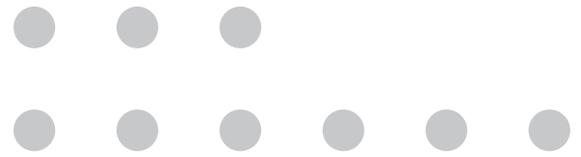
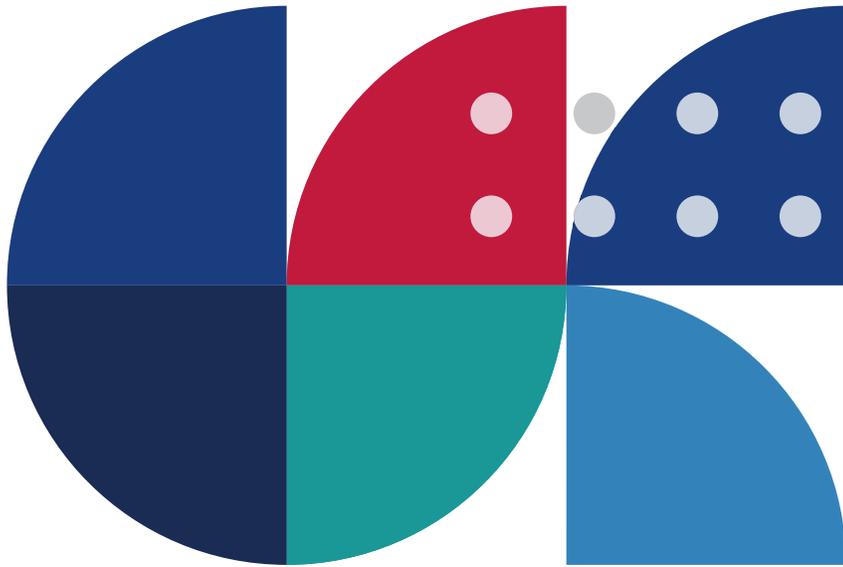


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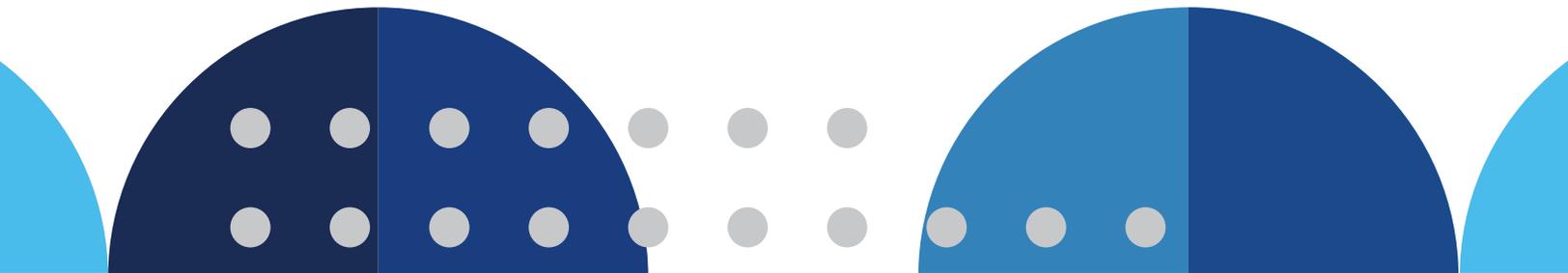


in the

NEW AGE

of

CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION



Elevate Your Print Services for Maximum Impact

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Roger P. Gimbel's

Guide to Thriving In the New Age Of Customer Communication

**Elevate Your Print Services for Maximum Impact
from Gimbel & Associates**

Introduction

Are you striving to ignite growth in your printing business, make sense of digital technologies, or reach your sales and marketing goals? Do you want to explore new ways to manage your operations more effectively and stay ahead of industry trends? Do you sell hardware, software, or services to print companies?

As a printing industry professional, you're invited to dive into a hand-picked compendium of articles brought to you by Gimbel & Associates, an international consulting firm dedicated to sparking business growth in the digital era.

Whether you're a print service provider, an in-plant print operation, or a vendor in the printing industry, this comprehensive collection is a one-stop resource to help you navigate the tides of change and drive your business forward. The compendium includes thoughtful content in four areas of the printing business:

- **Business Strategy:** Forge your path to success with impactful strategies and informed decision-making.
- **Design and Designers:** A look at design essentials that captivate your audience (or your *customers'* audience).
- **Marketing and Sales:** Unlock data-driven marketing and sales techniques that keep your ledger in the black.
- **Production:** Fine-tune your print production processes for optimal efficiency and quality. Every article in the collection offers observations, advice, ideas, and valuable insights, all highly relevant to the ever- evolving print industry.

Partnering with print service vendors, in-house printing operations, and a range of industry professionals, Gimbel & Associates helps companies pave the path to technological adaptation, advancement in sales and marketing tactics, and efficient operations management among other services that positively affect your business.

Our first publication, "Roger P. Gimbel's Guide to Better Business," was published in 2020 and features articles designed to help grow your business. This volume is available for download at www.rogergimbel.com/library.

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Introduction to Business Strategy

Navigating the Evolving Landscape of the Print Business

The scent of fresh paper, the rhythmic hum of a press, and the vibrant splash of ink are comfortable and familiar to printers. The world of print is exciting and creative. It is also a business. For the modern print service provider, the palette of business possibilities is vast, but so are the challenges.

This collection of articles guides you through print industry strategy. Whether you're a seasoned veteran or a freshly inked entrant, each piece offers tips and ideas to help you position your company for growth and success.

- Plan and execute with precision: Craft a printing operation from the ground up.
- Unmask your rivals: Understand your competitive landscape, identifying both threats and potential partners.
- Assess and adapt: Delve into operational assessments, ensuring your print firm hums with the efficiency of a well-oiled press.
- Expand your horizons: Explore the world of wide format printing, unlocking new avenues for growth.
- Forge powerful alliances: Consider the merits of partnering with a mail house, leveraging their strengths to bolster your own.
- Unearth in-house treasures: Discover hidden opportunities within your in-plant operations, transforming them into profit-generating gems.
- Dive deeper with our popular 3-part series about the unique challenges of attracting and retaining talent in the printing industry.

10 Tips for Adding Wide Format to Your Print Operations

Originally published in February 2022

Wide-format printing, a large and resilient category, continues to show potential for growth and profitability. If you haven't delved into wide format, it can be a significant new revenue stream for your print operations.

Definitions vary, but for our purposes, wide format means inkjet devices with printing widths of roughly five feet and greater. Encompassing many applications—posters, banners, pop-ups, labels, back-lit displays, textiles, home decor, wall art, and packaging—it also excels at very short runs with variable printing and customization.



If you are planning to expand into wide format, consider the following:

1. Start with Your Customers

To assess which wide-format services are practical, start by talking to your customers about their purchases. What are they buying and where are they buying it? If they were to switch their orders to you, is this base enough to grow into a substantial business?

2. Know What You Want to Print

Before choosing a printing press, decide what you want to print. The work on which you choose to focus will determine the substrates and ink, resolution and thickness requirements, costs, and the

environment where the work will be displayed. The substrates available for wide format are almost limitless and include canvas, metal, vinyl, glass, plastics, wood, and yes, paper, but no single device will print on every substrate.

3. Research the Equipment

Wide-format equipment choices are abundant. Printers come as roll-to-roll for soft substrates such as vinyl, or flatbed for rigid materials such as metal and gator foam board. Hybrid models can switch between the two for greater flexibility.

Textiles, for example, require printers capable of dye sublimation, where inks are diffused into textiles. Outdoor signs need printers that can handle solvent inks, which are more durable and resistant to fading. Consider the resolution you'll need. A large banner in a huge conference hall doesn't need the same fine resolution as counter-top displays or wall art. Do you need white ink capability?

Be prepared to devote considerable time to researching all the equipment options and configurations. Understand what each printer can do, its potential, and, crucially, its running costs.

4. Does it Integrate with MIS and Other Systems?

Ideally, you'll want to integrate your wide-format devices into your MIS systems, web-to-print platforms, other workflows, and RIP devices. What software upgrades will you need and who will handle the required integration?

5. Finishing Adds a Wow Factor

A cutting table is key for a flatbed printer and rigid substrates. A laser device with intricate cutting capabilities, for example, can give any job a wow factor that adds value and profits. Manufacturers can optimize various devices to work well together.

6. Pick the Right Vendor

Research vendors carefully. A good vendor will assess your operation and recommend the best devices without unnecessary up-selling. When you need them, accessing a technician quickly is a must. Also consider warranties, the training provided—especially with software integration—equipment upgrades, retrofits, and replacement heads. Discuss leasing options with them if that works for you.

7. The Business Model is a Little Different

Wide format is unlike offset. The myriad inks and substrates impact supply chains and inventory management. Costing differs from offset, where unit prices decrease as runs increase. Sometimes, you must price by square footage, for example. Prices for supplies can also fluctuate more wildly.

8. Branch Out to Consumers

Wide-format can be perfect for extending your reach to the consumer market in part because it makes brief runs and variable work feasible. Many printers are fulfilling orders on sites like Etsy or creating their own websites where consumers can upload images for printing on metal, glass, canvas, or fabric. Think wall stickers, art works, t-shirts, or customized metal signs. It's endless.

9. Dip Your Toe with a Partnership

To explore the wide-format world without taking the plunge, partner with a reseller and get a feel for potential demand and sales strategies.

10. Develop a Niche Expertise

Consider developing an expertise in a certain niche, while remaining flexible enough to do other work. Niche work is consistent and keeps the presses running.

Setting Up a Wide Format Operation

Originally published in May 2022

Expanding into wide-format offerings is exciting on many fronts. It's also challenging and complex as, among other things, it requires creating a smart manufacturing layout to produce the printed items profitably.

A good floor plan is like a puzzle—all the pieces must fit together to achieve the most efficiency. This includes moving materials, accessing equipment, creating networks, and other elements. Properly done, an efficient floor plan will reduce waste, increase productivity, and boost competitiveness.

Overall, the goal is to achieve an optimal flow. Create the most direct and productive means of physically moving a job from intake to production, to finishing and then shipping. The challenge is accommodating multiple printers, cutters, laminators, mounting devices, and other equipment into the flow.

Product Layout or Process Layout?

Common approaches to designing a manufacturing facility are the product layout method, the process layout method, or a hybrid of the two.

If, for example, a wide format operation is dedicated to producing one product, say a super-long run for labels that is repeated regularly, all equipment can be arranged according to the product layout. The equipment is arranged in essentially a straight line.

This simple arrangement minimizes the distances for material handling, reduces throughput time, uses space efficiently, and eliminates bottlenecks.

If an operation is producing a variety of jobs that are non-repetitive, then the process approach is often the nimblest. In this layout, you group all machines that perform a similar function together at various locations. All printers go in one area, all finishing in another, for example. This may not be the most direct route, but it allows for production versatility.

In today's world, manufacturing operations often deploy a combination layout. Basically, this approach is akin to setting up production lines that work in sync and start and end in the same place.



Production Floor Layout Best Practices

With all three layout approaches, we must keep certain considerations in mind:

- Ensure you leave enough room to move around any machine, and space to access it whether loading ink or doing repairs. What is the minimum number of feet of working space needed for each piece of equipment? You don't want operators tripping over each other.

- Minimize the distances that materials, such as substrates, ink, and other supplies, must travel between equipment. That includes moving materials from storage to the production space, and the final product to shipping. Too much moving around creates waste and inefficiency.



- Certain substrates for wide format may be bigger than those used in commercial operations. Rolls can be up to 16 ft. and require specific handling.
- Also, consider how to handle and move finished products, especially if you must inventory and kit printed items before shipping.
- Assess power needs. How far are the outlets? What voltage does each piece of equipment require? How will you connect all the pieces on the floor? If cables are needed, how long should they be and will they impede movement?
- How will each piece of equipment connect to internal digital networks? Will each piece need an IP address?
- How will you handle other critical requirements like exhaust, air supply, temperature, waste, and humidity?
- Think about what printers or other devices must be stationary and what stations you can move.

Critically, automation and software are key to achieving an efficient shop floor flow and requires planning. An effective MIS system, for example, can consolidate litho and wide-format operations and reduce administrative costs.

A good floor plan is well thought out, and should account for growth and added capacity, but it need not be cast in stone. Like anything else, a continuous improvement mindset with regular evaluations and adjustments will save time, labor, and materials.

7 Hazards of Web-to-Print Portals

New Content

Online shopping blew up over the last several years as consumers, confined to their homes, embraced virtual retail therapy. Business clients, through slower to the game, have followed. Print buyers, some of whom are already used to getting business cards online, are now much more open to hitting the order button for complex products, such as signs, multi-color brochures, or even packaging.

While there's no question that a well-done web-to-print (W2P) portal can increase high-margin revenue and enrich customer ties, pitfalls and hazards also exist. Here are some to consider.

1. Focusing on the Software Instead of the Vision

Before crafting a strategy or buying software, you need a vision for what you want a web portal to do. It's folly to launch such a labor-intensive service without knowing how a W2P solution will complement your operations, help you achieve your overall business goals, and help you grow.

Print service providers can easily forget that creating a great web portal is just the beginning of online selling. Success depends on understanding the needs of your customers and the benefits they'll get from a portal. Assess the competition and market dynamics and evaluate what contributions you will require from all internal departments.



2. Not Doing Enough Research and Preparation

All web-to-print software suppliers promise ease and success with their systems. It should go without saying that research is paramount. Your platform should be open, flexible, and easy to use.

W2P should be scalable to grow as your business expands. The system should be robust enough to handle custom toolbars, access points, and interfaces for different clients. Understand how much installation support the supplier will provide. And, crucially, get a fix on whether the supplier understands your business and your market so the software vendor can tailor the portal to your specifications.

3. Forgetting B2B is Not Always the Same as B2C

B2B clients have more complex needs than B2C ones. Their concerns will include color accuracy, brand consistency, centralized ordering systems, connections from their ERP systems, advanced file customization, storage, complicated estimating, and the ability to order material that's been created with professional layout and design software.

You can probably accommodate consumers' demand with templates and static price sheets. If you're building a B2C revenue stream, remember to keep the printing jargon to a minimum, as you're dealing with inexperienced buyers.

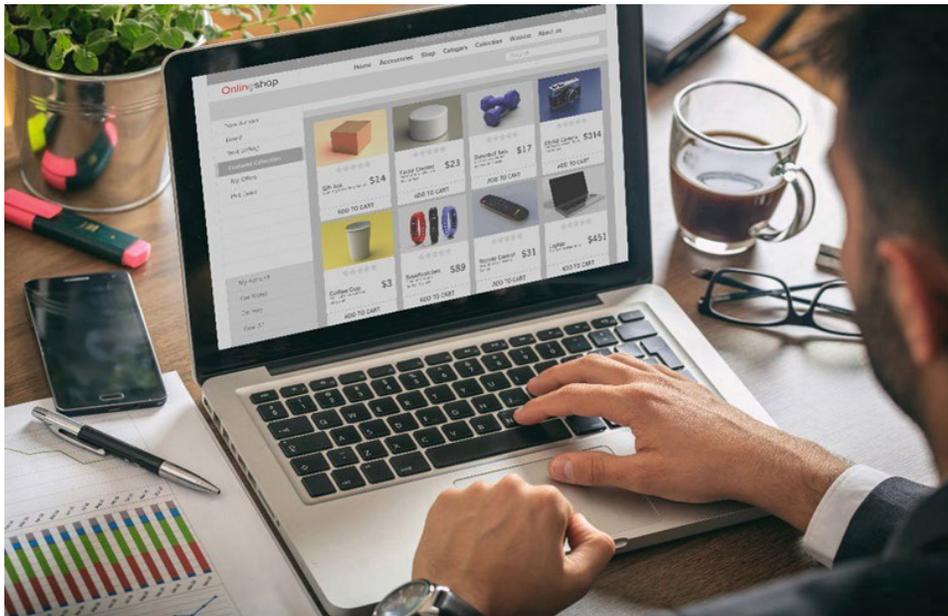
4. Not Putting the Right Person in Charge and Not Involving the Whole Company

If you're tempted to put the IT department in charge of developing your online platform, you might want to think again. The primary purpose of e-commerce is sales, so put this project in the hands of someone who knows how to leverage the technology to grow revenue. Other departments, including IT, should also be involved. Their input is critical because a W2P project will impact them. Make sure

whoever is in charge has the experience and, importantly, the time to do it, knows how to encourage input from multiple departments, and can deal with the supplier.

5. Assuming If You Build It, They Will Come

They won't. You need to tell clients and other users about your new way to order print. A W2P portal needs a well thought-out and executed marketing plan that includes one-on-one presentations to clients, social channels, email marketing, direct mail, and other forms of advertising you normally use.



6. Thinking Installation and Integration Will Be a Piece of Cake

Installation of a web-to-print system can take up to 8 months or more. The system needs servers with backup and security. W2P should ideally be integrated into your ERP and MIS system so that information entered online doesn't have to be entered again, wasting time. Other integrations may include warehousing and shipping. All these must be thought through carefully and you must eliminate glitches. It can be a complicated and time-consuming undertaking.

7. Going It Alone When It's Not Necessary

Some printers might be tempted to build their own systems, and that's certainly an option if you have the talent in house. But talent can leave, taking knowledge with them. Think about how you'll deal with updates, plug-ins, security, and other maintenance.

With advancing technology, many web-to-print software systems are indeed becoming very sophisticated and deliver what they promise in terms of revenue growth and ROI. But the road to successful e-commerce still needs a lot of vigilance and oversight.

Are You Fixing the Same Problems Repeatedly?

New Content

We're all susceptible to it: doing the same thing over and over because it's what we're used to, and it's easier. The same applies to problem solving, and most of us resort to using the same tried-and-true workarounds when confronted with obstacles.

