

Sustainability in Print

A broader ink-tank conversation for the industry

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Sustainability in print is still often explained through the most visible forms of waste: spent cartridges, excess packaging and the service friction that comes with frequent consumable changes. That framing has helped refillable ink-tank systems build credibility across the U.S. market, and recent industry research suggests the category is beginning to enter a state of maturity. As ink-tank printing gains ground across home office, SMB and distributed work environments, energy use is becoming a more meaningful part of the sustainability conversation for manufacturers, dealers, resellers and managed service providers.

High-capacity ink-tank printers accounted for roughly 45% of global office and home inkjet shipments as of 2024, a number that could reach an estimated 49% by the end of 2026. Refillable ink-tank systems are expected to continue gaining share even as the broader printer market remains under pressure, suggesting the shift is becoming less about recovering page volume and more about changing device mix and buyer priorities.

Two Sides: Perception & Evaluation

Keypoint Intelligence's primary research among organizations already using ink-tank printers helps explain why. Sustainability credibility is already well established: Not surprisingly, 97% of respondents said ink-tank printers are more sustainable than cartridge-based devices. Yet the benefits buyers most readily associate with ink-tank systems are reduced plastic waste from cartridges and less packaging waste. Lower energy consumption is part of the conversation, but it is not the first attribute most users mention.

At the same time, when respondents were asked to rank sustainability characteristics during evaluation, lower energy consumption emerged as the second leading factor, behind reduced plastic waste. That gap between perception and procurement is important, in that while energy may not



be the headline claim in the U.S. market, it surely matters when buyers compare alternatives more formally.

For the dealer channel, that distinction has practical consequences. Ink-tank systems are often positioned using two familiar arguments: lower TCO and less consumables waste. Both remain valid, though there are indications in the market that ink-tank printers are increasingly competing with low-end laser devices by offering cost-per-page (CPP) parity and better energy efficiency, a distinction that is particularly relevant in hybrid and distributed print environments where operating cost is evaluated more holistically. In that context, energy use becomes a greater part of the business case.

Image quality ranked as the top purchase driver for ink-tank users surveyed, followed by convenience relative to cartridge printers and ease of replacing empty supplies. Preference for higher page yields ranked lowest. What is more, satisfaction among current ink-tank users was also exceptionally high (98%), illustrating how the high-capacity ink-tank system has moved beyond its original role as a “print-more-for-less” proposition. Buyers are increasingly evaluating these systems as mainstream print infrastructure,

where usability, reliability and total operating efficiency matter as much as (or even more than) page yield itself.

Energy Efficiency Is Bigger Than Rated Power

That broader “efficiency” lens is where energy consumption deserves a little more attention. In practice, sustainability is not determined only by rated power consumption, but also by cleaning cycle design, frequency of maintenance, device downtime, ink waste and whether eco/ink saving modes remain usable for business output. Thankfully, there is a bit more visibility into these considerations thanks to hands-on lab testing.

In both consumer- and office-class testing, one tank platform showed fewer nozzle blockages, more efficient cleaning routines and much less degradation in eco mode than its competitor. In the office-class evaluation, one device preserved business-ready output and OCR accuracy in eco mode, while the other lost enough quality to make economy printing less viable for professional use.

While testing revealed differences between different machines by different OEMs, the key takeaway is not that ink-tank printers perform differently from one another, but that claims around sustainability, especially in the expanding ink-tank space, become more credible when supported by real-world scenarios that effectively illustrate reliability and resource efficiency.

Next Differentiators: Life Cycle & Serviceability

There are clear implications for OEMs and the greater dealer community here. Future differentiation in ink-tank printing will depend less on headline yield claims and more on reliability under real workloads, intelligent maintenance design, eco-mode usability and regulatory readiness.

It is also consistent with a regulatory backdrop in which ENERGY STAR remains a de facto requirement in many public-sector tenders, while packaging and producer responsibility rules continue to influence procurement expectations. This direction aligns with what U.S. ink-tank printer users are saying. When asked what would make ink-tank printers more appealing, respondents put ease of repairability first, followed by cost savings, longer product life cycle and lower energy consumption during use. Larger organizations showed the strongest likelihood of expanding ink-tank deployments over the next two to three years.

So, it stands to reason that the next phase of growth will be won less through consumables rhetoric alone and more through life-cycle value, serviceability and measurable operating performance.

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Speaking specifically about consumables rhetoric, ink-tank models do not eliminate the supplies strategy entirely as much as they change the logic of it. Even in a refillable model, the OEM supply ecosystem remains resilient: Among surveyed U.S. ink-tank users, 74% said they purchase new OEM ink supplies rather than aftermarket alternatives. This means that the installed base becomes even more valuable when a device

in use is durable, easy to support and trusted to deliver consistent output over time.

Ink Tank & Sustainability: What Is Next?

In summation, one of the clearest takeaways given recent survey and test data is that ink-tank printing has already established itself as a more sustainable alternative to cartridge-based inkjets in principle. The more important consideration for dealers is how that sustainability story evolves. Reduced plastic waste will remain the most visible proof point, yet energy use is becoming a more relevant part of the evaluation process, particularly when tied to repairability, maintenance efficiency, device longevity and competition with low-end laser.

For dealers and OEMs alike, a clear opportunity presents itself: Those who continue positioning the ink-tank printer as a primarily supplies-saving device may undersell its broader value as long-term print infrastructure. The next phase of market growth is sure to favor providers that frame ink-tank systems more holistically. To achieve this, devices will have to offer not only lower consumables intervention, but stronger life-cycle efficiency, serviceability and operational value across SMB, home office, education and distributed work environments, too. The OEMs (and dealers, for that matter) that communicate the full picture will be better positioned to present ink-tank printing as a more credible, long-term print architecture for SMBs, home office, education and distributed office environments alongside their positioning as simply a lower-intervention consumables model. ■

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