a major challenge. Over half (55.9%) of PSPs report that the peak season is only about the same or even less profitable than other quarters, indicating that a spike in volume does not automatically translate to a healthier bottom line.

84.4% reporting annual revenues over \$5 million

53% exceeding \$10 million

“ **A successful peak season means we're not just busy, we're profitable. It's when our systems run smoothly without constant firefighting, and we end the year with happy clients, not a burnt-out team.** ”

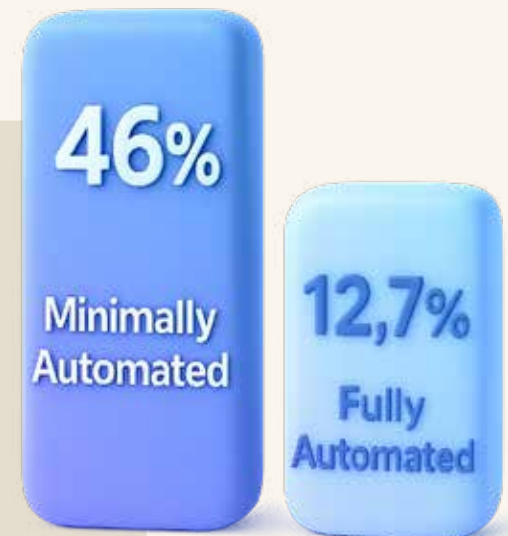
Quantitative insights: the challenges in focus



When asked to identify their top operational challenges, PSPs pointed to a range of issues across the production lifecycle. Managing the sheer volume of work, controlling costs, and hiring and retaining staff are consistently ranked as top priorities. The root of these challenges is often found in workflow bottlenecks. According to our survey, the most significant slowdowns occur in **Production & Manufacturing (29.4%)**, **Pre-production (22.5%)**, and **Scheduling (21.6%)**.



These slowdowns validate the existence of the "**Complexity Crisis**". A majority of print businesses are still reliant on systems ill-equipped for modern e-commerce. A staggering **46% of PSPs rate their operations as "Minimally Automated" or "Completely Manual"**, relying on emails and spreadsheets to manage their work. Only **12.7% consider themselves "Fully Automated"**.





This lack of preparedness is directly influencing investment decisions. When asked about their top investment priorities to improve operations, PSPs are focused on core production and inventory management. The top priorities were:

- New printing/finishing hardware (24.5%)
- Inventory management systems (23.5%)
- Shipping and logistics software (18.6%)
- E-commerce and Web-to-Print integrations (18.6%)



Notably, **workflow automation software was a direct priority for 9.8% of respondents**, signaling a growing recognition that intelligent systems are critical for survival and growth.

“ It's difficult, close to impossible, to keep track of +2000 individual orders on any given day during peak. Finding a solution to keep track on these on our production floor is key to improve DOT [delivery on time] and avoiding delays.

5.2. The creator perspective: the pursuit of quality and reliability

For e-commerce **Creators**, the **peak season is the most critical time of year for revenue and brand-building**. Their success is inextricably linked to the performance of their fulfillment partners, who must meet the evolving and often contradictory demands of the modern consumer. While creators focus on design and marketing, the full burden of production and fulfillment falls squarely on their partners' shoulders, making operational excellence a key factor in their success.

Meeting the modern consumer's demands

The primary fears for any creator during peak season directly mirror the heightened expectations of their end customers. The modern consumer has a low tolerance for friction and a high expectation for speed, creating a **"bring-it-to-me" mindset**. This means any fulfillment delays, especially around key holiday deadlines, pose a direct threat to a creator's brand reputation.

Layered on top of the need for speed is a powerful, values-based mandate for sustainability. This is not a niche concern but a mainstream demand, with **58% of global consumers stating they are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products**. For nearly half of all consumers, a business's commitment to sustainability is a priority. Creators are therefore actively seeking fulfillment partners who can provide verifiably sustainable manufacturing processes to meet this demand.

58%

of global consumers state they are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products

“

For a Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) creator, a fulfillment error isn't just a lost package or a blurry print. In a competitive market where they have full ownership of the customer relationship, it's a broken promise that directly damages their brand reputation at the most critical time of the year.

Ultimately, creators and their customers are unwilling to sacrifice quality for speed, or speed for quality; they demand both simultaneously. This dynamic is best captured by the new, multi-faceted equation for consumer value:

Value = (Quality + Personalization + Sustainability + Convenience) / Price. For a creator to succeed, their print partner must deliver overwhelmingly on every element of this equation.