But repetition can be the enemy of innovation. If this flawed standard operating procedure is the status quo in your shop, you're probably operating less efficiently and less profitably than you should be. It may be time to consider hiring an external and objective business analysis expert to get on a better track.



Business Analysis Benefits

A business analyst defines an organization's mission and goals and develops strategies to achieve those goals. Importantly, the process also identifies the challenges and obstacles that keep goals out of reach and develops a plan for organizational change.

The industry of business analysis is riddled with complex-sounding acronyms: SWOT analysis, MOST analysis, CATWOE techniques, MoSCoW techniques, Five Whys, and Six Thinking Hats techniques.

A business analysis involves sitting down and looking at every aspect of an organization. Besides clearly defining goals, a business analysis examines a company's history, current operating systems, and

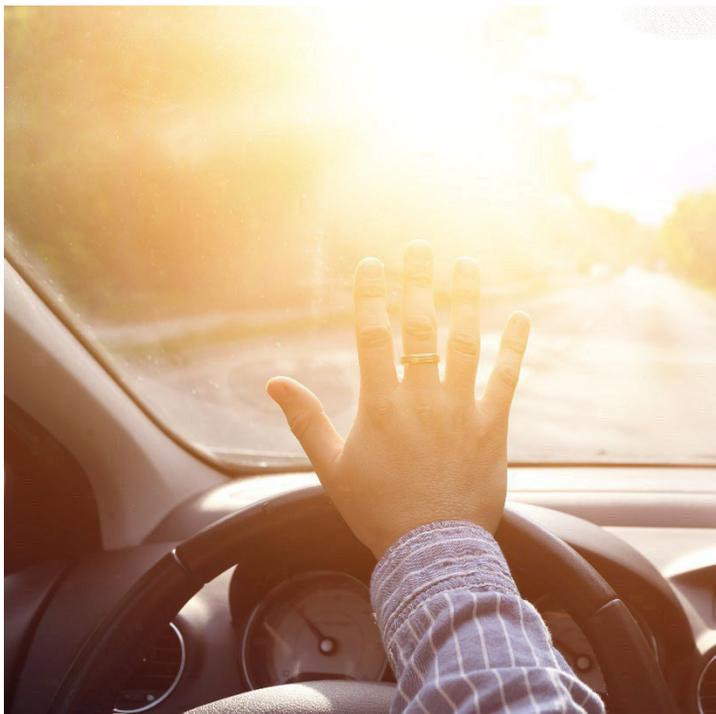
processes; it analyses the competitive environment; assesses risks and opportunities; clarifies the needs of customers, owners, and stakeholders; and identifies areas of strength and weakness.

A proper analysis will also produce strategies to achieve all goals, identify changes required across all areas of the organization, and develop a plan to implement and monitor the progress of the changes being made. Clear documentation that everyone can understand and follow is crucial.

The benefits of a successful business analysis are considerable. Done well, it will lead to significantly lower operating costs, higher sales and profits, more leads, greater productivity, better decision making based on data, more satisfied customers, stronger team collaboration, and ultimately, a more successful company that can take advantage of opportunities. In short, greater control of your company.

Obscured View

While it's possible to conduct this process internally, in real life, only the most disciplined and efficient printing companies can do it. Business analysis is a time-intensive job that's done while keeping the business running. Most print shops simply don't have that capacity.



Bringing in a knowledgeable expert is a good investment for many reasons. For starters, they won't disrupt the daily running of your business. Your staff can continue to do their jobs while the business analysis is underway.

An analyst brings an impartial view of your business that's unattached to doing things the same way. Their only investment is to help you build a better business.

Often owners and managers are so involved with the daily demands of running the printing business they can't see the forest for the trees. A neutral observer is in a prime position to see both.

Leveraging Outside Resources

Your staff may be more willing to share information with a third party instead of a direct manager or an owner. They will be more open about their frustrations and what hinders their performance. Conversely, independent observers may find it easier to deliver news and insist on changes the staff may not want.

Like other disciplines, business analysis is continually evolving, and an expert has the time and the obligation to keep abreast of new trends, regulatory requirements, and other best practices.

Finding the Right Analyst

Unique aspects of the printing industry make it essential to find a business analyst with practical experience. Printing is part manufacturing and part creative arts. Labels and packaging production differs from printing books, banners, and home decor. Ask potential analysts about their specific printing industry backgrounds and compare their expertise to the profile of your business. If you are looking to make a shift in your business strategy, find someone who has worked with companies similar to the model you have in mind.

In the end, wise print-shop owners, like owners of every business, must judge when to get out of their own way to be successful. Printers operate in a highly competitive environment that's intensifying by the day. A detailed analysis of your business and a well-thought-out path toward success may be the best investment you can make.

Assessing an In-Plant Operation

Originally published in February 2022

In-plant printing operations are different from commercial shops in significant ways. They are, for example, expected to provide services that support the goals of their parent companies.

Sometimes that means decisions regarding scheduling, production, or resource allocation are dictated by the needs, wants, demands, and whims of the parent company, regardless of any financial impact on the in-plant.

But in-plants are like commercial shops in that they are expected to run efficiently and keep costs down while handily meeting customer expectations and delivering work on time. To operate at that level, management should perform operations assessments at regular intervals. Focus on areas such as technology, workflow, and marketing. Individual industries and companies may have different dynamics and needs, but the following basic steps are the building blocks of any assessment.

Analyze the Equipment

List every device in the shop, from prepress monitors to binding equipment. Analyze the fleet. Do you deal with multiple suppliers, and would it be more efficient to pare back to fewer? Map the activity of each device, listing who's using it, how often it's being used, its cost to operate, the needs it meets, how often it needs servicing, its environmental impact, and any other relevant metric.



Look at Automation

Do you have enough? Do you need more? Become familiar with the exact workflow of each job from order intake to mailing. Map out the touchpoints along the production process, a list of who's involved with the job, and the equipment and technologies needed to get it out the door. Identify all repetitive steps, look for areas where you can standardize processes and highlight places where jobs will benefit from more structured workflows. Then align the software you have against your needs to determine whether you have underutilized tools or need to top up.

Know Your Costs

Look not just at the cost of equipment and software, but the costs of maintaining those tools and training your staff to use them. Track the number of jobs that go out on time, and those that are late. Track how costs for each job compare to the original quote and, if discrepancies exist, check that your estimation programs are up to date. Also, seek relevant industry financial benchmarks and check how you compare against other shops.

Measure Value

It's true that the first priority of an in-plant is meeting the needs of the parent company. But can you add value by selling to external customers if you have the capacity? Can you produce commodity products quickly? Can you develop abilities that serve your internal clients and external ones too, like variable printing?

Assess Your Marketing

Regularly assess how well the shop's capabilities and expertise align with the goals of the parent organization. For example, fundraising can be a very important function. Do you have the right technology and skills in variable printing which could prove valuable to fundraising? Look at how regularly you touch base with the marketing and IT departments to discuss their major plans or projects and how you might prepare to meet them. Is your shop collaborating and strategically aligned with key departments toward meeting their goals?

Equally, assess whether key departments or personnel know what the shop can do and are aware of how you help the company succeed. How often do you brief the higher ups about the good work you do and how relevant your contributions are? Do you have a schedule in place to perform these tasks on a regular basis and, more importantly, does your shop follow the schedule?

In-plants do function in a hybrid environment where some things are out of their control. But regular detailed assessments of every area of the shop will ensure you deliver value, work efficiently, and make your in-plant indispensable to your company.

Challenges and Opportunities for Print Service Providers

Originally published in June 2022

Well, we are certainly living in interesting times. Two years of a global pandemic, followed by conflict in Ukraine, have resulted in labor disruptions, a choked global supply chain, and a shifting marketplace. What's next is anyone's guess at this point.



Interesting times certainly bring a host of challenges, but they also bring opportunity. That's as true for the printing industry, which was living through its own interesting times even before the pandemic, as it is for individuals and society.

Positive Outlook for the Printing Industry

The future for the industry overall looks reasonably bright, although altered. According to UK-based research firm Smithers Pira, the direct impact of COVID should dissipate, though some changes will become permanent, altering demand patterns and the products consumers will use.

The firm projects that overall print and packaging will grow to \$834.2 billion globally in 2026 from \$799.6 billion in 2016, even as print volumes shrink. In 2021, analysts valued the market at \$760.6 billion as it absorbed the COVID hit.

Keep in mind these are global projections and regional markets might differ. Digital printing, packaging, and labelling are the definite bright spots for growth opportunities. The digital market, mostly inkjet applications, will grow substantially over the next 10 years and will account for almost 25% of the market.

Industry Trends

Also, keep in mind the digital market is itself a huge category. Digital printing can include wide format, textiles, home décor, mailing and fulfillment, short-run books, direct mail, specialty printing, and many other applications.

Another trend on everyone's radar will be the continued growth of online shopping. Consumers got used to buying online during the pandemic, even for B2B purchases, and they will keep on doing it, especially younger buyers.

There are significant opportunities. To exploit them fully, printing companies will have to be smart about investments and how they reorganize their companies. Aside from any printing press investment, relevant software for MIS, ERP, and CRM systems will be key. These systems make companies more efficient, more productive, cut out touchpoints, and produce better data that printing executives can use for decision making. A good e-commerce platform is a must as well. E-commerce makes business dealings quicker, easier, and more efficient.

Assess Now to Prepare

Preparing properly for growth is also critical. Individually, printers can't do much to ease the consumable shortages or tight labor situation, but companies can prepare to meet opportunities head on with a proper business assessment.



An assessment is an honest and objective analysis of a business. The aim of an assessment is to develop a clear picture of where the company is, where it's going, and what it must do to get there.

Assessments identify weaknesses, strengths, and needed adjustments in every aspect of an operation, including processes, financials, marketing strategy, financial operations, growth plans, leadership, labor components, product development, and so on. An effective assessment is highly individual to a specific company and

takes into account that company's goals.

When assessing new opportunities, managers must analyze whether they have the right resources, people, equipment, data, and finances to execute any potential strategy. They must look at trends in relevant markets, study what competitors are doing, assess the potential for growth of a new product or service, review the potential for risk, consider client preferences, and evaluate a host of other analysis topics.

A good honest assessment will prepare managers and leaders for formulating the right strategy for their business. Assessing your own company is not a simple task to do while running a daily business. It may be a good idea to ask an objective third party to lead the process and continue monitoring after you carry out a strategy.

Interesting and challenging times can be managed effectively, but they require an extraordinary amount of preparation.

How Color Choices Affect Printing Costs

Originally published in March 2021

Color preferences are changing. An overenthusiastic use of loud, bright hues in recent years has, ironically, dulled their impact. Perhaps we're all yearning for more mellow, calming experiences, or maybe we simply want a visual change. Whatever the actual reasons, design trends are shifting to a more muted, less vibrant color palette.

The printing process can affect color choices, and some of those choices cost more than others. However, cost-effective color is possible, without reducing its visual appeal.

Before we dig into the color-related cost elements of print jobs, let's discuss the importance of talking to your printer early in the project.

When designers communicate with their printers, their jobs will run more smoothly, the end product will satisfy, and you may save money. Start the conversation as designs are being considered, not right after the last files have been sent to the printing company. The more complex the project, the more important this communication becomes. Color management should be part of that discussion. Offset, digital, and inkjet technologies all handle color differently, so design decisions may depend on the press on which your print provider will run the job.



We're going to focus on offset printing for this discussion.

Surprise Fact About Ink Consumption

Other than projects that call for specialty inks, ink consumption rarely comprises a large part of total printing costs. A strategy to reduce ink coverage probably won't have an enormous impact on the price of most print projects. Yes, for exceptionally long runs the cost of excess ink coverage can add up, but most times, it's not enough to affect the colors you choose for your job.

Spot Colors vs Process Color

Though the current trends are moving toward muted color schemes, some projects will still benefit from bright or fluorescent colors. To produce these colors, it's necessary to run spot colors, which add to the cost of a job. Printers can create most colors with cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK)—the process colors, so insist on spot colors only when the desired color can't be produced with CMYK, or an exact color is absolutely critical, such as for corporate brands. Process color is the least expensive way to reproduce the colors necessary for most jobs.

Spot colors come premixed from the ink manufacturer, based on industry standard color systems like the Pantone Matching System (PMS). Besides CMYK, printers may use a fifth color for special shades. Spot varnishes, specialty inks, or metallic inks can also count as spot colors.



PMS colors and specialty inks cost more, but adding spot colors also means printers must image extra printing plates. This adds to the project cost.

Printing Plates

In offset printing, every job requires at least four printing plates—one for every color. Jobs with more colors, such as spot colors, require extra plates.

Printers must also create plates for every imposition, also known as a signature. Each page in a catalog is a signature, for example. With process colors, each signature requires four plates. Every special color in the job requires an extra plate for each signature. Be sure to include the costs for plate-making when estimating the price of a print job.

Paper

The costliest element of a print job is the paper. Paper makes a difference in how colors will be reproduced, so choosing the substrate is important in planning for the colors to be featured.

Work with printers to discuss paper attributes like weight and surface treatment. These specifications affect how paper absorbs the ink. Paper coating such as matte, glossy, or satin will also determine the look of the colors on the final product. Any color, even a specialty or Pantone color, will look different, depending on the paper.

Paper also comes in various shades of white and brightness. This too, affects the appearance of the colors used in a print job.

Uncoated paper is less expensive than coated paper, so for a muted palette, uncoated sheets will achieve the results at a lower price point. Also consider the shade of white or choose a different colored paper altogether to keep colors in the desired gamut.

Color management for print can be extraordinarily complex, so be sure to get expert advice early in the project planning process. With forethought about color, printers can produce spectacular results at a reasonable cost.

4. How Will You Serve Your Customers?

Regardless of what equipment you will ultimately choose, think about whether you want to serve your clients from a brick-and-mortar location, or virtually with a web-to-print operation. Many software suppliers have programs to create an e-commerce service. Each of these channels requires their own logistics.

5. What Equipment Do You Need?

Once you're comfortable with your product and its potential, consider what equipment you'll need to get started and, critically, what software you'll need. Each application has optimum printing equipment, including bindery devices, to execute jobs cost-effectively. You'll also need software programs for functions such as estimating, sales and CRM, ecommerce, and MIS systems. Industry trade shows are great venues to get crash courses on equipment, suppliers, services, and key thought leaders.

6. Where Will You Set Up Your Business?



Where do you want to locate your company? Do you need foot traffic? Do you need to be near a highway? Maybe you'll need warehousing space. Does the space meet all the requirements for electrical, Wi-Fi, ventilation, or a re-enforced floor for heavy equipment? Look into the permits and laws you will be required to follow.

7. What Will it Cost?

Be clear about how much money you can invest in your enterprise, or how much you can afford to borrow. Get a good picture of your costs: standard overhead costs like rent, software packages, equipment leasing or financing, maintenance contracts, payroll, insurance, and marketing.

Once you've answered these questions, it's time to draft a business plan with clearly defined goals. Whatever printing path you choose, there are plenty of resources to help you along the way.

Printing Start Ups – What to Consider

Originally published in January 2022

In the first article of this two-part blog, we discussed the major considerations of a business plan for a start-up printing company. This time, we'll look at other aspects that must be handled well to succeed in the printing industry.

Equipment and Software

If you're like most printers, you love equipment. The speeds, the colors, the rhythmic whirl of the sheet intake and output — they're all mesmerizing. Even if you're not awed by presses and laser cutters now, you will be. It's inevitable.



In reality, you should be pragmatic about equipment. Before you buy, be sure about what you plan to print. Commercial printing presses fall into three basic categories: offset, toner, and inkjet. If you want to specialize in short runs or variable printing, a toner press is best. Long runs call for offset. Posters, POP, or signage lean to inkjet. Multiple options and suppliers exist within these broad categories. Before buying any equipment, consider outsourcing certain functions, like binding and finishing.

Software is becoming the engine of printing companies. Software generally falls into one of three categories: design, workflow, or MIS systems. Design tools feature prominently in the design and pre-press area. Workflow software is a general term for everything that happens to the printing file as it goes through production: file checking, proofing, imposition, press set up, and so forth. MIS software, or management information systems, execute administrative and operational functions: order intake, estimating, customer management, scheduling, web-to-print, accounting, shipping, warehouse management, and data collection.

Consider many factors before buying hardware and software. Should you install one module at a time instead of buying a full MIS suite? How much IT support do you need? Is it more efficient to buy from one company or several?

Now that in-person events are happening again, a trade show is an excellent place to compare manufacturers and their products. Most suppliers will also be happy to visit and educate you about their equipment, and several independent consultants specialize in helping printers identify which equipment is best for them.

Marketing and Sales

Consider marketing as a roadmap for finding customers. The first step is to articulate why clients should do business with you. Another approach is to consider how your services make life easier for your customers. Remember, everyone claims to provide excellent service, so you'll need to be more specific to distinguish your company from the competition.

An excellent website is a must. Your website should establish your visual identity, clearly explain what you offer, be easy to navigate, and be up to date. Next, consider how you'll drive traffic to your site. Think about digital marketing, Google ad words, social media, and a customer communication program, such as regular newsletters and blogs. But don't forget that printing is a visual and a tactile medium.

Nothing will wow potential customers like samples of well-printed jobs.

Also consider other places you can find customers. Attend trade shows and conferences your clients attend, for instance. Partner with graphic designers, or even other printers, who can refer customers to you.

If you're just starting out, spending money on marketing might seem out of reach, but it could be your best investment. You can easily hire someone part-time to help you.

Staffing

Good sales managers and reps are perhaps the hardest positions to staff. The best ones know how to establish relationships with their customers and provide value. They understand customers are concerned about how you can help them achieve their objectives and are less interested in your lineup of equipment. See this article "Knowing Your Customer and Their Needs".

Besides sales reps, you may need equipment operators, accounting staff, and customer service reps. IT support is increasingly important.

