

What opportunities do you see for print in a hyper-personalised future?

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The Paradox of Modern Reading

Imagine receiving a cookbook where every recipe matches your dietary needs, your kitchen equipment, and your cooking skill level. Or a children's book where the protagonist shares your child's appearance, interests, and family structure. These aren't speculative ideas; they exist today. In any bookstore, you'll find thousands of identical copies of the same titles, each selling the exact same content to vastly different readers.

This is the paradox facing print publishing. We live in the most personalised media era in history. Netflix curates content for individual viewers. Spotify builds unique playlists for each listener. Instagram delivers a feed tailored to personal preferences. Yet books, one of the most intimate and personal media forms, remain stubbornly mass-produced. Every reader is different, but every copy is identical.

During my three-year apprenticeship at a publishing company near Stuttgart, personalisation was never discussed as a strategic option for print products. The focus remained on traditional offset production, large print runs, and standardised content. This reflects a broader industry reality: while digital media has embraced individualisation, print publishing has largely maintained twentieth-century production logic.

But what if print's physicality could combine with digital personalisation logic? What if the tangible, permanent nature of books could be matched with individually relevant content?

This is an immediate opportunity. Hyper-personalisation offers a fundamentally different approach: an editorially guided, data-driven way of configuring modular content, structure, and presentation into unique print products. Instead of tweaking isolated elements, it reshapes the entire product architecture by assembling curated modules: chapters, examples, recipes, visuals, according to reader input or contextual data. In doing so, it positions print as uniquely valuable because it's physical, not despite it.

Why now? Three Forces Converging

Three fundamental shifts have created the conditions for hyper-personalised print to become viable: technological capability, economic necessity, and reader expectations.

Technology is Ready

Digital printing has transformed from a niche technology into a mainstream production method. Viable digital printing allows every page of every copy to differ without additional setup costs. Print-on-demand eliminates the need for large print runs and warehouse inventory. Web-to-print platforms enable customers to personalise products through intuitive interfaces, with orders flowing directly to production workflows.

During my internship at a digital printing press manufacturer that also provides workflow solutions, I worked directly on implementing these systems. We developed a web-to-print shop that allowed customers to personalise books, connected seamlessly to automated production workflows. In a separate project with a publishing company, we created a web shop for personalising non-fiction books, combining editorial content with customer data and digital printing into a scalable production model. These weren't experimental prototypes; they were functional, economically viable systems producing real products for real customers.

The technology exists, the workflows function, the infrastructure is available, but what's missing is strategic adoption.

Economics Demand It

Traditional publishing economics are under pressure. Average print runs continue to decline. Industry analyses and trade-press reports frequently cite return rates of 20–30% in the German book trade, although official, segment-level data is not publicly published. Rising costs for paper, energy, and logistics squeeze margins further. Offset printing's economies of scale become harder to achieve when print runs drop below economic thresholds. Print-on-demand production of personalised books addresses these challenges directly. The returns are eliminated because each copy is produced exclusively upon order confirmation. Overproduction is entirely avoided, with inventory maintained as digital files rather than physical warehouse stock. Premium pricing becomes justifiable when products deliver individual value. A personalised cookbook at 30 € can be more profitable than a generic cookbook at 12 €, even with higher unit production costs.

Readers Expect It

Readers under 20 have never experienced un-personalised digital media. They expect content matched to their preferences, contexts, and needs. This expectation increasingly extends to physical products. Research in consumer behaviour shows growing willingness to pay premium prices for personalised goods, particularly when personalisation delivers functional value rather than merely cosmetic customisation (Franke & Piller, 2006).

The Opportunity: Four Strategic Pathways

Hyper-personalisation in print publishing is not a single product category; it is a spectrum of opportunities across different market segments and price points. Here are four concrete pathways, each demonstrating how publishers can leverage hyper-personalisation to create differentiated value.

1. Children's Books: Beyond Names to True Representation

Personalised children's books currently represent the most established market for hyper-personalised print. Companies like *librio* have moved far beyond simple name insertion, allowing customers to customise protagonist appearance, names, and language (*librio*, 2026). A story about starting school can feature a protagonist who looks like the child, references their actual interests, and reflects their family situation, whether that is a single parent, two mothers, grandparents raising them, or any other configuration.

The value proposition is clear. Literature research demonstrates that children engage deeply with stories when they see themselves represented (National Literacy Trust, 2022). Parents willingly pay premium prices, often 3-4 times mass-market equivalents, for books that reflect their child's identity and experience (Adukia et al., 2023). Production relies on modular editorial content: writers and illustrators create variant components that can be combined according to customer input, maintaining narrative coherence while enabling extensive personalisation.

What makes print so special in this case, in contrast to digital media? Physical books become keepsakes, documenting specific moments in childhood. They're kept, treasured, passed down, not consumed and discarded like digital content. The tangible object carries emotional weight that digital cannot replicate.

2. Non-Fiction: Adaptive Knowledge Products

A promising example of personalised non-fiction was presented at the Canon Future Book Forum in Munich by Michael Then, Head of Licences & Content Solutions at Gräfe and Unzer (GU). GU introduced personalised cookbooks that allow customers to add their names and dedications, a meaningful first step into personalisation that creates emotional connection and gift value.

However, this is only the beginning of what's possible. Building on GUs foundation, the real opportunity lies in content-level personalisation: cookbooks where readers input dietary restrictions, cooking skill level, available time, kitchen equipment, household size, and season preferences, and receiving a book containing only recipes they can actually make with their specific constraints. This addresses a fundamental problem in non-fictional publishing, readers buy 300-page books but only use 50 pages. A generic cookbook might contain 200 recipes, but a vegetarian reader skips all meat recipes, a novice cook ignores advanced techniques, and someone without a food processor cannot make half the recipes. True hyper-personalisation would deliver 100% relevant content, transforming the value proposition entirely.