Conclusion

From surviving to thriving: your next moves to win the fourth quarter

The analysis presented in this playbook leads to an undeniable conclusion. The 2025 peak season, even shorter this year due to Thanksgiving dates, will unfold in a high-stakes environment, one uniquely defined by the powerful contradiction of mounting economic pressure on one side and escalating consumer expectations for personalization, sustainability, and speed on the other. In this new landscape, the legacy approaches to production management—characterized by fragmented systems, manual processes, and reactive decision-making—are not just inefficient; they are a direct threat to profitability and survival. They will fail under the immense strain of modern e-commerce demand.

The only viable path forward is a strategic transformation. **Winning in 2025 requires building an operation that is resilient, efficient, and scalable by its very design. It demands a shift from managing chaos to orchestrating complexity. This is not an incremental improvement; it is a fundamental change in the operating philosophy of a print business, moving from a collection of disconnected processes to a single, intelligent, and unified production ecosystem.**



Adopting an end-to-end production operating system like **GelatoConnect** is the single most strategic and impactful move a Print Service Provider or on-demand manufacturer can make to not only prepare for the next peak season but to future-proof their entire operation. It is the definitive answer to the challenges of the modern era, providing the tools to turn the immense pressure of the fourth quarter into a period of controlled, profitable, and sustainable growth.

Your next moves

To translate this strategic understanding into action and begin the journey toward operational excellence, the following steps are recommended:

- 1 Request a personalized demo of GelatoConnect**

See firsthand how the platform can address your specific operational pain points and unlock new opportunities for your business.

>
- 2 Download the comprehensive ROI report**

Explore detailed case studies and financial models that demonstrate how leading PSPs are leveraging GelatoConnect to reduce costs, increase throughput, and drive significant bottom-line growth.

>
- 3 Contact the GelatoConnect team**

Engage in a strategic conversation with industry experts to discuss your unique peak season challenges and co-create a tailored plan for transforming your production capabilities.

>

Works cited

- 1 Global Economic Prospects - World Bank, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>
- 2 U.S. Consumer Spending Trends to Watch in 2025 - Morgan Stanley, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.morganstanley.com/insights/articles/us-consumer-spending-trends-2025>
- 3 World Economic Outlook Update, January 2025: Global Growth: Divergent and Uncertain, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2025/01/17/world-economic-outlook-update-january-2025>
- 4 OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2025 Issue 1, accessed July 23, 2025
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook-volume-2025-issue-1_83363382-en.html
- 5 How E-Commerce Will Evolve in 2025: Key Predictions - BYYD, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.byyd.me/en/blog/2025/05/how-e-commerce-will-evolve-in-2025-key-predictions/>
- 6 Consumer spending trends: 10 key insights for 2025 - GWI, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gwi.com/blog/consumer-spending-trends>
- 7 Print on Demand Trends and Statistics in 2025 - Kornit Digital, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.kornit.com/magazine/print-on-demand-trends-statistics-jsuh/>
- 8 Top Print Industry Trends in 2025 You Can't Afford to Ignore - OnPrintShop, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://onprintshop.com/blog/latest-trends-reshaping-the-future-of-print-industry>
- 9 Print On Demand Market Size & Share | Industry Report 2033, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/print-on-demand-market-report>
- 10 Global Economy Set for Weakest Run Since 2008 Outside of Recessions - World Bank, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/10/global-economic-prospects-june-2025-press-release>
- 11 World Economic Outlook - All Issues, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO>
- 12 Chart: OECD Cuts U.S. Growth Forecast Over Tariffs, Policy Uncertainty | Statista, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.statista.com/chart/34557/oecd-real-gdp-growth-projections/>
- 13 The Most Destructive Supply Chain Challenges in 2025 and How to Navigate Them, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.z2data.com/insights/most-destructive-supply-chain-challenges-2025-how-to-navigate>
- 14 OECD Economic Outlook, Interim Report March 2025, accessed July 23, 2025
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook-interim-report-march-2025_89af4857-en.html