Attracting employees from other print companies is a standard way to acquire staff, but is it the best? If you want to attract younger people, go to college and high-school job fairs, advertise on various online platforms, and on social media. Consider what makes younger people want to stay with you. Values change all the time. What mattered to employees five or 10 years ago may not matter today.

Read "Future Employees" for more ideas about recruiting employees for your print business.

It all sounds a little daunting. And yes, running a print company is complex, but it's also very exciting. Plenty of resources are readily available to help at any time.

How Well Do You Know Your Competition?

Originally published in December 2020

Print service providers: Have you taken the time lately to analyze your competition? It might not be the shop across town anymore, but a business in another state, or even overseas, that is soliciting business from your customers. Even if you have done competitive research before, you may need to update it. Much has changed since the pandemic started.

Why Bother?

A competitive analysis allows you to measure your company against the competition. The process creates an environment that can reveal gaps in the marketplace or highlight areas in your own operation that could benefit from improvement.

Researching competitors gives you the knowledge necessary to develop effective marketing strategies for your own business while simultaneously pointing out threats posed by competitors

whose activities may target your customers.



This is an ideal time for this exercise. Print service providers everywhere are re-evaluating how they do business. Those that relied on walk-in traffic have shifted to online tools that allow customers to order, configure, and buy print products online. Some are succeeding, others are struggling. You can learn valuable lessons about what or what not to do by assessing the efforts of others who have already blazed this trail.

Competitive analysis can indicate what is important to print customers now, and how print vendors are responding. COVID-19 has also affected customer businesses, and their priorities may have adjusted. Certain vertical markets have an increased need for print while others have contracted. Speed may be more important than price, or perhaps innovative financing plans make print buying more reasonable at a time when customer cash flow has slowed.

To round out your situational assessment, talk to your customers. Find out what is important to them now and how they expect their businesses to change in the next few years.

How to Do a Competitive Analysis

Competitor research shouldn't be an intimidating thought. You can learn much with a modest investment of time and effort. For those who want to dig deeper, outside experts or specialized tools are available.

Start with a simple review. The wealth of information and insight to be gained with just a few hours of work may surprise you. Here are some basic steps that produce the data necessary to determine an effective strategy.

Identify the Competitors

You may be tempted to search on Google by entering the business names for known competitors, but try entering your own business name first. Scroll to the bottom of the knowledge panel on the right side of the search results page. Google will display related searches for local businesses. Results may vary depending on your search settings and the browser you use.



To widen the search geographically, use keyword phrases related to what you do. Be as specific as possible. The ads and entries in the search results will identify other print companies that also offer those services. If you don't see your company listed in the organic search results, your site is lacking enough relevant content. You may need to publish more items like blog articles that reference your keywords.

Record the Details

From your research, choose three or four of your most direct competitors. These will be companies that offer the same products and services as your company and are courting the same customers. Use a chart or spreadsheet and list each of the companies in columns at the top of the page. Then populate the rows below with details like strengths and weaknesses of each competitor, their target markets, strategies for online and offline marketing, products and services they emphasize, etc.

Compare to Your Company

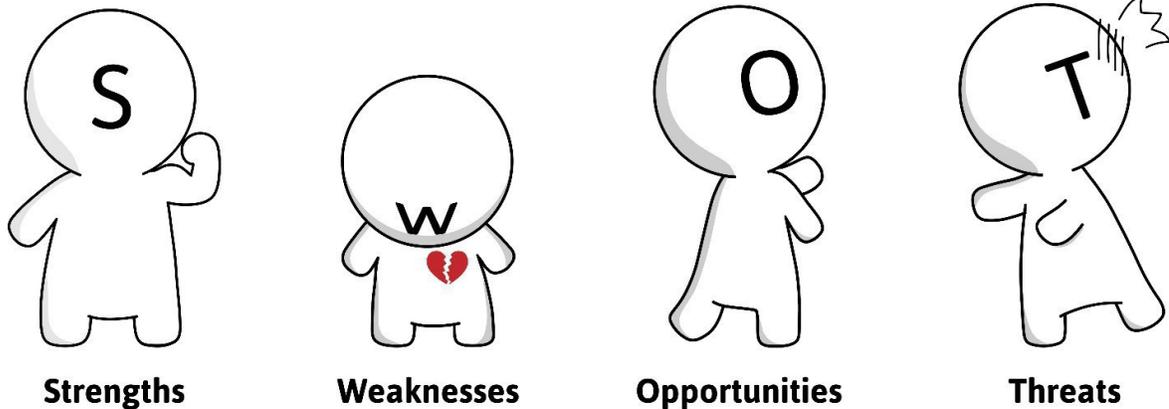
Notice the differences between your organization and competing print service providers. Also notice what the high-performing companies are doing. Look at websites, publications, and social media activities. Perhaps one company publishes consistently to their blog with original informational content,

while another leans heavily on social media. Some printers work hard to develop email subscriber lists, while for others it's just an afterthought. You may get some ideas to try for yourself.

Pay attention to how your competitors do their marketing. Are they using video? Do they actively interact with others on social media? What about webinars or live events? Which websites seem most likely to prompt visitors to take the next step in the buying process?

Do a SWOT Analysis

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) is a way to see how you match up with your competitors. Do a SWOT analysis on each competitor and on your own company. The results will suggest actions you can take to capitalize on competitor weaknesses and emphasize your strengths. Look at your own weaknesses and devise ways to minimize their impact. Because of the analysis work you've done, your opportunities will be clear.



How to React?

Analysis won't change anything. You must take action.

The moves you make will depend on the information and insight you've gained from the competitive analysis exercise. Perhaps the answer is delivering work faster, optimizing your workflow to trim costs, or begin a campaign to expand on services for an underserved niche. Maybe you need to retrain your salespeople or invest in new hardware or software.

The print business has always been highly competitive. To succeed, customers must have a reason for working with you instead of the shop down the street or across the country. But you can't distinguish your company from the rest unless you understand how you match up. Set aside a few hours to assess your competition. Your improved knowledge of the competitive marketplace can guide you through challenging times.

Online Portals and the Customer Experience

Originally published in June 2023

In today's competitive printing industry, customer retention usually comes down to a great customer experience. High quality printing is simply the standard now, not a differentiator, and competing on price is a race to the bottom. Great customer service can be the competitive difference that makes clients want to do business with you and keeps your bottom line growing.

But the definition of great customer service has evolved. Today, the meaning includes a certain degree of self service and 24/7 access—the conveniences that can be found via online portals. Easy to navigate portals with anytime and anywhere access, quick responses, project tracking, proofing, invoicing, inventory tracking, and other services can make your brand stand out with their terrific benefits.



Convenience

Who isn't looking for more convenience to make the working day easier? Convenience is a huge attraction for online portals. They let customers place orders or upload files when and where it suits them, look at job progress when they want, check invoices, or perform multiple other tasks. Customers can often interact seamlessly from several devices. It's efficient customer service on a client's terms.

Time Savings

The automation features that drive convenience also generate time and money savings for your client. When you automate the repetitive functions of the supplier/client relationship, or you offer easy access to information, you're making your clients more efficient and more productive.

Self Service

For a certain cohort, accessing information themselves is one of the hallmarks of excellent client service. They'd rather not pick up the phone and wait on hold to get connected to the right person, who may or may not be available.



They'd much rather go through the FAQ pages to get the answer quickly for themselves or have a quick exchange with a chatbot and save time. Performing tasks for themselves can feel empowering and less frustrating.

Secure Storage of Assets

Tracking marketing assets like business card designs, logos, brochures, and other collateral takes time and energy. Online portals that can securely store brand assets and make it easy to access them

deliver not only convenience, but also peace of mind. It makes all subsequent transactions easy and quick and ensures everyone is working from approved material. For further protection, you can accommodate restrictions related to who has access to various assets.

Better Knowledge

Portals loaded up with helpful information can solidify your relationships with clients. Upload how-to guides, videos, educational pieces, answers for technical issues, or advice on how to be more effective marketers or print buyers. It's a great opportunity to become the go-to source for essential information and become a trusted consultant.

Personalized Experience

Personalization is an increasingly important facet of good client experience. Take companies like Amazon as your inspiration and make clients feel like they're operating in their own space, that you understand and are ready to meet their needs.

Custom portals that are designed to look like client brands, that track inventory and send reminders when quantities are low, that offer discounts on specific products clients purchase, or suggest related products, all make clients feel you understand their business and are there to help.



Stronger Communications

You can also use portals as potent listening devices so you can keep improving. A space that allows clients to give feedback or report issues easily is valuable for both parties.

Print companies can structure portals to provide as many services and functions as your clients need. The best are convenient, reliable, easy to use, and helpful. They don't totally replace the face-to-face customer service approach but done well they immeasurably enhance the client journey.

Operations Assessments: A Must for Print Firms

New Content

In the slower moving printer sphere of yesterday, operational assessments were “nice things to have” for your father’s printing company. However, the challenge of keeping pace with the high speed of a rapidly changing technological landscape has rendered operational assessments essential for today’s print service providers (PSPs). Either keep up or face the threat of losing business to a competitor that *has* kept up. Competition could come from anywhere in the world.

There is no doubt that our industry has undergone transformation. Besides the swift pace of technology, market requirements have changed too. Quick returns, different types of onboarding, how we connect with customers, and electronic data interchange (EDI) — these things pose challenges for print firm management. And each one is a reason for PSPs to have their operations evaluated periodically.

Take a hard look at what your company is doing and ask:

How are you doing it? Where are your production bottlenecks? What are your pain points?

Operational assessment is difficult to do internally because owners and managers are too close to day-to-day action. It’s impossible to have objective viewpoints. It can be a classic scenario of not knowing what they don’t know. They’re usually too involved to see the proverbial forest through the trees. Assessing operations frequently becomes an issue of skill set and bandwidth. Some equipment vendors offer assessments, but they are not always “honest brokers” either.

An organization’s cultural challenges are also a factor. Technology can be easy, but people are often the more difficult pieces of the puzzle. Relatively speaking, it’s a breeze to buy a piece of hardware, integrate with software, and even streamline workflow processes. However, getting employees on board with change can be a daunting task.

Don’t Neglect Maintenance

Proactive and preventative maintenance should be part of a print operation’s assessment. If you’re not already doing scheduled equipment maintenance, you should be. The worst case is reacting to a crisis or an emergency when machine improvements or software upgrades can become unnecessarily complicated. PSPs need an operational assessment plan to schedule maintenance and avoid these situations. Start by talking to manufacturers and service organizations to determine which devices need attention— and how often.

To get the assessment ball rolling, conduct due diligence when selecting a consultant to lead your efforts. Talk with industry partners and peers to find out whether they’ve done it and how they went about it. Ask them what they did; how they did it; and who they used. Ideally, you’ll find someone with the necessary background and experience to perform a thorough assessment, including an ability to recognize the pitfalls before they become significant problems.

An operational assessment from Gimbel & Associates can be as broad or as narrow as you need it to be. We offer clients customized consulting services that can include workflow analysis, strategic planning, sales training, marketing plans, and more.

Should You Partner with a Mail House?

Originally published in September 2020

A key component of creating printed materials is managing the mailing system that gets the brochures or flyers to the recipients. It's a big percentage cost of a printing project. But mastering the intricacies of the mail stream can be complex and expensive.

Some print shops outsource this critical step and partner with an established mail services company, while others opt to bring the function in-house. Which is better? The answer is highly individual, based on the amount of mail you need to process, client requirements, and so on. It has to make business sense.

Factors Associated with In-House Mailing

Mailing involves researching, monitoring, and communicating the specifications for different postal products. Mailers have to be up to date on design rules, sorting tactics, and knowing how to get the best postage rates. Offering in-house mailing services for your clients requires expertise to buy and run mailing equipment.



You might consider the many reasons to bring the mail in-house. It can be a key revenue stream, for one. It gives your organization an expert knowledge base that supports your clients' business more effectively and tightens the customer relationship. You can control your own processes, ensure consistent mail preparation to your own standards, and protect client data, especially if you're dealing with sensitive information.

In-house service also reduces job processing and delivery times. And offering that one-stop shopping experience to clients can make you more valuable to them and less vulnerable to competitors.

Factors Associated with Outsourced Mailing

If you opt to work with a partner mail services company, keep some issues in mind.

Remember that outsourcing mailing services, especially if you manage the process for your client, does not absolve you of responsibility should something go wrong. If the mailing house makes an error or has a data breach, you're still on the hook for the fallout.

Find a way of holding the mailing house responsible for data safety protocols and accountable if something goes wrong. The more critical the documents you manage, the more you must exercise control and oversight over the process.

You'll also want to assign someone to manage the mailing house relationship. Someone from your organization must establish lines of communications, vet the company, and set up protocols for handling materials. Before choosing a partner, you'll want to assess their workflow, their financial stability, their expertise, and their equipment.



If a mail house meets your requirements, opting to outsource can be a wise choice. Mailing equipment can have a large footprint and the machines are highly specialized. By partnering with a mail house, you won't have to research the machines, manage the upkeep, devote space in your facility, or manage the overhead and staffing.

Neither will you have to worry about postal regulatory compliance and managing the relationship with the USPS. Idle mail equipment won't concern you. Inactive labor during down times, overtime, and other labor problems won't be an issue.

Also on the plus side, a mailing house can offer services that maximize discounts. A mailing partner can score more presort discounts by aggregating mail from several sources, all bound for one zip code. You may get the discount even if your own concentrations are low.

Managing a mail operation is complicated, but if the fit is right, it can be a wise investment. An examination of your postage costs, costs of ownership, revenue forecasting, and opportunity costs is the start to making a decision about the best way to handle mail for your client.

Staffing Up Strategies for Printers – Part 1

Originally published in October 2023

Part 1 of this article focuses on ways print service providers can attract a younger workforce by reinventing the medium's 'down and dirty,' inky image.

Hey Boomers and Gen X-ers, our workers are aging. U.S. manufacturers faced a major setback after losing some 1.5 million jobs at the onset of the global pandemic; since then, companies have been struggling to fill job vacancies. In Q1 2023, there were nearly 700,000 open manufacturing jobs, according to consulting firm Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute. The National Association of Manufacturers reports that over 2 million manufacturing jobs could go unfilled by 2030.

Print firms are feeling the pain. A good portion of experienced print industry employees are nearing retirement age. Last year, more than one-quarter of the U.S. workforce was 55 years of age or older, up from 14% twenty years earlier. In 2020, for the first time in the history of the United States, individuals 65 years of age and older outnumbered those five years of age and younger, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



The U.S. print sector, which today employs over 386,500 Americans, shows negative growth (of -2.6%) again this year, reports research firm IBISWorld, and is down 1.4% overall since 2018.

Comparing to Labor in Europe

We don't have a healthy apprenticeship culture in the US. Fewer than 1% of workers in the United States were in any kind of formal apprenticeship in 2020, according to the Department of Labor. That number equates to roughly 285,000 people—compared to the 1.4 million apprentices in Germany.

In the United Kingdom, **the number of skilled tradespeople working in the print sector fell by 73% between 2006 and 2021, PrintWeek has reported.** Skilled workers—prepress technicians, printers, post press workers and printing press assistant operators—fell from 112,300 in 2006 to just 30,500 in 2021 according to the UK's Office for National Statistics.

Skilled Worker Shortage

“Not surprisingly, companies in the printing industry will continue to have difficulties in attracting and keeping talent in 2023,” Joe Marin, senior VP of member services at the PRINTING United Alliance, told Printing Impressions in Q1. “There are skills gaps, and people with industry experience and technical expertise are in increasingly high demand.”

Identifying performance gaps is essential to building toward a skills-centric marketplace. A LinkedIn survey revealed the skills needed to do a given job have changed by 25% in the past eight years. Interestingly, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu may scrap internal job titles altogether.

Shiny Objects, Flexible Shifts, and Interns

Recruiting younger people to fill those roles has proven difficult among the so-called “green-button” generation, which has grown up with technology and is accustomed to instant gratification. So, how can print service providers (PSPs) compete with big-tech firms such as Amazon and Google to attract and keep the staffers they need?



PSPs striving to recruit Generation Z and Millennial employees should refrain from using “dirty” words and phrases, such as factory and printing plant, in job descriptions, advises Deborah Corn, founder of the Print Media Center. To portray a high-tech atmosphere, many company owners and hiring managers need to reinvent their conservative image, “which can be limiting,” Corn explains.

Instead of acknowledging how the printed medium is evident all around them, “young people may think that printing companies kill trees or pollute the world with ‘junk mail.’ Let job candidates know that you have cool, electronic ‘toys’ to play with. After all, there’s a reason that Landa’s digital presses are intentionally designed to look like iPads.”

Once hired, giving their jobs “purpose” and empowering young employees are also crucial. “The worst thing supervisors can do is squash new ideas and fresh perspectives,” Corn cautions. When evaluating performance and criticizing constructively, tread lightly and accentuate the positives.



Offering flexible working shifts is another way to entice prospects. For example, some companies have gone to four 10-hour shifts. Boss Litho employs 40 people on two shifts at its 47,000- square-foot production facility. “In April we changed to a four-day work week on 10-hour shifts,” shares CEO Jean Paul Natal, who adds that his employees in California seem to enjoy longer weekends and having Fridays off.

More open-minded owners have dabbled in even shorter stints. “Flexible scheduling is really important to working parents, who may need to pick up their children from school at 3 p.m.,” Corn points out. To compete for employees from an HR perspective, get progressive when granting leaves of absence for maternity/paternity purposes, too, she urges, as well as offering medical insurance coverage to same-sex life partners.

Coordinating internship programs with local high schools and community colleges is an ideal strategy for cultivating future talent. “The key is to win over the school guidance counselors” who may perceive printing as a dying industry, notes Corn. “Invite them [career advisors] to open houses that show off your pristinely clean campus as a communications hub,” she adds. Redecorating and a fresh coat of paint may be in order, as “what they don’t want to see is some dingy, cinder-block office setting,” warns Corn.