The expansion potential across non-fiction categories is enormous. Travel guides could reorganise based on trip dates, mobility needs, and interest profiles. Professional handbooks could be filtered by industry and experience level. Medical guides could adapt to specific diagnoses and treatment paths. Educational texts could match curriculum requirements and prior knowledge. Each represents an existing content category where content-level individualisation would dramatically increase practical value while allowing publishers to monetise their content archives in a new way.

3. Literature: Modular Narratives and Reading Paths

Hyper-personalisation can extend to literary fiction through a modular narrative structure. Authors write core plots with optional chapters, perspectives, or contextual material. Readers choose their preferred reading experience based on available time, desired depth, or interest in particularly sub problems or themes.

Consider a family saga offered in a three configuration: a 250-page version containing the main narrative arc, a 400-page version adding secondary characters' perspectives, and a 550-page version including historical context chapters and an epilogue. The core strength remains consistent, same characters, same plot resolution. They vary in depth, pacing, and contextual information. Additionally, the names of the characters and the place can be selected, and the story can be changed accordingly.

This is not 'choosing your own adventure' with branching plots. Authors maintain complete narrative control and artistic vision. The modular structure is invisible to readers. Each version feels like one coherent book. It is more analogous to director's cut versus theatrical releases: different edits of the same artistic work, each valid, each serving different audience preferences.

4. Premium Editions: Print as Personal Artefact

At the highest end, hyper-personalisation positions books as art objects. Limited editions of literary works or photography books could combine content personalisation with physical customisation: reader-selected chapters or images, custom cover design, premium materials, and craft binding. Price points of 150-500 € tap into the luxury goods market where personalisation signals status and taste.

What Publishers Already Have

The remarkable aspect of hyper-personalised print is that publishers already possess most required assets. Unlike technology companies entering content markets, publishers do not need to build from scratch.

Publishers already have the content archives. Decades of published material, much underutilised in current form, can be disaggregated and recombined. A publisher's backlist represents a content database ready for modular redeployment.

Publishers already have the editorial expertise. Publishers understand quality standards, narrative coherence, and audience needs. Their expertise becomes the framework governing personalisation, ensuring that algorithmically-selected combinations maintain editorial integrity.

Publishers already have author relationships. Publishers hold rights and maintain partnerships with creators. Authors can develop modular content specifically designed for personalised production, opening new creative possibilities while retaining artistic control. Publishers already have the brand trust and cultural authority. Readers trust established publishers to curate quality content. This trust cannot be easily replicated by technology platforms and becomes more valuable as content abundance increases.

Publishers already have customer data. Direct sales channels, subscriptions, and digital platforms provide publishers with reader preferences and purchase behaviour data that can inform personalisation strategies.

What is typically missing is not capability but strategic vision: recognising that these assets can be recombined into hyper-personalised production models.

What Publishers Must Do

Moving from concept to implementation requires specific actions. Publishers should start with one vertical. Do not attempt to transform the entire catalogue. Choose one category where personalisation clearly adds value, practical non-fiction, or children's books. Pilot with 1-3 titles. Learn what works. Iterate based on actual customer response.

Publishers must audit existing content for modular potential. Which backlist titles could be disaggregated into components? What content is already structured and tagged in ways that support modular assembly? Publishers often underestimate how much usable material they already possess.

Publishers must partner with technology providers. Digital printing companies offer workflow solutions. Web-to-print platforms exist; do not build from scratch. During my studies in print media technologies at Hochschule der Medien, I gained a comprehensive understanding of printing industry technologies and workflows. My subsequent internship demonstrated that integrated solutions combining web interfaces, content databases, and automated

production already function reliably. The technology is available; the question is adoption, not development.

Publishers must test premium pricing. Hyper-personalised copies should command 2-3 times mass-market prices. This is not price gouging; it is value-based pricing reflecting genuine individual relevance. Measure willingness to pay and satisfaction. The data will inform expansion strategies.

Publishers must maintain editorial control. Technology enables selection and assembly, but editorial teams must define permissible combinations. Content quality, narrative coherence, and brand integrity remain human responsibilities. Algorithms activate pathways; editors create and approve those pathways.

The competitive risk of inaction is real. Amazon already operates print-on-demand services. Technology platforms are developing editorial capabilities. If publishers wait too long, they risk becoming mere content suppliers to platforms that control customer relationships and capture value.

Print's unique Position

The opportunity for print in a hyper-personalised future rests on a fundamental insight: digital media wins on convenience and ephemerality, but print wins on permanence, tangibility, and meaning. Hyper-personalisation does not diminish these qualities; it amplifies them.

In a world of infinite, disposable digital content, personalised physical objects become more valuable, not less. Books transform from products into possessions, artefacts of specific moments, contexts, and relationships. You do not just consume them. You keep them, display them, return to them, pass them on to others.

Generic mass product combined with digital convenience equals a commodity, which is Amazon's business, and traditional publishers cannot win by playing it. But personal content combined with physical form creates meaningful objects. That's the opportunity platforms cannot easily replicate.

In ten years, readers will look back at our era of identical mass-market books the same way we now view black-and-white television or rotary phones: functional but not personalised, adequate but not optimal. The future of print is not smaller or niche. It is personalised, purposeful, and premium. Books that matter because they're *yours*, made for you, matched to you, meaningful to you.

Publishers who embrace this transition will not just survive the digital age. They will define what comes next. The opportunity is not to resist personalisation or retreat to nostalgia. It is to become a medium where personalisation matters most, where it is not just data-driven, but deeply human. Where the personal becomes permanent.

That is not a compromise. That is print's superpower.

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