- 15 OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2025 Issue 1: General assessment of the macroeconomic situation, accessed July 23, 2025
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook-volume-2025-issue-1_83363382-en/full-report/general-assessment-of-the-macroeconomic-situation_3e68d1e3.html
- 16 Supply Chain Predictions And Outlook For 2025 - Forbes, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2025/01/16/supply-chain-predictions-and-outlook-for-2025/>
- 17 State of the Consumer trends report 2025 - McKinsey, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/state-of-consumer>
- 18 Tips for Green Printing: How To Stay Sustainable in 2025 - Walsworth, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.walsworth.com/blog/tips-for-green-printing>
- 19 79+ Brand New Ecommerce Statistics for 2025 - Exploding Topics, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://explodingtopics.com/blog/ecommerce-stats>
- 20 The 2025 Retail Outlook for Europe, accessed July 23, 2025
https://downloads.ctfassets.net/951t4k2za2uf/56pfadbxx3th4mjLP86SP4/7bc6caef64f3c6e6a7efa3feb3e43c7b/PMG_2025-State-of-Commerce-Europe_April.pdf
- 21 E-Commerce in Europe 2025: Trends, Growth & Consumer Shifts - AWISSEE.com, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://awisee.com/blog/e-commerce-in-europe/>
- 22 Spring 2025 Economic Forecast: Moderate growth amid global economic uncertainty, accessed July 23, 2025
https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring-2025-economic-forecast-moderate-growth-amid-global-economic-uncertainty_en
- 23 Print On Demand Market Size To Worth USD 102.99 Bn By 2034 - Precedence Research, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.precedenceresearch.com/print-on-demand-market>
- 24 Is Print-On-Demand Worth It in 2025? - Printful, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.printful.com/blog/is-print-on-demand-worth-it>
- 25 Top 10 trends in print to watch in 2025 - FESPA, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.fespa.com/en/news-media/top-10-trends-in-print-to-watch-in-2025/>
- 26 Top 10 trends in print to watch in 2025 - FESPA, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.fespa.com/en/news-media/top-10-trends-in-print-to-watch-in-2025>
- 27 USA Printing Industry: 2025 Statistics, Trends, and Future Outlook - WTPBiz, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.wtpbiz.com/blog/printing-industry-statistics>
- 28 Print Leaders Adopt GelatoConnect to Future-Proof Production - Printing Impressions, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.piworld.com/article/print-leaders-adopt-gelatoconnect-to-future-proof-production-and-drive-profitable-growth/>
- 29 Connect - The future of production | GelatoConnect, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/connect>

- 30 Transform Your Business with GelatoConnect, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/connect/why>
- 31 Print Management for PSPs | GelatoConnect, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/connect/print-management>
- 32 Gelato Named a Most Innovative Company for 2025 - PRINTING United Alliance, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.printing.org/content/2025/03/20/gelato-named-a-most-innovative-company-for-2025>
- 33 GelatoConnect Releases 149 New Features in Q1 to Help Print Producers Increase Growth, Efficiency, and Control - WhatTheyThink, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://whattheythink.com/news/124032-gelatoconnect-releases-149-new-features-q1-help-print-producers-increase-growth-efficiency-control/>
- 34 AI in printing: Practical applications to transform your business - Gelato, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/connect/blog/2025-print-trends-ai-software-automation>
- 35 GelatoConnect announces new features, including apparel-specific workflows, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://thedeapixelssociety.com/gelatoconnect-announces-new-features-including-apparel-specific-workflows/>
- 36 Say yes to every order - how to scale your print order intake - Gelato, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/connect/webinars/order-intake-webinar-scale-print>
- 37 How to overcome inventory challenges in peak e-commerce season, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://ecommercegermany.com/blog/how-to-overcome-inventory-challenges-in-peak-e-commerce-season>
- 38 Peak Season Fulfillment: Challenges and Top 10 Strategies, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://fulfillment-box.com/peak-season-fulfillment-10-strategies-for-maximum-efficiency/>
- 39 How to Prep Your Store for Peak Shipping Season + What to Expect - ShipBob UK, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.shipbob.com/uk/blog/peak-shipping-season/>
- 40 E-Commerce Peak Season 2025: Planning meets challenge - Shipcloud, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.shipcloud.com/blog/e-commerce-peak-season/>
- 41 Sell Globally, Print Locally - Gelato, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/blog/sell-globally-print-locally>
- 42 Overcoming the Top 4 Pain Points in Fulfillment - Ware2Go, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://ware2go.co/articles/top-4-pain-points-in-fulfillment/>
- 43 AI in printing – practical applications to transform your business. - Gelato, accessed July 23, 2025
<https://www.gelato.com/it/connect/webinars/ai-in-printing>