Disabled workers and military veterans are a virtually untapped pool. “Why can’t a blind person or someone confined to a wheelchair work in your facility?” Corn asks.

How to Keep Good Workers – Strategies for Staffing Part 2

Originally published in November 2023

In Part 2, we will delve into how best to retain existing employees while employing automation as a competitive advantage

In the first part of this series we analyzed the aging, skilled labor market and the trend of older employees leaving the workforce, which can have a detrimental impact on industries, including the printing business, that depend on knowledge and expertise. “That kind of brain drain . . . could put a little more pressure on companies to figure out ways to hang on to older workers,” believes Michael Madowitz, director of macroeconomic policy at Equitable Growth.



We also suggested ways to recruit younger employees to the print sector. Enlist the help of outsiders, such as industry consultants, to work with state agencies and educational institutions. This strategy can be one smart move for printing companies trying to overcome a negative image of their industry in the minds of young people.

Printing companies should also consider the importance of older workers.

Now, we delve into the heated competition for high-quality employee talent: How best to hold on to staffers already on the payroll who are performing at high levels. After all, retaining employees (or luring back qualified people who’ve left for proverbial greener pastures) often is far less costly than hiring and training new people.

At Canon Solution America’s recent *thINK Ahead* annual event, production inkjet customers received advice about creating a work culture that people will not want to leave. One key aspect is “having a culture of recognition” that demonstrates each individual’s impact, explained Adriane Harrison, VP of human relations consulting at the PRINTING United Alliance trade association.

For example, when someone goes above and beyond to do an excellent job, “provide immediate positive feedback,” urged Harrison, “This should be specific—not just ‘great job’ but ‘your work on X helped save this project/meet a deadline/won over the customer/etc.’ Give praise publicly—post it on a bulletin board (real or on the company intranet) so others see that management recognizes the contributions of team members.”

Labor shortages and employee retention are top of mind on the signage side of the business, too. “Our association research reveals that finding and keeping qualified personnel is the number one pre-occupation of NPSOA print owners today,” reports Michael Makin, senior consultant at the National Print & Sign Owners Association. “In a post-pandemic world, the availability of a qualified and interested labor pool is challenging, to say the least. It will definitely be an issue discussed at the next owners’ conference.”

Be forewarned that hiring out of desperation is usually a risky proposition. Poor fits and bad attitudes can spread like cancerous wildfire throughout the organization. Once companies vet and hire the “right person”, there’s the training investment to consider. Retraining new people can be an expensive and extremely difficult endeavor, according to Lester Williams, a service manager who oversees five copier technicians at North Carolina equipment dealer Vision Office Systems. That’s why the 40-year digital print industry veteran makes it a high priority to keep his top people locked in and content.

The One That Got Away

Williams lost one of his key players a few years ago, “but we got him back after a couple of days,” he says with a smile—after the compensation pot was sweetened with a beefy pay raise. The competitive Charlotte, NC labor market forced the dealership to hike hourly wages by 18% across the board to survive.



For more financially motivated workers, paying above wage/salary scale never hurts; matching employees' individual retirement accounts (IRAs) is another popular fringe benefit. However, as PRINTING United Alliance's Harrison points out: “If a company provides competitive wages and benefits, the thing that will set it apart and make people want to stay is creating a strong connection between managers and their teams, and between the team members.” Build relationships; jointly create company mission/value statements; and help team members recognize and understand the positive impact they have on the production, culture, profitability, and workplace environment.

Perks



Many of today's younger employees seek benefits that go beyond their electronic pay stubs. Every added frill can help with retention. Some creative firms offer employees perks like free lunch on Fridays, food trucks, company iPhones, dart boards, foosball tables, video gaming and even beer on tap at the office. For Vision Office, providing technicians with company vehicles and gas cards has been a plus.

Get to know your team, Harrison advises. Learn their demographics and build benefit programs around their needs—whether it's workday/shift schedules or considerations about remote/hybrid work arrangements.

Creating career pathways can be a big draw. “The future workforce is Gen Z, who are very focused on career development,” she notes. “For Gen Z, the number one reason ... to leave a job is the lack of career development.”

The manner in which you manage people matters, too. Of his supervisory style, Williams says: “I try to create a positive environment . . . and do not micro-manage. Most techs hate that! Good guys [techs] are scarce and difficult to find,” he cautions. “And even coming in with no ‘bad habits,’ trying to retrain new people is usually harder than keeping the ones you have!”

That said, if someone who possessed solid mechanical and electrical skills came his way, Williams would hire that person even if Vision didn't need another tech, “Even if he had no copier background at all.”

Our final installment on staffing strategies will focus on how to leverage automation in operations.

Fewer Workers Calls for Technology – Strategies for Staffing Part 3

Originally published in December 2023

The final installment of our three-part labor series focuses on employing automation as a competitive advantage.

In the first part of this series, we analyzed the aging, skilled labor market—the trend of older employees leaving the workforce and strategies for recruiting youthful as well as more mature workers. Next, we delved into how to hold on to staffers already on the payroll. In Part 3, we analyze automation advancements as part of the solution to printing industry staffing shortages.

With the overall cost of doing business increasing and production volumes decreasing, how can print service providers (PSPs) maintain profit margins and still make money? The ability to print more jobs at faster rates becomes paramount. Automated technologies allow employees to perform critical pre-press, printing, and post-press operations without requiring years of experience as apprentices or junior assistants. For example, achieving precise colors on the press has become a case of science trumping subjectivity, according to Shawn Sundquist, president and CEO of Range Printing, Inc. (Brainerd, MN).

“In some respects, the skilled-labor shortage has forced the issue,” says Sundquist, a third-generation leader at the company his grandfather founded 55 years ago. “There is definitely an older demographic in our pressroom running the presses,” he notes, lamenting that the vast majority of younger workers don’t seem to care much about the intricacies of mechanical inner-workings.

“Young people are used to pressing the ‘easy button,’” Sundquist observes, so that’s what Range has given them—in the form of press automation from manufacturers such as Lithec GmbH. Its LithoFlash (LF) closed-loop color management system removes much of the skill from the color equation. “With LF controls in place, we’ve had a [paper] feeder become comfortable moving up to become a back-up press operator,” he notes.



Prepress, Pressrooms, and Binderies

Boss Litho is another firm doing more with less on its new RMGT 1060LX sheet fed press. Speedy makereadies and LED-UV curing are helping the California folding-carton printer to compete in the challenging economy. CEO Jean Paul Natal contends PSPs need to spend money to make money. Boss has recently invested more than \$5 million in upgraded equipment.

Natal shares that, post-COVID, the cost of skilled labor has risen to affect the bottom line negatively. To retain employees in the Southern California marketplace, he and his team have been forced to raise hourly wages by almost 30%, “from \$25 to \$35 per hour.” However, advanced manufacturing automation is helping to offset this added expense as the firm’s overall head count is now down some 30%, or 20 employees.

Uncovering Opportunities for In-plant Print Operations

Originally published in May 2021



In-plant printing centers operate in an in-between world. They're not commercial printers who must constantly hustle for business, but their continued existence is not guaranteed, either. The traditional model for in-plants to passively print documents for internal departments no longer works well. In many instances, those departments can outsource work to third-party printers or turn jobs over to staff members who may have only a passing acquaintance with design and

production.

In this environment, we recommend in-plant centers develop strategic approaches that keep their operations relevant and thriving. In-plants can build a good strategy around adding value, selling services, and a little self-promotion.

Add Value

Every department needs to prove its value to an organization. In-plants are no different. However, simply holding the line on costs is no longer enough. A better strategy is to add value by aligning in-plant operations with corporate goals, such as improving customer relationships. Here are a few suggestions.

Printing Expertise



Help marketers with data management skills, like segmenting customers, adding personalized messages, and suggesting opportunities for data-driven variable content. Use specialized knowledge and experience of print production, paper, toner, and ink to produce projects cost effectively.

Postal Knowledge

Help internal departments design and prepare materials for the mailstream and keep postal rates

low. Or track physical mail delivery to trigger personalized follow-up emails and help the marketing department boost response rates.

Data Security

Data security is key in most organizations. In-plants are uniquely positioned to safeguard corporate data and protect privacy. Having access to a secure in-plant can be a huge advantage for some companies.

Efficient Technology

Printing technology available to in-house print centers now rivals commercial shops. Most times, the equipment is the same, and it can be less expensive to print shorter runs in-house.

Also, why not consider an internal web-to-print system to make ordering easier for basics like business cards, or to place re-orders? The technology to offer this time-saving function is available.

Sell Like a Commercial Printer

An in-plant is not a commercial printer, but taking inspiration from one makes strategic sense. Think of supported departments as clients. Give great service, sound prices, and earn their business.

Consider selling to external customers. There is no reason it can't be done, assuming the print center has excess capacity. Base services on value: charge less for commodity products and more for value-added products like variable-data printing and direct mail campaigns.

Engage with the marketing department. Get involved with projects in their planning stages. Make sure marketers know what the print center offers and show them how print center services can help meet their goals and needs.



Improve Perceptions

A big challenge for in-plants is that top managers don't know what they do or why they're important to the company.

While it's important to do outstanding work and add value to projects, it's equally important to make sure decision makers know what the in-plant does. Do a little intelligence gathering to find out how managers perceive the in-plant operation. Then execute a strategy that corrects any inaccurate perceptions and actively promotes positive opinions.

Show executives and department managers the exceptional work that print center employees produce. Build relationships and keep everyone informed about streamlined job submission processes, improved proofing practices, new pricing policies, or any other changes.

In-house newsletters can be effective in spreading the word about the in-plant's print capabilities. In newsletters, in-plant print centers can share success stories, profile key employees, or provide guidance about best practices. Open house events or private tours for a department can be another extremely effective way to open channels of communication and capture work that department administrative assistants are out-sourcing, simply because they were unaware of what the in-plant operation can do.

In-plant operations have one great advantage—the inside track. In-plant managers have access to people and information that almost no third party has. Learn how to leverage that advantage to raise the profile of the print center within the organization and fend off proposals to shut down the print center and send the work to outside service providers.

Introduction to Marketing and Sales

Unleashing Marketing and Sales to Grow Your Business

Mastering the technical aspects of printing isn't enough. Modern print service providers must transform their expertise into gold: captivating customers and sealing the deal. Today's global marketplace makes it important to develop new skills and approaches to meet customer expectations and beat the competition.

This collection of articles of practical strategies will ignite your marketing and sales engine. Prepare to shed the skin of old-fashioned tactics and emerge a sales superstar, ready to captivate customers and take advantage of tools at your disposal.

- Peer through the buyer's lens: Demystify the print-buying journey, understanding what truly drives customer decisions—from their point of view.
- Learn from the masters of missteps: Avoid the fatal flaws that send prospects fleeing, ensuring you never get the dreaded "never be invited back" treatment.
- Rewrite the sales playbook: Craft a dynamic sales strategy for the modern age, one that resonates with today's tech-savvy buyers.
- Open your doors, open your minds: Explore the untapped potential of open houses, transforming your print haven into a customer magnet.
- DIY or delegate? Decide whether to roll up your sleeves or leverage professional aptitude, crafting the perfect marketing solution for your unique needs.
- Harness the social media wave: Master the art of using social media to promote your business, engaging your audience and building community.
- Equip your customers with knowledge: Become a trusted advisor, educating your customers about print technology and empowering them to make informed decisions.

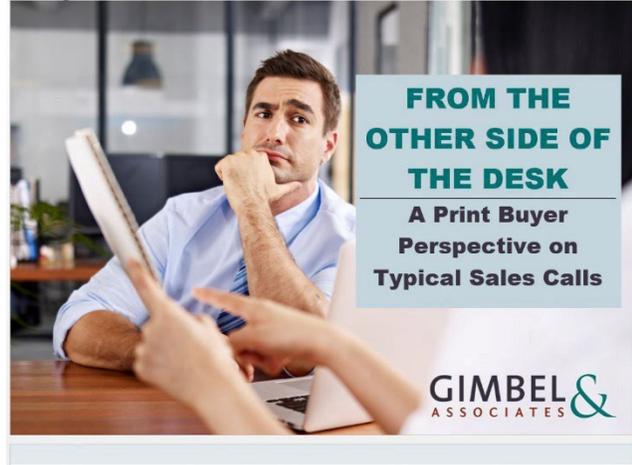
Marketing and sales are the foundation of your success. By adopting these proven strategies and embracing the transformative ideas described here, you'll turn your print business into a customer magnet, attracting new clients and forging lasting partnerships.

A Print Buyers Perspective

Originally published in June 2022

Like the rest of us, print buyers have come through a challenging time. COVID has surely affected their jobs, and the profession itself has changed as print's place in the marketing spectrum has evolved.

Today's buyers include highly experienced professionals who understand the technicalities of print and are fascinated by equipment, and newly minted entrants who are likely to be digital natives or marketers without a great deal of printing experience. For them, buying print is not a primary function, but only one task in a broader portfolio. And let's not forget that a lot of print buying has moved online.



So, what do these professionals expect from the print-buying experience? Great service, wow-level quality, and great prices are still

important, so be prepared to present those details during meetings. But tailor your presentation to the expectations of each individual buyer. Like everything else, customization matters.

Here are some other points to keep in mind.

Be COVID Sensitive

You're likely stressed from the last three years. Your business may have been whiplashed and you've had to reset. So have print buyers. Be sensitive to their challenges, be empathetic, listen, and don't push. This could be a time for you to truly shine and prove your worth.

Be Prepared

Print buyers are stretched. When they agree to a meeting, they won't want to waste time telling you basic facts about their company. Dig into LinkedIn, other social platforms, Google, and their website. Try to understand the company and the industry it which it operates. If you can, look at and try out their products or services, or check out their physical locations. Examine how they use print and digital channels.

Talk About You a Little

If the print buyer doesn't know you, take a few minutes to introduce your company. They will be interested in how you present yourself. Be prepared with your list of equipment, speak knowledgeably about your technical capabilities, your prices, your expertise, and your certifications. Focus on their needs. For example, if you know the buyer purchases color-critical jobs, point out your G7 color certification. If it's not relevant, keep it to yourself.

Talk About Them a Lot

Actually, listen to them intently. Print buyers are people and people like to be heard. Home in on key issues that matter to their success. Discuss challenges and goals and present solutions. Discover what exemplary service means to them and prove you can meet their requirements. Show them you can be



an asset and lead value-added discussions about client retention, conversion rates, regulatory compliance, or any other priority they mention. If you're discussing equipment, explain what it can do for them. Today's buyers are juggling a lot and they value a supplier who can make their jobs easier.

Talk About More than Print

Many of today's print buyers don't have the luxury of focusing only on print. They may juggle all kinds of marketing platforms. By all means, show them how to best use print, but also assure them you understand communications and integrated marketing. Print buyers are looking for suppliers that keep up with trends and can help with managing multiple requirements.

Walk the Talk

As we said up top, many print buyers today are digital natives. They do just about everything online and will probably expect to deal that way with you, too. Make sure they can build orders, submit them, monitor jobs, get a quote, proof work, and ask questions online. This is how modern lives are made easier.

Say Thank You

Regardless of whether they're newbies or seasoned professionals, buyers will appreciate a follow up. Send a thank you, furnish information that you researched, or send samples. It shows you value them enough to take time out of your crazy day to express appreciation.

Digital Printing Sales Secrets

Originally published in July 2021

Digital printing has been an intrinsic part of the printing industry for over two decades, yet many printers still struggle with finding a successful sales strategy. Even the term itself has gone through various iterations, and the technology has evolved considerably over those 20-plus years.

For our purposes, we'll take a broad view of digital printing, encompassing the first-out-of-the-gate toner technology, followed by inkjet and its incursion into most applications including flexo. Digital technology also has been a game changer for finishing, with raised UV, die-cutting, foils, and specialty inks.

While the methods for applying ink to substrate vary, they share some business models and other attributes. Digital work is short-run driven and meets quick turnaround times. Variable data techniques personalize impressions by groupings or individuals, marry messages with data, and play a critical role in multi-channel campaigns.



Selling digital's potential relies on consultative approaches that take longer to complete. Conversations and pitches must emphasize outcomes like better conversion rates, higher customer engagement, better ROI, and the role of data in crafting relevant messages. This is very much different from selling volume-driven offset work.

Let's look at some approaches that work best to increase sales of digital work.

Understand What Digital Printing Does

This does not mean speeds and feeds. It means developing a deep understanding of what outcomes digital printing enables and what problems it solves for clients. Be comfortable explaining that sometimes fewer impressions cost more per piece but deliver better results. Learn how digital print can enhance a multi-media campaign by driving recipients to websites and PURLs and develop expertise for creating and deploying variable campaigns. Show brand managers how to test market campaigns with small batches of labels, packaging, or posters.



Do Your Homework

Do a thorough analysis of potential clients. Understand their business, their challenges, their competitors, and their goals. Develop a clear idea of how digital printing applications can help them achieve those goals or major pain points. Then learn their markets. Are clients in retail? Education? Entertainment? Technology? Every vertical has its own dynamics, challenges, trends, regulations, and competitive pressures.

Don't Talk DPI

When you finally get in front of the client, don't talk toner or dpi. Frame discussions about benefits, ROI, customer engagement, response rates, conversion rates, cross promotion, and other results. If clients need to drive response rates, suggest taking 25% of a large mailing and try adding a PURL or a personalized message.

Also, think of corollary products. Retailers may need flyers, but do they also need POP signage printed on synthetic substrates with messages that change weekly or by location?

Partner Up

Think about partnering with a creative agency or an advertising firm. They are always looking for services to make them stand out and digital printing applications likely fit the bill. Partnerships can be effective for reaching multiple brands, increasing repeat business, raising print volumes, and expanding service offerings. Plus, agencies already have a roster of established clients. They understand their clients' businesses and can recognize opportunities for digital print.

