Gartner: 3D Printer Market "At Inflection Point"

Written by Marco Attard
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According to Gartner the 3D printer market "is at an inflection point", as global shipments are forecast to reach 217350 units in 2015, up from 108151 in 2014, before growing to over 2.3 million by 2018.

"Unit shipment growth rates for 3D printers, which languished in the low single and double digits per year throughout the 30 years since the first 3D printers were invented, are poised to increase dramatically beginning in 2015," the analyst says. "As radical as the forecast numbers may seem, bear in mind that even the 2.3 million shipments that we forecast will be sold in 2018 are a small fraction of the total potential market of consumers, businesses and government organisations worldwide."

Leading the market through 2018 in 3D printing technologies is material extrusion, since it is the technology behind consumer (sub-$1000) 3D printer segment. Driving consumer 3D printer adoption is lower prices, improved performance and expanded global availability.

On the enterprise side, 3D printing viability for prototypes and manufacturing, together with lower costs, improved quality and a wider material range are main market drivers.

However material extrusion spending is hit by the large amount of startups and small companies selling sub-$500 3D printers, meaning such companies might not make the revenues to cover production, overhead costs, service, sales, channel development, R&D and profits. On the other hand alternative, costlier technologies such as directed-energy deposition and powder bed fusion should retain prices as demand rises as vendors attract and retain enterprise buyers.

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As such 3D printer ASPs vary depending on technology and market forces, with each market depending on device mix, prices and buyer requirements.

As for the future Gartner predicts plug and print capability will drive the consumer 3D printer market come 2015, as vendors start incorporating vendor-specific cartridges with locked-in materials, 2D printer style. Automated bed leveling and heated build chambers will also make for simpler consumer 3D printers.

"This trend will accelerate as the market consisting primarily of early adopters who grew up with an open-source approach without lock-ins evolves into a market in which average consumers dominate," the analyst concludes. "While the early adopters will rage at the perversion of the 3D printer open-source ethos, the vast majority of mainstream consumers will demand the simple and consistent operation that "plug and print" can provide them."

Go Gartner Forecast 3D Printers Worldwide, 2014