Personal 3D printer sales to reach $1.2B by 2018
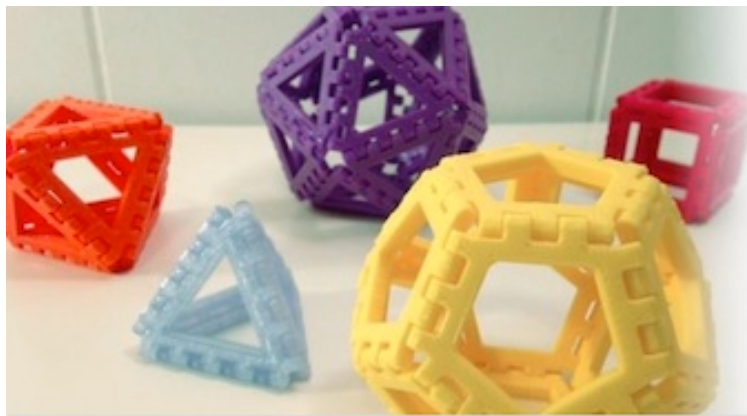
The entry of 2D printing companies into 3D market will spur adoption, Juniper Research report says

By Lucas Mearian
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Computerworld - The sale of 3D printers and related materials is expected to balloon from $75 million this year to $1.2 billion by 2018, according to a new report.

Driving that surge from today's relatively low levels will be the entry of mainstream 2D printer companies such as HP and Epson to the 3D fray, Juniper Research noted in its report, "Consumer 3D Printing and Scanning."

Geometric objects displayed on the 3D printing design site Thingiverse, where CAD drawing are shared freely (Photo: Thingiverse).

The Juniper report says the entry of conventional printer companies into the market, along with the development of an strong ecosystem of software, apps and materials, will help convince consumers to start buying 3D printers.

"In order for 3D printing to successfully find a mainstream market amongst consumers, it needs to widen the applications available that integrate consumer lifestyle and drive a number of applications beyond professional printing," said report author Nitin Bhas in a statement.

While 3D printer shipments are at relatively low levels -- thus representing a limited opportunity in the medium term -- Juniper expects sales to increase significantly beyond the five-year period. Top 3D printer makers, like 3D Systems and Stratasys, agree that today there's stronger demand for professional 3D printers and materials.

According to Juniper, the U.S. and Europe are leading the rest of the world for consumer 3D printer adoption; hobbyists and early tech-adopters in those regions are driving that surge.

Retailers such as Staples and service providers like UPS are testing in-store 3D printing services to provide their customers an opportunity to use the technology without having to buy the hardware and related materials.

Juniper's report also notes that similar to the mobile device ecosystem, content will be critical to the success of consumer 3D printing.

"This can be achieved through the creation of an app or online portal for connecting to the cloud and enhancing the functionality of the 3D printer via content -- as already done by MakerBot via its Thingiverse and Digital Store," the report stated.

The Thingiverse website is the largest repository for sharing free 3D printing CAD designs.

Jenny Lawton, president of 3D printer company MakerBot, said there's been a lot of hype in the marketplace as of late and "no one knows what's going to happen."

"I think the consumer adoption trend is moving along nicely. There are reasons it might accelerate," she said. "This isn't the first time that a disruptive technology has gone from the professional marketplace to the consumer or the home. I think people are getting more comfortable that they can adopt the technology and it won't go away."
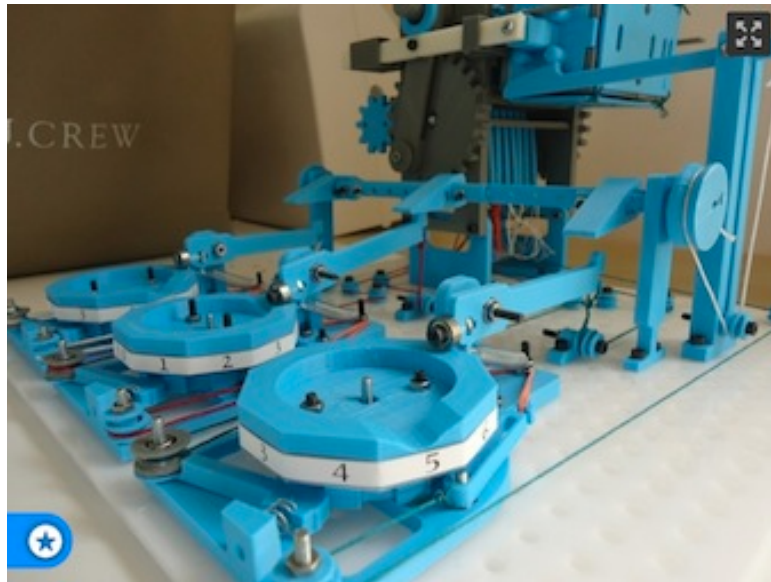
The Turbo Entabulator - a 3D-printable, fully mechanical computer whose CAD file is available for download on Thingiverse (Photo: Thingiverse).

Lawton pointed to video cameras, computers and 2D printers, which once were only found in business settings.

Academic settings, in particular, are also having a profound affect on 3D printer adoption rates as the machines are becoming ubiquitous tools in secondary schools and universities.

"It's a part of what [kids in college do]. Now, it's no longer alright to just become a mechanical engineering; you need to have skills in making 3D modeling and printing. That's a change," Lawton said. "The person who's leaving college now and going into the workplace is expecting to have access to that technology."