Find the Right Person

Agencies also help with one of the most critical elements of a digital-print sales strategy — connecting with the right people in an organization. The print buyer who looks for the cheapest quote is no longer relevant. Digital printing needs to be sold to creatives, production managers, and marketing managers, often as early as possible in the life of a project.

Use Technology

Digital printing shines at short-run work. An especially effective approach for selling short-run repeat work is a web-to-print system or e-commerce site that eliminates human interventions from transactions and increases margins. A web-to-print system will also generate valuable information about your customers' buying trends.

Digital printing takes a little more time to master but as its share of the printing market is expected to grow, an effective sales strategy is imperative.

How to Lose a Print Sale (and Never Be Invited Back)

Originally published in December 2022

Anyone selling print today using the methods they learned ten years ago (or more) is going to run into difficulties. The pandemic changed the way people feel about work and time. That's what brought on the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting phenomena. Print buyers, who may hold positions in marketing or the executive suite, place a high value on their time and they aren't very tolerant of people who waste it.



It can take dozens of attempts to secure a meeting with a prospective customer. When you're finally in the room with a decision-maker, don't make mistakes that will cause them to end the meeting or deflect any attempts at following up.

What the Buyers Say

Seeing the sales process from the point of view of the buyer is incredibly important. That's why we produced an eBook called "From the Other Side of the Desk". We talked to print buyers and

executives—the individuals print salespeople are likely to face when they finally secure an appointment to talk about their services. The feedback we got was revealing.

Buyers told us print salespeople visiting their offices were doing it all wrong. Conversations were unfocused (or focused on the wrong topics). The buyers had a hard time understanding why they should do business with the printing companies calling upon them.

To get a fresh perspective on the print sales process, download the free eBook at rogergimbel.com/library.

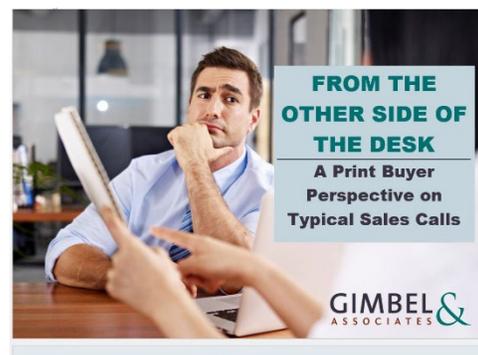
We divided the book into three sections: preparation, presentation, and follow-up. In each section, you'll read about actual experiences print buyers had with prospective printing company partners.

Here are some mistakes a salesperson can make that virtually guarantee a disappointing outcome:

Preparation

Mistake #1 - Failing to take time to learn about the companies and individuals with whom you will meet. Just because the prospect has probably done research on *your* company before you set foot in their office, doesn't mean you need to do the same. Just wing it when you get there.

Mistake #2 - Forgetting about preparing thoughtful questions or anticipating objections. You need to ask only one question after you make your pitch - "Well, what do you think?" Be ready to whip out your price sheet in case they say, "I'm ready to buy. How much does it cost?"



Preparing for the meeting includes identifying the client's likely objectives. Why did they agree to meet with you? (Hint: It's not getting the lowest price. If it is, you're probably talking to the wrong person). You'll also want to identify your desired outcome. Send a pre-meeting agenda and stick to it.

Presentation

Mistake #1 - Starting the meeting by talking about your products and services. The prospect may not have a need for half the things you mention, but they probably won't say anything, so just keep going to show them you really know your stuff.

Mistake #2 - Ignoring what the prospect is saying. Their objectives and business challenges are just distracting. Keep focusing on why you're there—getting the order.

Steer conversations away from specifications such as print volumes, finishing, and paper stocks. Discuss the client's business goals, such as customer acquisition, retention, conversion rates, upselling, lifetime customer value, regulatory compliance, and customer experience. Aligning your services with their business goals allows the customer to move forward with finalizing decisions.



Follow-up

Mistake #1 - Leaving follow-up to administrative people back at the office. Your job is selling new business, not nurturing them for expansion.

Mistake #2 - Ignoring the prospect's buying process. It's your sales regimen that's most important. If customers insist on extra steps, it just slows everything down.

Everyone sends a thank you email after the sales meeting but the print buyers we interviewed said they were disappointed if post-meeting communications didn't include guidance about the next steps. Follow-up notes are also great opportunities for showing you were paying attention and you have ideas about helping solve their problems. Include a piece of relevant content, like a research report or a case study, that is helpful as customers progress through their decision-making procedure.

We learned from the people on the other side of the desk that print salespeople had plenty of room to improve the way they approached a business about buying their products and services. These concepts are even more important today, given the experience of the last couple of years.

Download "From the Other Side of the Desk" and find out how the shoe fits once it's on the other foot.

How to Redefine Your Printing Sales Strategy

New Content

The traditional means of selling print have given way to more consultative approaches. The demands and complexities of the market mean that being an order taker for print jobs no longer serves anyone's needs. The pandemic has accelerated this transition.

Consultative selling begins with a mindset that focuses on what your customers need and how your services can help them grow their businesses. As the term implies, it means becoming a consultant or partner to clients in ways that go beyond simply selling them banners or brochures. Tactically, it means creating stronger relationships with customers, encouraging them to rely on you and your ideas. These approaches should translate into higher sales from each client.

Let's look at several ways the print sales process has changed, and how to migrate to a consultative style.

Foster a Customer Focus

Some of your customers may have been relatively unscathed by the pandemic, but many of them face tough times. They may be reassessing their marketing investments and overall spending budgets.



This is an excellent opportunity to offer advice and position yourself as a resource that can help them get back on track. Your customers should feel they can depend on you for what they need. As an objective third party, you are in a good position to point out areas of their businesses that require attention. Share your thoughts about topics such as effectively distributing marketing messages or managing documents with a remote work force.

Share Your Expertise

Don't underestimate the knowledge you can share regarding print and digital communication strategies. You likely know a great deal about how print can help your customers achieve their business goals and can suggest efficient ways your customers can communicate with their audiences.

Leverage the knowledge inside your company. If your staff offers expertise in logistic, data mining, design, web development, event planning, or other specialties, get them involved. Consultative selling is often a team approach.

Develop a deep understanding of your customers' industries, the challenges and opportunities they face, and what trends you see. Share your insight.

Also, leverage the data at your disposal. Track customers' interactions with you, their order history, their complaints, or why you may have lost a print job to a competitor. Look for patterns. If you see a way for clients to do something better, cheaper, or faster, let them know.

Get Your Messaging Right

As remote work becomes more entrenched, in-person selling will become rarer. Sales reps are used to being the face of the company and the first line of contact with customers. As habits change, customer relationships will evolve.

Customers' first line of contact will probably be online now. So, make sure your website stresses the right messages you want your customers to understand. That means less content about your equipment and your history and more about the results you deliver. Include obvious calls to action that benefit the customers and nurture their relationship with your brand.

Be aware too that remote work means some services function better when they're automated. Investigate ways to remove barriers to working with you. Convenience, time savings, and good execution are also crucial to building trust.

Respect Time

The days of the leisurely lunch meeting are over, at least for now. Time is a scarce commodity these days and if you get an hour of anyone's time, bring them value beyond what they can get by themselves online.

The idea of relationship selling has been updated. While personality, personal engagement, or friendships still matter to sales success, it's more important to build on respect, knowledge, and good ideas. The success you achieve is directly related to the value you bring.

It's Time: Open Houses for Printers

Originally published in September 2023

For two long years, nobody put on an in-person event. Organizers migrated everything to virtual affairs or cancelled their plans outright. Now people are feeling safe enough to attend live events again. Sports teams are back to playing in front of their fans and entertainers are performing for audiences.



If you once had plans to host an open house at your printing company and never got the chance, it's time to put that event back on the calendar.

Getting Back to In-Person Events

There's no promotional investment that can make a bigger impression on customers and prospects than the personal interaction made possible with live events. Well-executed open houses are great ways for print service providers to achieve their goals for new business development, launching new product lines, or expanding business relationships.

Successful customer events and open houses don't happen by accident. To realize tangible results, you will need alignment throughout your organization on event goals, strategies, and project planning responsibilities. Gimbel & Associates' free eBook, "Making Your Event a Success," is an end-to-end guide to help you plan, market, and execute events like an open house. There's no need to start from scratch! Follow the advice in the guide and you'll be able to leverage global best practices to market your event at the local level.

Visit our resource library page to download "Making Your Event a Success" along with other helpful guides, eBooks, and reports.

Benefits Not Available Virtually

Customer events facilitate conversations with decision makers. Much better than a phone call or an email, your staff has an opportunity to engage with customers and uncover unmet needs or opportunities to expand customer relationships. It is difficult to control the conversation on a salesperson's visit to a customer's office where they get distracted by incoming phone calls or other interruptions.



Getting customers and prospects into your environment also makes it easy to acquaint them with new services your company provides. Seeing print production in action is memorable. Sometimes even long-time customers aren't aware when you've added new capabilities. They may be buying from someone else.

An open house can be a source of content. Capture pictures, videos, and testimonial quotes. You can use this content for promotional purposes long after your in-person event concludes.

11 Steps to Event Success

Our event planning guide includes eleven areas for print service providers to address.

Event goals Content strategy

External communication plan

Internal communication plan Event budget

Data requirements

Event logistics

Food, beverage, signage

Samples, give-a-ways, raffles Networking strategy Clean sweep

A successful open house at your print facility takes thought, preparation, and work, but it will be worth the effort. Your customers are excited to mingle with real people again. Give them the chance to leave their offices and take the opportunity to show off your company by inviting them to a few hours of informative presentations and demonstrations at a live, in-person open house event.

Marketing – DIY or Hire a Professional?

Originally published in July 2020

Print providers face the dilemma of marketing their services with in-house resources or hiring a marketing firm. It's a reasonable predicament. Print service providers (PSP's) offer many services that execute on strategies marketing agencies recommend. These include graphic design, print, and direct mail submission. PSPs are experts in those parts of a marketing program. Would it be much of a stretch to write the marketing plan and manage the digital components? How much time could website design and maintenance, SEO, and social media take?

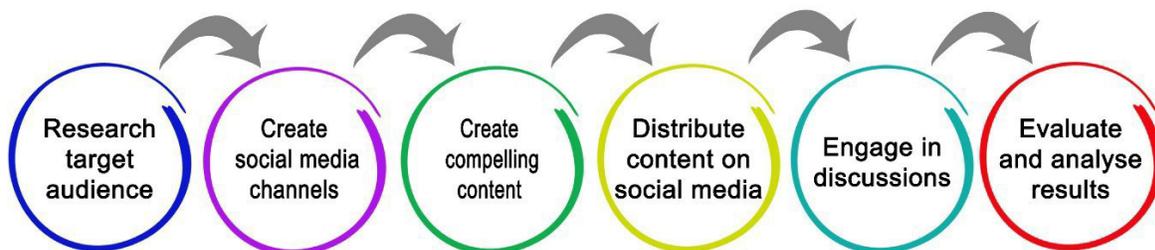


It boils down to one simple question: “How much of my company’s marketing should I do myself?”

Current State and Desired Outcome

The first step in deciding which direction to take is an assessing your current marketing efforts and determining where you want to go. For this, bring in an outside agency for a paid assessment. A set of ears and eyes from outside will inspire new ideas. You will learn what you are doing right and where you should improve.

Prior to meeting with an agency, do some homework. What are your competitors doing? Dissect their websites and notice what you like and don't like. Ask your clients what media prompts them to make business purchases. Lastly, be introspective. Pick a couple companies and observe how you respond to their marketing. Choose organizations outside the print sphere. Fresh, compelling ideas are the order of the day.



Website

A marketing plan should pivot around your website. It is usually a prospect's first experience with your company. Your website must be professional and visually pleasing, but more importantly, it must be found. It's better to have an easily found basic website than a flashy site that languishes in obscurity. A well-constructed website with good search engine optimization (SEO) and mobile responsiveness ranks higher on search engines.

Be cautious about “canned” DIY website template tools. They can produce professional-appearing results, but the drag-and-drop structure that makes them easy to build is bad for SEO. They can negatively affect your organic search results.

Search Engine Optimization

SEO is something you can do in-house, but consider hiring a professional. Agencies use SEO specialists who spend their day moving your print service company higher in organic listings. They will suggest many ways to increase your rankings with marketing activities like strategic blogging.

SEO is not a set-it-and-forget-it proposition. As your competitors see you creeping up in the rankings, their SEO folks tweak their strategies. Then your team responds, and so on.

Social Media

Social media is an easy way to engage and communicate with customers. It’s a process you can do yourself if you know how to tag someone on Twitter and Facebook, but do you have the time to keep the posts current? If yes, DIY; if no, assign to an agency.

Blogs

Companies that blog have 97% more inbound links than those that don’t, which means more search engine traffic. Blog articles should solve problems or provide fresh insights on relevant topics. Small businesses cite lack of time and scarcity of ideas as reasons they do not blog regularly. A well-crafted article takes time to write, and consistency is the key. You might consider outsourcing some blog content to an outside agency.



Print and Direct Mail

As a PSP, you have powerful marketing tools at your disposal. Print and mail is what you sell, and what you know. With a direct mail campaign, prospects see how good you are at what you do. They can hold a sample in their hands.

Any marketing firm you choose should understand how to connect print and direct mail to digital technologies. QR codes, augmented reality, near-field communications and the Postal Service’s Informed Delivery program connect a printed piece to a web page.

People and Technology Costs

What is the cost of a full-time employee (FTE) whose singular focus is marketing, including all aspects of campaign creation, website maintenance, SEO and more? Compare the total burden of FTE’s to the yearly fee of an agency. Don’t forget to include yearly fees for your marketing team’s software tools in your DIY estimate. It is a cost with no end. With an agency, software maintenance is part of the fee.

The Tipping Point

You should you hire an agency to handle some or all of your marketing program if you lack some necessary skills or you don't have the time, and you've decided it's not worthwhile to recruit and hire an in-house expert. When your marketing project is an appropriate creative or technological challenge to take on yourself, go with the DIY approach. But when a greater level of experience, tools, and training are better suited for the results you need, outsource this work.

The World Changed. Why Are You Still Selling Like It's 2019?

New Content

It may sound trite, but the pandemic has changed many things about the way we conduct our lives, run our businesses, and purchase product and services. Whether these changes are permanent is still unclear, but they are the new normal for now. As you continue to sell, you and your sales team must adjust your strategies to succeed in this post-pandemic world.

Let's look at five areas that require an updated approach.

1. Empathy

We've all endured a long, hard slog. Just as your business has faced hardship, so have your clients. Approach clients with empathy, don't push too hard, listen to their problems and challenges, try to offer new ideas or lend a helping hand if you can. A little support and thoughtfulness go a long way to solidifying client loyalty.

2. Virtual engagements

According to research firm McKinsey, the shift to virtual engagement is now preferred by 70% to 80%



of B2B decision makers worldwide. It's effective, cheaper, reduces travel, and is easy to schedule. A large majority of those decision makers also say they're open to making online purchases worth more than \$50,000.

If you and your team haven't mastered the art of virtual selling, now is the time to start. This is true for active clients and prospects. Get your sales team the proper training, get them used to the technology, and adapt your presentation style for this new medium.

If you meet clients online, you should also enable them to do business with you on their terms through a website with e-commerce capabilities or customized ordering portals. Optimize your website and portals with robust self-service tools so that clients can find products, place orders, track their jobs, and get answers to their questions.

3. Diversification

Whether you operate in one or several verticals, or provide general commercial printing, a post-pandemic recovery may be the right time to diversify your services and products. Not all verticals will recover at the same rate, so you may be forced to look for new revenue streams. But even if your verticals are doing ok, many clients might like to trim the number of vendors they deal with.

Look for opportunities to secure more business from each client and create a more seamless experience with more ancillary services. For example, do clients need new products to meet pandemic needs? If they've moved into online sales, do they need more packages? What about corollary materials? If you can't produce everything yourself, consider partnering with companies that can.

4. Customization

Pandemic changes—more stress, tightened budgets, labor shortages, remote working, online shopping — have made marketing personalization critical.

Learn how to use data and deploy it for clients' benefit. Using demographic and website traffic patterns, you can build a list of prospects and target it with the power of your digital presses and variable data marketing skills. Those same skills can be used to build, deploy, and track omnichannel campaigns for your clients.

5. Sell Value and Solutions

Given the challenge facing all businesses, the number one goal for your sales teams is to stop selling print itself and start focusing on what printing enables and the problems it solves for clients.

Train your sales teams to be more strategic and to develop insights for helping your customers' businesses. Don't ask what printing they need. Ask about their pain points, their challenges, and their goals. For example, a client who wants to expand into online shopping may be overwhelmed by the complexities of software, website design, logistics, and marketing. If this is an area you know, share your knowledge. Clients who face reduced budgets will benefit from a variable campaign that increases ROI.

Basically, it all starts by asking your clients: How can I help you succeed?

Using Social Media to Promote Your Print Business

Originally published in July 2020

Social media can be a powerful addition to a print company's marketing strategy, but using it effectively requires research, education, planning, and plenty of time. If you haven't used this channel for business promotion, the prospect of diving into the social media pool can seem overwhelming. In this article, we'll share some advice about how print companies can take advantage of social media without getting lost or buried.

Research

Just as with any marketing idea, you only want to spend your time in areas where the people you are trying to reach will see your messages. Establish free accounts in the major social platforms you suspect are frequented by your audience and go looking for evidence they are part of the network. Most printers will start with LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram.

Search for your customers, but also pay attention to groups or hashtags to gauge the activity among other people and organizations similar to your targets. On LinkedIn, for example, search for terms related to the markets you serve and then select "groups". The group membership lists and activity will be a clue about the kind of companies that use the social network regularly. Search for a hashtag to see how many people are following a keyword within a network. These actions will tell you if your messaging will reach your target audience.



Pick one or two social platforms that seem to be the best fit. Don't try to be instantly active on too many social networks at once. You won't have the time.

Education

Look for posts or conversation threads relevant to your audience. Notice which ones are getting shares and reactions. Those are the topics most interesting to the members in a network. If the topics are relevant to your business, consider covering them in your own posts.

You can also use a tool like Google's Keyword Planner to identify hot topics related to your business. This tool reports how many people are searching for a particular word or phrase. Entering a search phrase displays the average number of searches for the term you entered. Keyword Planner also tells you if many advertisers are competing for the same keyword. You need not run a Google Ads campaign to use the Keyword Planner, but a free Google Adwords account is required.

Planning

The first planning step is identifying your objectives. What do you expect to achieve by using social media? Lead generation, brand awareness, and thought leadership are some common goals. Don't lose sight of your objectives as you execute your social media strategy.

Next, decide on the content you intend to publish. Reposting other's content is fine to an extent, but

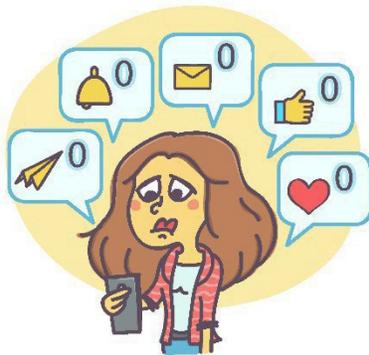
original content yields the best results. Unless you have an inventory of material on hand, this means someone must create the content. Identify your resources, which may be in-house or outsourced. If your existing staff will create the content, we recommend allocating time in the workday for handling the task. When this responsibility is a “when you have time” project for someone who already has full-time responsibilities, it rarely works.

Finally, plan the action you will take based on how your social networks respond to your posts. Will you use the interest in a post to segment your leads and follow-up? Use high click rates to spur further posts on the same topic? Respond to followers who comment or share your content with others? Someone must carry out your social media strategy.

Execution

Marketing through social networks differs from other approaches. It’s not just another broadcast channel. Your organization must connect with your followers. Besides posting on a consistent schedule, your activities may include commenting or sharing other people’s posts, following other users, and starting or participating in group discussions. All these tasks take time—probably more than you thought.

Set aside the same time each day to monitor and engage in social media. Take 30-60 minutes at the start of each day to log into the platforms. Notice how followers are reacting to your posts and look for opportunities to grow your follower list or add value by commenting or taking part in group discussions.



Social networks are for connecting and sharing information. If all your content is marketing oriented, your audience will not respond. Users are quick to unfollow brands that are overly promotional. Focus on creating informational content your audience finds interesting and useful.

Though consistency is important, and social media is somewhat of a numbers game, always post with intent and compare your content with your objectives. When faced with a choice between frequently publishing lackluster content and posting well-written, thoughtful, and interesting articles less often, choose the latter.

You’ll want to set time aside for analyzing important metrics like profile views, shares, and clicks. These statistics will tell you if you’re in the right platforms and if you are influencing your intended audiences.

Social media is an important business tool. It’s a place where nearly all your potential customers go before they do business with your company. It is foolish to ignore this powerful way to promote your brand. But using social media is a commitment. Resources and time must be allocated to the effort or it will fail. Jumping into social media with a halfhearted effort can damage the brand image more than it helps.

What's Your Story?

Originally published in August 2022

Has anyone ever enjoyed a session of Death by PowerPoint? If your sales reps are still focusing on speeds, feeds, and other dry factoids during client presentations, chances are high they're not delivering a message that resonates.

While facts still matter and need to be communicated, a more compelling approach is to weave them into stories that hold your clients' attention and truly engage them.



Why Stories?

Stories sell better than facts, it's that simple. When we listen to stories, we use more complex areas of our brain; we engage our emotions; we find it easier to remember content and data, and we stay focused. We're all people and we all like a good story.

Stories make facts come to life and render the storyteller more memorable. They create a stronger connection between the solutions your clients need and your company. If you can foster those feelings, closing the deal should be much easier.

What Makes a Good Story?

All good stories have several elements. They have a central character, an obstacle or problem to overcome, a resolution, and a central message.



Good stories should be easy to follow and have a clean structure—beginning, middle, and end. They should be told simply without getting bogged down in data. They should be geared to the audience or the client in front of you and based on substance. Don't tell stories simply to embellish, but to illustrate a point.

Good stories are also not typically about you. They are about your clients' successes.

Above all, stories should show, not tell. This is true of all storytelling, from magazine articles to movies. It's the difference between telling your prospect you provide good service and letting them realize it on their own. Which do you think is more effective?

How to Tell Good Stories

This approach may sound difficult, and it takes some practice to master. But when you think about it, most of us instinctively try to tell stories when we speak to other people. When you're telling your friends about your cancelled flight, you try to weave all the facts into a story. You don't focus on the

time or the flight number, or even the carrier, but on details that engage the senses. You describe the thick crowds, the stifling heat in the terminal, people who lost their patience, screaming kids, your frustrations, your tired back, and your relief when you got rebooked.

Story Examples

Use your natural instincts to weave stories into your sales presentations. Here are some examples to get you thinking.

Say a prospective client asks you about rush jobs. You might tell them about a time when a client called you in a panic because they needed something done super-fast to meet a critical deadline. Briefly describe the cause of the problem—computer glitches, internal disagreements, failure by another supplier. Lay out the consequences of missing the deadline.

Describe what your staff pulled together to make the deadline—working overnight, calling in extra operators, sourcing stock quickly, consuming huge jugs of coffee. Then describe your client’s relief and appreciation when you called to tell them you did the job in time. If the client sent a thank you note, throw that into the story. You have your hero, the conflict, the resolution, and the key message that you go above and beyond at all times to get the job done.

When a prospective client asks what you can do for them, have some stories ready about other clients. Use case studies to illustrate how you solved problems and created opportunities for each client. Quantify the benefits your clients experienced, whether it’s 25% time savings or 30% revenue increase. Using client stories to show your capabilities carries more credibility.

When a client says tell me about your company, don’t describe your shop floor and the equipment you have. Rather, tell them a story about the small space where you got your start. Describe how you creatively overcame obstacles, what kept you focused, how you developed strategies to clinch key clients. Describe your vision for your company and what you’re proud of. Tell a human story about how you built your business. Roger Gimbel was able to do this recently in a published book called "I'm Not Anyone." Roger donates the book sale proceeds to the scholarship administered by the Print and Graphics Scholarship Foundation. Buy "I'm Not Anyone" now at Amazon in either paperback or eBook form.

Obviously, you can’t weave everything into one long narrative, but if you incorporate a few solid stories, you’ll create a memorable encounter and be closer to a positive outcome.



Creating a Customer Guide to Printing Technology

Originally published in April 2022

The printing process is intricate and complex. Printing is a finely tuned and calibrated engineering feat with thousands of parts all moving in perfect harmony. On top of that, various technologies execute the function in different ways. While your customers needn't be exposed to all the details, a little bit of knowledge about printing technology can't hurt. Sharing information like this with your customers shows them you are a professional who has a thorough understanding of the industry.

Feel free to use the descriptions in this article to populate your own newsletters, blogs, or other communications aimed at your customers.



Offset Presses

Offset, or offset lithography, refers to traditional printing presses used to produce brochures, magazines, business cards, posters, books, flyers, and more. To use an offset press, we make a printing plate for each color to be printed. After the plate is inked, it transfers, or offsets, the image to an imaging roller, which then images the paper.



Offset uses the CMYK color system— cyan, magenta, yellow and black — along with premixed Pantone colors that ensure consistency. Many offset presses can handle up to 12 colors, and most can apply finishes such as varnishing and coating.

Offset presses print on a variety of coated and uncoated paper stock with a smooth surface. Their ability to consistently produce top quality output and brilliant colors make them a perfect fit for long runs of static pages.

Digital Presses

Digital printing refers to a press that prints directly from a computer. Digital presses don't use plates. We'll cover two press technologies in this category.

Electrophotographic or toner presses

Since the early 90s, toner presses have occupied a prominent place in the printing world. These machines use toner instead of ink and they can produce variable data print jobs. Modern versions produce high-quality color nearly indistinguishable from offset.

Short runs are economical on a toner press. Jobs such as personalized direct mail are especially suited to this technology.

Inkjet presses

Inkjet presses use a contactless form of printing. Inkjet heads spray ink droplets onto a substrate, making inkjet presses very versatile. They can accommodate a huge variety of rigid and soft substrates in thicknesses up to about two inches. Inkjet can print on just about anything.

Inkjet presses are available in sheetfed and web models and produce the same products, including variable work, as toner presses.

Large-format devices which come in roll-to-roll and flatbed configurations are also inkjet presses. Some models are used to produce vehicle wraps, murals, billboards, and other large images. Large-format flatbed presses can print on rigid substrates like foamboard, glass, doors, or even tiles.



Flexographic Presses



Flexographic presses are web-fed devices. The material comes from a roll and the press uses rubber photopolymer plates with raised images. Ink is applied to the plates and transferred to the substrate. It can be very effective and flexographic presses feature the simplest imaging structure.

Labels and packaging are traditional uses for flexographic printing, but it can be used for books, newspapers, or inserts. Inkjet presses are making incursions into the flexographic market as well.

Dye Sublimation

Dye-sublimation is a printing process used to transfer ink onto fabric. A design is printed onto a special paper placed against the material. When heat is applied, the inks turn to gas and are transferred into the fabric. The results are nearly permanent, and will not crack, fade, or peel under normal conditions.

Dye sublimation presses print on polyester or other synthetic textiles for flags, banners, photos, novelty items such as cell phone covers, and other items that have sublimation-friendly surfaces.

Many printing projects can be processed using several different print technologies. Deciding which technology to use depends on production efficiencies, running costs of the press, run lengths, objectives, and optimum quality desired.

Introduction to Design & Designers

Bridging the Creative Chasm

Understanding and Collaborating with Designers

Designers transform blank pages into captivating experiences. But for print service providers, navigating the creative terrain can sometimes feel like deciphering a foreign language. This collection of articles is all about taking advantage of creative design while ensuring your print operation can efficiently produce the materials they conceive.

Forge a seamless bridge between your technical expertise and the designer's artistic vision.

- **Champion inclusivity:** Grasp the nuances of designing for accessibility, ensuring your print creations resonate with everyone.
- **Master the mailbox:** Lend a helping hand to designers navigating the intricacies of direct mail, ensuring their creative visions reach their intended audience.
- **In-house design:** Explore the merits and considerations of offering in-house design services, determining if it's a good fit for your business.
- **Educate the creators:** Demystify the world of print for designers, empowering them to create masterpieces that fit your workflow and stay within budget.
- **Package the perfect pitch:** Equip designers with pro tips for package printing, transforming boxes into silent salespeople on store shelves.
- **Data as muse:** Unveil the power of data for designers, showing them how to harness its insights to craft more targeted and impactful pieces.
- **By fostering understanding and collaboration,** you can transform every project into a print venture that resonates, informs, and inspires

Print Projects and Accessibility

Originally published in August 2022

Printers often focus on how a project looks. Are the colors right? Is the registration exact? Any smears or smudges? Are the graphics and text sharp and clear? These are all important, of course, but we usually base the analysis on what we can see, hold, and touch. How often do you consider the suitability of a printed piece for someone with a disability? Nearly a quarter of the global population is disabled, and regulations like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) make looking at a piece from an accessibility aspect important.



When you think of disabilities, you might be considering only impairments we can see. These are obvious to us. Not so noticeable are difficulties with thinking, memory, learning, or communicating. Designers and printers must also consider them as conditions that affect an individual's ability to read and understand a printed piece.

Accessible design doesn't have to limit creativity. It's all about making adjustments so the printed or electronic piece can connect with the entire audience.

Web pages are an area where design decisions can make it difficult for a disabled person. Pay attention to how you lay out the screen. It makes a difference for aids such as screen readers. Navigational tools should be easy to use and keyboard functions should be available, when possible, not just mouse clicks.

People with seizure disorders are sensitive to blinking and flashing elements. Designs that feature elements with over three flashes per second might trigger a seizure. Parallax scrolling gives the viewer the illusion of depth by causing background images to move at different speeds than the foreground, but can be troublesome for viewers with motion disorders.



Color

A common accessibility mistake is to make color the only way to convey information. This presents problems for color-blind people who cannot distinguish between different shades. Soft yellow text on a muted orange background, for example, is a poor practice. If using color to highlight headings, for example, try adding a design element such as bolding, in case the reader can't see the color difference.

Underlining hyperlinks in the text will help them be recognized as links and not missed by those challenged by the color scheme.

Substituting color for words helps declutter forms and documents, as you can eliminate some instructional text, but make sure the meaning of text is clear, even without the highlight color.

Contrast

Dark text on a white background is best for readability, but not as interesting as other color combinations. Just make sure the background and the text have enough contrast to be clearly seen, especially with small print.

Contrast in images is also important. Simple illustrations with thick dark lines and shapes are the easiest to interpret. Avoid super-intricate illustrations with thin, fine lines and lots of colors.

Text

When designing for accessibility, keep font treatments simple. Stick with common font families such as Helvetica, Arial, or Gill Sans. Avoid condensed or italic fonts and use decorative or cursive faces sparingly. Do not place text on top of images. Upper and lower case is usually easier to read than all caps.

Be careful with kerning. Letters that touch one another are difficult to distinguish.

You wouldn't think of it, but alignment makes a difference. The beginning of a line is more difficult to find with right aligned or centered text. Left alignment is best.

Organization and Hierarchy

Clearly organized information is critical for readers with visual or cognitive challenges.

Print the most important information in the largest font. Print additional headers in decreasing font sizes. Hierarchy also helps screen readers translate web pages for the visually impaired.



Print

Paper choice is important. High gloss paper can be difficult to read in certain light, so avoid it when possible.

Printed materials can be more accessible when they include QR codes that link to a video or an audio recording.

Accessible design requires thought, and may suppress over-the-top designs, but the end goal is to make things easier for all readers. Printers and designers who can review pre-production designs with disabilities in mind will be less likely to produce materials that don't meet societal standards.

Designing for Direct Mail

Originally published in May 2020

Direct mail is staging a comeback! Instead of concentrating solely on saturated channels such as email and social media, marketers are once again embracing mail's superior open and conversion rates. To produce the best results requires both creative designs and compliance with postal mail best practices. Designers who have spent little time with direct mail may need to get up to speed on the details that make a direct mail campaign successful.

The volume and complexity of the US Postal Service's Domestic Mail Manual can be overwhelming, but creative people need to focus on only a few important areas to ensure their designs flow smoothly through the mail.

Design missteps that affect mailability can be expensive. Errors discovered at production time increase costs and put deadlines in jeopardy. A bit of knowledge is all it takes to prevent last-minute disasters and get maximum value from direct mail campaigns.



Basic Design for Direct Mail

It may seem obvious, but postal automation equipment must be able to read the addresses printed on mail pieces. The best way for designers to avoid problems in this area is making sure the space they reserve for the mailing address is white or light colored. Choose matte or dull finishes to prevent reflections that hinder address-reading equipment.

Bleed-throughs can also cause readability problems so make sure text and images

don't show through from the opposite side of the paper or the envelopes, but don't select material that is too thick or stiff. Mail handling equipment requires material to be flexible as it passes over belts and rollers.

Aspect ratios are items that designers often overlook. Out of spec dimensions won't keep your mail from being processed, but USPS surcharges will have a dramatic effect on postage costs. Aspect ratio refers to the relationship of the height of a mail piece to its length. To avoid non-machinable surcharges, the ratio must fall between 1.3 and 2.5. Divide the length of the piece by the height to calculate the aspect ratio. The USPS defines the length of a piece as the edge parallel to the delivery address, so avoid vertically oriented address blocks. Remember a perfectly square mail piece has an aspect ratio of 1.0, so it doesn't meet the standard necessary to qualify for the lowest postage rates.

Address Placement

Mailers must position the mailing address in a rectangular region that begins 5/8" from the bottom of the piece and ends vertically 2 3/4" from the bottom of the piece. Delivery addresses can appear anywhere within the vertical limits, but cannot be closer than 1/2" from the left or right edge of the mail piece.

Designers must leave room for the postal barcode which postal equipment will apply in an area at the bottom right corner of the address side of the mailpiece. The barcode clear zone is 4 ¾” wide by 5/8” high. Leave that area blank.

The return address appears in the upper left corner, in the top third of the mail piece, separated by at least 1” horizontally and vertically from the delivery address. Return addresses may include artwork or logos. All permit mail must include a return address.

Check out the *USPS Quick Service Guide 602* for guidance about the address side of mail pieces.

Self-Mailers

Folded self-mailers are pieces folded into two or more panels, resulting in letter-size mail. Because self-mailers are not enclosed in envelopes, the postal service has published several rules regarding their design and construction. Folding specifications and sealing methods are two problem areas that cause mail to be rejected or assessed extra postage and surcharges.

Refer to a slide presentation at <https://postalpro.usps.com/node/4314> to acquaint yourself with the many guidelines that apply to this type of mail.

A best practice for designing folded self-mailers is to confer with a Mail Piece Design Analyst (MDA) available from the US Postal Service before finalizing a design. This will save you time and money.

Size and Shape

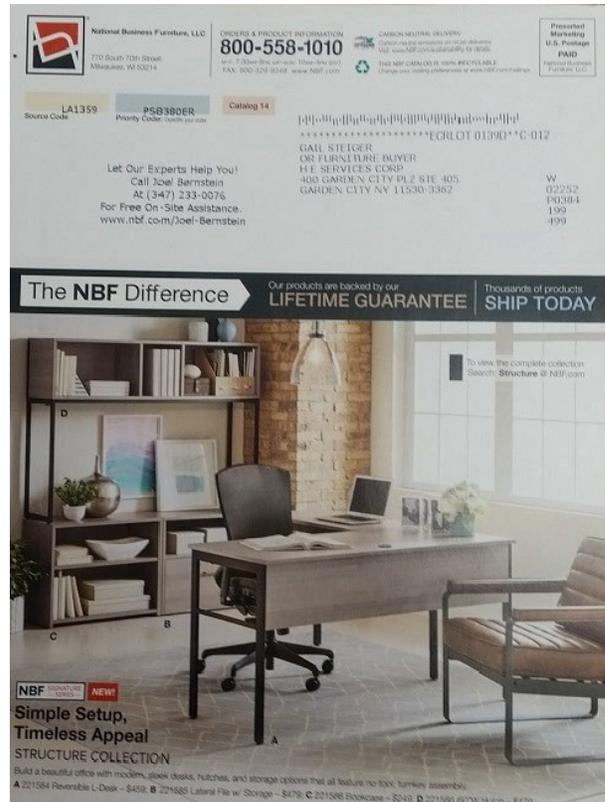
Unless the client will pay the surcharge for irregular shapes, direct mail pieces should be rectangular. Measurements should fall within the following dimension requirements.

Postcards should be 3 ½” to 4 ¼” high and 5” to 6” long. The thickness must be between .007” and .016”, or ideally 8 pt. to 10 pt. cover stock.

Letters are 3 ½” to 6 1/8” high and 5” to 11 ½” long. Letters can be up to ¼” thick. Machinable letter-size mail pieces in envelopes can weigh a maximum of 3½ oz. They cannot be shrink-wrapped, poly bagged, clasped, or have any closure that can damage the processing equipment.

Direct Mail Works – But Follow the Rules

Direct mail, even with all its rules, is still one of the most highly effective means of engaging your audiences. This is true for all demographics. Familiarity with mailing requirements will allow marketers to realize the greatest benefits from their direct mail investments.



Designers may regard mailing rules as complicated and inhibiting, but they are necessary to ensure the postal service can process mail pieces quickly and keep postage prices low. Combining creative design with USPS rule compliance is the smart way to use direct mail effectively.



Do You Offer Design Services?

Originally published in March 2023

A growing number of print service providers have added design to their service offerings. If you haven't ventured there yet, consider the many advantages to bringing design in house. Unfortunately, it's not as easy as placing a help wanted ad. Design is a broad area and graphic designers come in many flavors and with many specialties.



The designer you choose to hire must be the right fit for the work your company produces and match your organizational culture. An understanding of the print process and its intricacies is, of course, mandatory.

The Benefits of In-House Design

The number one reason for bringing design services in house is to make money. Design can be a profitable revenue stream. Your company can leverage design services at the right time to expand into areas that are just as lucrative, such as campaign deployment, data analytics, or mailing and fulfillment. Design services can also help secure greater spending from your customers.

A second benefit of offering design services, but just as crucial, is to meet the needs of your customers and solidify that relationship. Time-stressed and resource-challenged clients will appreciate the ease of dealing with one vendor who can offer most of what they need. If you can relieve clients of the legwork of finding, briefing, and managing a designer, you will be valued.

An in-house design capability to create logos, retouch photos, or develop company branded collateral is a positive step towards improved customer experience.

Design management can also move you a step closer to the inner working of your clients' marketing departments, where you can be involved right from the inception of a project or campaign. Printers have endeavored to be included in marketing planning but have traditionally found it difficult. Design is one way in.

An on-staff designer can create files that are not only error free but are set up to match the technical requirements of your equipment. A skilled designer can expedite prepress and cut down on time devoted to fixing the files. Saving time is like making money.

Print-savvy designers can choose the best materials and other finishes to achieve any desired effect a customer may want. They understand how their choices could affect production downstream, which will help your shop function more effectively. They can also create precise files if you're outputting a campaign to different technologies, such as brochures on offset but large displays on inkjet.

Design doesn't need to be limited to print. Most designers will probably be skilled at adapting artwork for other platforms like social media, electronic communications, ecommerce sites, and client websites. Serving these customer needs with in-house resources could mean more money for you. In short, talented designers can help your company be more efficient and profitable.

The Right People



Good designers can also be tricky to find and a little internal assessment before posting any job ad is a good idea.

Begin by assessing your needs as clearly as possible. As always, start with your clients. What services are they asking about?

Branding, web design, marketing print collaterals, book design, signs, direct mail, or other services.

What type of printing do you do? Different products and technologies require different levels of ability. Packaging design, for example, must often adhere to stringent regulations and color demands. Direct mail must follow postal specifications. Sign printing has its own requirements. Designers must be familiar with these particulars.

Once you have a clear idea of what you're looking for, you can start your search. If you're not totally sure you want to commit to a full-time in-house specialist, you can partner with a freelance artist or a design firm and test the waters.

How do you assess any potential hire? Look at expertise—particularly as it relates to print, technical skills, and interpersonal skills.

Expertise

Designers tend to specialize in certain areas, like magazine design, web design, or virtual branding. It's important that whoever you hire has some knowledge about designing for print. Look at portfolios of their work. Ask candidates questions about how they developed certain projects, their process with clients, and how much time they take to execute a project. Do they have a narrow focus, or can they ply their talents in more general applications? The more versatile they are, the better.

If they have limited print design experience, can you spare the time and resources to train them? Also, don't be afraid to make a subjective assessment. Do you like their work?

Technical Skills

Designers should possess a thorough understanding of all the technologies and tools available. Printing, as we know, can be a wonderful, but technically demanding, output option.

Adobe Suite experience (inDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, and Acrobat) is the bare minimum skill requirement.

Other skills you may desire include photography, WordPress or other web design tools, social media experience, or video editing. More refined expertise and skills can include handling data, working knowledge of variable data file creation programs, or experience with mailing requirements.

For printing, knowledge of paper and substrate attributes is valuable, as is some pre-flighting knowledge or familiarity with prepress programs, specific industry software such as packaging design, and remote-proofing tools.

An understanding of the different printing technologies on your shop floor, their capabilities and limitations is great, as is knowing how to create error-free press ready files for different output devices or accommodating any embellishments, for example.



Interpersonal Skills

Good designers will need to understand that you run a business, which requires some business sense. Their job is to move projects along expeditiously, so you can decrease wait times and your shop functions as efficiently as possible. They need to rise to this level of professionalism while flexing their creative muscles.

Designers are one of the key gateways to your company. Designing is a client-facing role. Make sure they listen well to clients' directions, achieve what the client wants, and behave professionally at all times. They must be on time for all tasks, including deadlines, communicate well, and keep everyone in the loop. They must be good team players.

Like every other staffing challenge, finding good designers is not always easy, but the effort can certainly be worth it.

Educating Digital Designers About Print

Originally published in November 2022

A significant percentage of designers have little to no experience in creating print projects. When they shift to printed materials, this lack of knowledge can cause them to make design decisions that add unnecessary costs and make it tough for printers to produce the product the designers envisioned. Designers accustomed to working in digital channels may not be conscious of the details that determine the success or failure of a print project.

Educating designers about print has become important as more businesses are realizing the new role print plays in overall marketing strategies. An organization cannot always achieve their marketing objectives with a digital-only approach. Marketers are seeing print in a new light, and they are asking their designers to create the applications that take advantage of the unique opportunities print offers. For them, print is new again and allows them to reach customers overwhelmed with digital advertising.



Printing Digital

Consumers respond to printed communications differently than how they consume digital content. They enjoy receiving direct mail or exposure to printed messages and they pay attention when the presentation of ideas and offers feature ink on paper or other physical substrates. Studies have shown that consumers retain information and recall brand content better when they consume printed materials. They trust information that comes to them in printed form and take action more often compared to digital advertising.

Print's Rise in Popularity

This change in consumer attitudes about print and renewed interest from marketers should encourage designers to learn more about how print is produced. Printing companies can help designers understand the costs involved and appreciate how print differs from the digital channels for which they've been designing for some time. Printers can help designers take advantage of print's re-emergence as a critical marketing tool.

Connecting Print to Digital

Digital designers will be especially interested in how print can bridge the space between physically printed materials and the digital environment. Prepare some short videos or slide decks for designers that show examples of how to deploy new technologies. QR codes, augmented reality (AR), or Informed Delivery can connect printed materials with digital campaign assets the designer has probably supplied.

For tracking and follow-up in direct mail jobs, suggest ways to use personal URLs (pURLs) to provide data that identifies which postal mail recipients interact with the brand. Introduce the tracking capabilities offered by the USPS Informed Visibility program that notifies mailers when the mail pieces are delivered so they can trigger supplementary email or text messages.

Designers can add these new technologies to their print projects, allowing the messaging that begins with print to continue and expand via easily accessed digital channels with which the designers are already familiar.

Be Proactive—Create a Guide

To lessen the impact of poorly prepared files that arrive in your print operation, consider developing a guide for designers. Help them confirm they've taken all the steps necessary to ensure their job prints accurately, on time, and produces expected results.

Here are some areas you might want to include in a designer's guide:

Proofing

Check for spelling, spacing, grammar, capitalization, and word usage. Ask others to proof the project as well. Emphasize that



corrections made before sending the file to you will be much easier and cheaper to make than last-minute edits that happen after you begin working on the project.

Bleed and Crop Marks

Explain what bleed and crop marks are, and how you want your designers to use them.

Colors

Remind designers that print uses cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, whereas computer, tablet, and phone screens render in red, green, and blue. Be sure they convert colors to CMYK. Provide specific color conversion instructions for popular design software and explain about limitations in the CMYK color pallet.

Resolution

Help designers create photos and graphics designed to print perfectly at 300 dpi.

Fonts

Missing fonts is a common problem. Teach designers how to embed fonts in their PDF files using popular design software. Explain about the pros and cons of outline fonts.

The current trends suggest more digital-first designers will be working on print projects. Take the time to educate them on best practices for document design and file preparation so you can print their projects accurately, on time, and within budget.

Helping Designers with Direct Mail

Originally published in February 2023



Direct mail has a proven track record of being an effective marketing tactic, even in today's digital age. One reason for its effectiveness is that mail is more likely to be seen. It physically arrives in a mailbox rather than being easily missed on social media or email in-boxes. The tactile nature of direct mail also adds to its appeal, making it stand out and feel more personal. In addition, direct mail can be a great way to drive consumers to websites or personal URLs to get more detailed information.

Designers play a crucial role in this process by creating visually appealing and engaging pieces, but they can be even more effective if they understand the fundamental strategies of successful direct mail. Some designers have plenty of direct mail experience, others do not. Here are some ways printers can assist designers working on their first direct mail projects.

Campaign Goals

The printer and the client may understand the objectives of the campaign, but did anyone inform the designer? Layout, color, image, and copy decisions can be more relevant if everyone on the team knows the goal. It's better to give designers this information up front than to request re-work when initial designs don't coincide with the overall aim of the project. Tracking the impact of direct mail will also depend on how pieces are designed.

Audience Profile



The audience will affect the designer's choice of colors, images, and other design elements. The more designers know about the target audience, the more tailored their designs can be to the recipient's needs and preferences.

The design approach for a sixty-year-old grandfather will differ from the mailpiece designed to attract the attention of a young first-time homebuyer, for instance. Include as much audience detail as possible in the design brief.

Leverage the Power of Personalization

Digital presses and data processing software can create highly personalized mailings that can be customized for segments or individual recipients. However, designers may not be familiar with the best way to set up their variable data files to take advantage of this technology. Consult with designers or furnish them with guidelines for how to build files that will work best in your prepress and production workflows.

Coatings and Embellishments

Print service providers can help designers get creative with their printed materials. Physical mail engages the senses in a way that digital media cannot. Keeping postal regulations in mind, recommend different sizes and shapes of postcards or envelopes, or experiment with paper stocks or textures.

Discuss finishing options and costs for treatments such as embossing, coatings, die cutting, and foils, as well as a wide range of inks. Augmented reality (AR) may also be an option in certain circumstances.

Samples and coupons can also be effective ways to engage the audience and stand out. And don't forget about the envelope itself! If your operation supports envelope personalization, suggest ways envelopes can spark curiosity.



Focus on the CTA

Print service providers should emphasize the importance of the call to action (CTA). Graphic designers may wish to focus more on other visually appealing design elements of the mailpiece. The CTA is the most crucial component of any direct mail piece, as it conveys the desired action the recipient should take. It should be bold, memorable, and given proper prominence so that mail recipients can easily see and understand what to do. Designers should also check all links to ensure they are functioning properly. A broken link or a website that doesn't work can damage trust in the brand.

To make the CTA even easier for the recipient to execute, designers can consider interactive elements like QR codes. These codes allow the recipient to access a URL quickly and easily, without having to type or copy it. Their convenience makes QR codes an appealing option for direct mail pieces.



Designer Education a Good Investment

Direct mail is a powerful marketing tool that can be highly effective when executed correctly. Designers play a crucial role in creating visually appealing pieces, but they can be even more effective if they understand the fundamental strategies of successful direct mail. This includes understanding the campaign goals, knowing the audience, adding personalization, and paying close attention to the CTA.

Print service providers can help designers by providing guidance on these strategies and recommending techniques and ideas that can make the materials more impactful and effective. By following these tips, designers can create successful direct mail campaigns that drive results for their clients.

Package Printing Tips for Designers

New Content

The importance of packaging can't be stressed enough. Boxes, cans, or bags are a tactile extension and experience of a brand, so it's essential to get them right. Packaging also has to work hard. It needs to communicate a brand's core values, be good looking enough to entice consumers, clearly communicate what's in the box, and protect whatever it holds.

While many aspects of designing a package are similar to designing a brochure or other print jobs—you must be creative in using fonts, colors, and images—creating packages that pack a punch is a more complex and compelling exercise. For starters, packages are not flat, like catalogs or posters, but are multidimensional. Packaging, in its many forms, also serves real structural functions—it protects products during the shipping, distribution, and warehousing process. These characteristics demand a more multidimensional creation approach as well.

How Packaging is Like Other Print Jobs

Similar to any postcard, catalog, or website, a package reflects the image of the brand it represents and must work in harmony with all other collaterals and platforms. The creative and strategic use of logos, fonts, color choices and key messages all go to serve this purpose.



Unless you're designing a package in a vacuum, you likely already know all the relevant details about the intended audience and what makes them tick. You can incorporate these insights into the design.

You can also use all kinds of printing techniques that add impact, such as holograms, foils, embossing, debossing, special inks, spot varnishes, and so on.

And, like other printing, you need to be mindful of cost and keep it in line with

the product. A \$300 perfume will need more luxurious and expensive packaging than a \$9 makeup kit.

Function

We design a catalog with function in mind. You pick the right paper and coating to avoid smudging, for example. With package design, function takes on more importance; it's actually your starting point.

The key purpose of a box, or a tin, is to protect its contents. No matter how awesome the box looks and feels, if the bottle of perfume is broken before it reaches customers, then it's a disaster.

You must consider the fragility of the product, how the package will be transported, whether it's robust enough to withstand the rigors of the distribution chain, and how durable the package needs to be. Try to understand the supply chain journey and what your lovely box will be up against. This will inform the substrate you choose and the type of packaging you create. Perhaps a tube is called for rather than a box.

Form

The most common form of packaging is produced with folding cartons. Think cereal boxes and the like. The paper is creased, scored, cut, folded and glued into three-dimensional items. There are many types of folding carton templates that your printer can tell you about. All deal with box shapes, how boxes close, and how they're sealed, among other considerations.

But packaging is about more than boxes. Mailer bags, cardboard tubes, stand-up pouches, envelopes, cans, and bottles can all be called into use. Don't restrict your thinking. The packaging you choose says as much about your brand as the design you put on it. Look at the competition and consider how you can stand out with a different approach. Remember that yoghurt used to come in plastic containers until someone came up with squeezable options.

Which brings us to substrates. Modern presses can print on a huge variety of material: corrugated cardboard, degradable or compostable packaging, plastics and polyethylene, glass and aluminum, just to name a few. You're not restricted to paper anymore.

Just keep in mind all these substrates have their own peculiarities to consider when on press. If you're printing on clear plastic pouches, for example, they may need white ink to achieve the right opacity.

Regulatory Issues

There are significant regulations that govern packaging. The pharmaceutical and food markets, just to name two, are rife with rules about what goes on the packaging and what kind of material can touch the food. If you work in these sectors, it's a good idea to become familiar with the regs.

Related to regulatory requirements, consider how to handle practical aspects such as bar codes, logos, usage information, or expiration dates, especially if you decide to print your packaging in batches on an as needed basis.

Designing in 3D



Tubes, bags, or boxes have multiple sides on which to design. Think critically about this and use all surfaces for maximum impact, both outside and inside. When a consumer opens a box, for example, there's a small thrill happening. You can have them face a blank lid, or you can be creative and use that space to cement the brand experience.

Software is available to visualize your creation in 3D format as you design. It can be a much better option than designing on a flat screen and it's almost like an instant proof. These software packages also let you visualize how your package will look on store shelves. They create a virtual store where you can see your design in context with other products.

Production

Before you begin the design journey, talk to your printer about die line templates (the scored lines that are used to fold the box) and instructions for preparing accurate print-ready files such as how to layer different elements and embellishments, or any other guidelines to ensure a smooth production.

Designing for Store Shelves vs E-commerce

Shopping habits have evolved into a hybrid experience. Sometimes we want to shop online, sometimes in brick and mortar stores. Packaging must accommodate both. Creating packages for both shopping formats is often similar, but there are some subtle differences.

For retail stores, packaging must have shelf appeal, it must draw and maintain eyeballs, and it must stand out against competitors. Where it will be displayed, whether on a shelf, on a carousel, or a stand-alone shelf, will inform how you design.

Packaging for online shopping, especially for online-only storefronts, doesn't have to meet these expectations. Consumers don't see the packaging online. It does, however, make a first impression when it arrives, and it must be sturdy enough to make sure it arrives intact. If it's going through the mail, a package must also meet all shipping requirements. Also consider how the weight of materials you choose, and how the dimensions of the package may affect shipping costs.

Packaging design is certainly a complex undertaking with many more moving parts than other printed materials—literally. But we cannot overestimate its role in the success of a product or a brand. We shouldn't judge products by their box, but we usually do, so it has to be right.

Printers Advise Designers About Making Jobs Easy to Print

New Content

Printers often spend valuable time dealing with designer-provided files that aren't ready for printing. As printers strive to automate more production processes and handle customer work with fewer employees, hybrid work schedules, or outsourced services, eliminating bottlenecks is essential. This article describes situations, sometimes created by designers, that require manual intervention or workflow interruption during print pre-press and production.

Printers can help themselves by educating designers, especially those new to print, about these common mistakes. If a printer can decrease the number of files that come to them peppered with



troublesome mistakes, they can process more work on time and on budget for their customers.

Advanced design software programs like InDesign include the elements to avoid many of these errors but a designer must have the knowledge to turn on and use the necessary features.

Here are some errors and omissions that printers can teach designers to avoid.

Wrong PDF Format

A PDF for commercial printing is not the same as a PDF destined for the designer's desktop printer. Give designers a list of settings describing how you want them to create PDFs. Ask them to become familiar with the presets in their design program, so they choose the correct version every time.

Neglecting to Embed Fonts

If designers don't properly attach the fonts they are using in their designs, you will waste time at pre-press. This mistake will delay the project, forcing you contact designers and ask for the proper fonts, try to match the fonts, or buy the fonts. The results may differ from what the designer had in mind, and the project cost will increase.

Incorrect Image Resolution

High-quality commercial printing requires 300 dpi to create crisp, clear images, but designers are not always aware of this fact. Make sure they know to convert all images to 300 dpi before sending them to you.

Inform designers about your preferred image file formats. Ask them to make sure image links are sound and naming protocols for images are consistent so you can easily access the files.

Trim Size, Bleeds, and Gutters

Make sure designers are aware of the specifications for trimming and binding the finished product. Tell them about safe areas and offer examples of what happens when the print files don't follow the recommendations.

A perfect bound cover will need room for the spine. The size will change depending on the thickness of the document. Clearly communicate the spine size you calculate for them or show them how to calculate spine sizes themselves so the designers can format their files correctly for finishing.

Issues with Color

Designers can make lots of mistakes with color. Educate designers about the color profiles used in your facility and be sure they are familiar with how to adjust their colors accordingly. Explain the

difference between CMYK and PMS colors, including the impacts on project cost.

Profitably producing beautiful, printed images for your customers is your goal. Designers play a big part in the success of every project. To ensure the output is satisfactory and you can process the work accurately and efficiently, you may want to invest time developing resources, guidelines, FAQs, and tips you can supply to the designers who produce the files they will submit for printing.

Introduction – Production

Beyond the Press: Print Production Tips and Ideas

Print production can be a complicated affair. From pre-press operations to finishing and distribution, printers have lots of interconnected moving parts to manage. Sometimes, printers get so caught up in the business of getting the jobs out the door, they don't take the time to consider ideas that could transform their business.

This collection of articles covers a wide range of topics that may interest you and spark inspirations you can implement in your own business.

- Go beyond the flat: Immerse yourself in the world of embellishments, exploring how foil, embossing, and other elements can add depth and dimension to your print creations.
- Defy the stillness: Inject life into your print materials with the power of motion graphics, creating visuals and interactive elements that captivate audiences.
- Bridge the digital divide: Compare and contrast the nuances of print and digital presentations. Advise clients and make informed recommendations.
- Craft pixel-perfect PDFs: Demystify the art of creating print-friendly PDFs, ensuring your customers deliver files that enable smooth transitions from screen to press.
- Engage the senses: Craft print projects that are multi-sensory experiences, captivating audiences on a deeper level.
- Harness the power of data: Discover the world of data enhancement for printers, learning how to leverage information to personalize and target your print pieces.
- Personalize for profit: Explore the ever-expanding reach of print personalization, discovering how to tailor your offerings to individual customers and drive greater engagement.
- Print production is not just about technical precision; it's about unleashing the magic of communication through tangible, engaging experiences. As you browse these articles, you'll gain the knowledge and confidence to push the boundaries of print, transforming your projects from routine to extraordinary.

All About Print Embellishments

Originally published in August 2020

Any marketer or designer knows that success and customer engagement come from standing out and creating memorable experiences. Print is a proven method of creating strong connections, and one method of intensifying engagement with printed pieces even more is by adding embellishments.

Embellishments are finishing decorative applications added after the actual printing, in the post-press phase of production. Broadly, embellishments include multiple types of inks, from metallics to invisible formulations; specialty coatings; die cutting; embossing and debossing; and various foils.

It's difficult to overstate just how much embellishments elevate a printed product and make it pop. They add an undeniable visual punch — think about a lovely gold foil on a black box, for example. But they also add an extra dimension that takes a box or a book cover from the strictly visual to a fuller sensory experience. When you touch an embossed card, read a car brochure created with scented ink that smells like new leather, or feel the texture of those leather seats thanks to a UV coating, you're engaging with those pieces at a deeper neurological level.

Haptics is a science that deals with sensory experiences, particularly the sense of touch. Studies in the field have shown that when something feels as good as it looks, a larger portion of our brain is switched on and we become more likely to buy. Embellishments create greater ROI.



Available embellishments have proliferated over the last few years and many are now available as digital applications, which lowers cost and turnaround time and makes short runs more affordable. Die cutting, for example, can now be done digitally without the need to create dies. This development also means that many printers now offer these services in-house, for greater convenience and speedy execution.

With all that in mind, here's a look at what's available.

Coatings and Varnish

Coatings are traditionally applied to protect printed pieces. A magazine cover, or a brochure with a glossy coating not only makes the images pop but also serves as a barrier to protect against fingerprints, smudges, or scratches. Coatings also protect the piece as it proceeds through the mail stream. Most coatings these days are aqueous, or water-based, for maximum environmental friendliness. They come in gloss, satin or matte finishes or a newer option called soft lamination which makes a printed piece feel like velvet. Coatings can be applied to selected areas of a page — known as spot applications — or to the entire page, known as flood applications. A card or book cover with a gloss varnish on the company name or title creates a nice texture when juxtaposed against a matte background.

A recent innovation includes UV curable coating fluids, which dry instantly under UV lamps. Aside from the time savings, it has created eye-catching raised UV applications where fluids are applied in thicknesses that stand in high relief on a page. The technique creates uniquely touchable textures—the scales on a lizard for example, the grit of sandpaper, or raindrops on a window. The applications are limited only by the imagination.

Die Cutting

Die cutting refers to a technique in which certain pieces are cut out of a piece of paper or other light substrate. It can be a simple job, such as cutting out the shape of a box or a decorative star, but digital die cutting can produce intricate designs like a filigree pattern.

Traditionally, die cutting is achieved by creating die plates that are pressed into the substrate to cut out the design, or by creating dies in specific shapes to be cut.

In digital die cutting, a laser beam cuts out the desired shape working from a special layer added to the design file. The benefits of digital die cutting include the intricacy of the patterns that can be achieved, and eliminating the time and cost of producing dies and plates. Printers can produce shorter runs more economically.

Embossing and Debossing

Embossing creates a raised pattern in the substrate. It works much like die cutting, but the embossing tool presses a pattern or design onto a page, rather than cutting it out. Debossing depresses the image into a substrate, creating a concave impression.

Embossing and debossing create a great tactile experience. Most of us have seen invitations with embossing on them. Recent developments for embossing include digital presses that can handle embossing inline as part of the printing process, reducing time by not sending the work to a third- party supplier.



Foiling

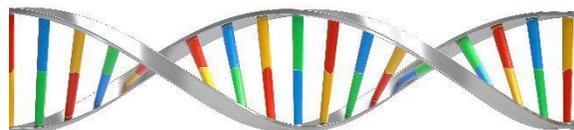
Foiling adds metallic finishes to a printed piece. It can add an element of luxury and a certain blingy quality that's sure to catch the eye. Many wine labels and packaging products, for example, use foiling techniques to add a touch of glamour and sophistication. Traditional foiling is done with hot or cold stamping. Hot stamping uses heat to apply the foil to selected areas, while cold stamping uses glue to apply the foil.

Foiling today, especially with digital presses, offers a dizzying array of metallic ink colors that create a glittery, foil-like finish and specialty elements such as holographs for decoration or security purposes. Some digital presses can deposit metallic toners as a fifth color, creating previously impossible treatments. Foil can even be applied in variable printing mode in which the treatment and the color change from page to page.

Specialty Inks

Inks have exploded past the basic CMYK or even the seemingly unlimited Pantone PMS formulations. Beyond new options such as scented inks, fluorescent shades, or metallic options, there exists a huge range of security inks that could easily have come from a James Bond movie. Options include biometric inks with DNA tags used to verify if products are real; thermochromic ink that appears or disappears at different temperatures; magnetic inks with tiny iron oxide magnetic flakes that allow a number to be machine read; and infrared inks that are not visible to the naked eye but can be seen under an infrared light.

Each of these embellishment techniques on its own is pretty cool. But when you combine them on a book cover, or high-end brochure, the results can be spectacular. Metallic ink with various textures from raised UV over soft lamination, for example, can really make a piece stand out.



And yet, as varied as embellishments are, they're still in the early stage of what's possible. Equipment and ink manufacturers are constantly developing new formulations, applications, and technologies that will increase the use and affordability of embellishments. It can only get more spectacular.

Beyond Static: How Motion Graphics Can Enhance Print Materials

Originally published in August 2020

It should come as no surprise that video content is king, providing endless entertainment and learning through lively visuals and animations. But what about print? Should you just concede the attractive and absorbing aspects of video and animation to the digital channels and concentrate on selling flat printed images?

Don't leave any opportunity behind!

Motion graphics aren't appropriate for every project, but helping your clients dive into the realm of motion can be a differentiating factor for your printing business that helps retain current customers and attracts new ones. Motion graphics can transform flat sheets into mesmerizing 3D objects, capturing the reader's attention and even bridging the gap between the tangible and digital worlds for an unforgettable interactive experience.



Transforming Print Media with Folds and Tabs

Show your clients how you can transform a simple piece of paper into an interactive experience using innovative folding techniques and die cutting technology. Suddenly, static graphics come alive and captivate your client's audience.

Incorporating panels and tabs into a folded sheet can unveil hidden messages or images beneath die-cut windows. Some examples might include before and after shots in a make-up ad or stunning house renovations. A spinning wheel in a folded postcard can be an interesting way to deliver information. This clever approach can make presenting marketing offers or explaining complex concepts entertaining and engaging.

Pop Off the Page

Recipients will remember the message when a flat sheet converts into a 3D object like a birthday cake or a bouquet of flowers. Thanks to die-cutting techniques, pop-ups make this magic happen, and the possibilities are endless.

But why stop there? With intricate folding and inserting tabs, you can create usable objects like pencil holders, boxes, houses, or paper airplanes. These eye-catching creations serve as long-lasting brand reminders, keeping your client's business top of mind.

Flip Books - Still a Thing

How about creating a booklet or a catalogue where the corner of each page is adorned with a one-of-a-kind image, illustrating a balloon's skyward journey in sequence. When flipped, the booklet

transforms into a delightful animation of the balloon soaring through the clouds. Or envision a seed catalogue that brings a tomato plant to life, from a tiny seedling to luscious, ripe fruit.

If your client has the budget, a flip book can even become an engaging standalone masterpiece, sure to get the customers' attention.

Add Motion with Lenticular Printing or Holographs

This cutting-edge technology uses thin lenses to create exciting effects, like transitioning between images or producing 3D visuals. You've probably seen such items made from plastic that make an image move by tilting the object back and forth. Now these lenses can be made thin enough to use in printing applications.



And let's not forget holographs—their specialized techniques and inks also bring images to life, adding that extra wow-factor to your prints. Both methods are surefire ways to elevate your print game with a sense of motion and depth.

Augmented Reality is Becoming Mainstream

People are being exposed to augmented reality (AR) through experiences like games and chat filters. Your client's audience may be just the right people to respond to AR enabled print applications like direct mail postcards. Any technique that lengthens a customer's exposure to your client's brand is a good thing and AR can definitely capture their attention.

When consumers point their phone or mobile device's camera at a printed image, vehicles, gadgets, or toys spring to life as captivating 3D models. This cutting-edge technology injects a dose of interactivity and takes presentations to a whole new level!

Easy Interactivity: QR Codes

QR codes effortlessly bridge the gap between the tangible and digital realms, thanks to their easy creation using free software and compatibility with mobile devices. Their popularity skyrocketed during the COVID pandemic, as restaurants cleverly replaced physical menus with online alternatives using these nifty codes. Most people now recognize QR codes and know what to do with them.

Incorporating QR codes into printed materials like business cards or direct mail adds a touch of modernity, making them an indispensable component of multi-channel campaigns. Scanning a QR code can whisk users away to enticing websites with special offers, vibrant social media platforms, or personalized experiences tailored just for them.

The Future of Interactive Print

Print has evolved, and it's still a crucial part of communication strategies. Embrace these new techniques, show them to your clients, and watch your printed products become more engaging and effective than ever.

Common Issues with Wide Format Printing

New Content

Wide format images are, by virtue of their sheer size, visually arresting. Of course, printing them involves a specific set of issues and challenges that differ greatly from offset printing. Elements like fonts, colors, perspective, and file creation are some considerations that are unique to wide-format printing.

Let's have a look at these elements, broadly broken down into two categories.

Design

The key consideration when designing large-format projects is perspective. Images that are significantly higher than eye level will look different from those closer to the ground. This viewpoint affects design in a critical way.



Designs that are too complex or have too much text will be difficult to read and absorb. If fonts are too thin and delicate, they won't be readable, and the distance may distort how they appear. Similarly, fonts that are too thick may overpower the design.

Graphics should be simple, yet compelling. Designers should limit the text so viewers can absorb the message in a few seconds.

Similarly, keep colors to a few and make them crisp, so they stand out. Avoid light colors on a white background, for example. Pantone colors might be best to achieve consistency and to match other graphics properly.

What looks good on a brochure or business card will work similarly well on a huge scale. Consider the context of where the customer will display the print item. How will it compete with other banners or graphics? How far away are most viewers likely to be? How long do viewers have to take it in? Factor



all these considerations to create a large-format printed piece that's effective.

File Preparation

The necessary resolution for a wide-format file is governed by the viewing distance. Resolution for wide format is somewhat counterintuitive since the farther the image, the lower the resolution needs to be. If a banner is being viewed from 10 ft., then resolution at full size should be 150 dpi. If viewed from more than 18 to 20 ft., then 75 dpi will do.

Offset printing requires 300 dpi for optimal printing, but the human eye can't discern fine details from a distance, so a lower resolution is acceptable.

Working to Scale

It's unwieldy to create a 10 ft. banner on a computer screen. A solution is to scale down the image to one quarter to one sixth of its size, while keeping resolution high for the best results. The printer needs to know

what scale was used so they can output at the correct size.

Substrates

Wide-format printing devices can output on a full range of substrates beyond paper. Again, consulting the printer about specific set ups for any chosen substrate is a good idea, especially as colors are converted from RGB to CMYK or Pantone colors.

Raster vs Vector Images

Vector images are more effective when outputting a wide-format file. They scale up easily to any size and do not pixelate. Change as many elements as possible, including fonts and logos, to vector graphics before outputting to a PDF. If a photograph is included in the poster or banner, it will have to be a raster image and must be large enough, huge really, to scale up to the desired size. It's best to consult a printer if they have preferences regarding which software, such as Adobe Illustrator or InDesign, is used to create the file.

Type Safety Area and Bleeds

To ensure type or graphics don't get cut off, they should be placed in the type safety area with about 2% clearance on all sides. If a banner is 100 inches, the clear border should be about 2 inches. When grommets are used, more space may be required. If the poster, sign, or banner needs bleeds, those should be at least 2 inches on all sides.

Wide format is unique and requires adjustments to traditional design and printing conventions, but the result, in terms of new revenue streams, producing eye popping creations, and meeting healthy demand, is well worth the effort.

Considering the Differences Between Print and Digital Presentation

Originally published in December 2021

Designing for print and designing for digital presentation can be quite different. Some aspects are common to both, such as visual appeal, a pleasing use of color, and effective space utilization. Other practices, techniques, and executions will differ.

Layout, Presentation, Typography, and User Experience

Both digital and print design make use of similar elements such as type, images, shapes, and colors. How those elements are presented, however, are quite different. Designers of websites, emails, and landing pages enjoy the luxury of unlimited space. They do not have to fit their scrollable digital content into a limited area. Designers can layer content in structures like carousels, drop-down menus, and links. Even screen size is not a limiting factor. Responsive designs will re-arrange content according to the dimensions of a viewer's screen.

Print requires more creativity, forcing designers to work within the physical limits of the paper size. The elements on a printed page, apart from techniques such as augmented reality, are static.

Print may seem to be restrictive, but the opposite is true. Printed materials engage more of the senses, offering textures, scents, cutouts, and creative folds.



Digital is Unpredictable

Web designers can't control how readers see the fonts because of customizations and preferences on viewing devices. If a font chosen by the designer is not present on the viewer's device, it will use a substitute font. The results are unpredictable. With print, readers always see fonts as the designer intended.

The technical aspects of how a website works, with links, navigation, pop-ups, scrolling, etc. are an integral part of the design. Though designers are encouraged to enlist the help of printers early in the project, print requires less time spent on interactivity and user experience.

Users have more control over their experience with digital content. They can view in portrait or landscape, zoom in or out, choose to click on links or not, block images, etc. In contrast, user experience with printed materials is almost entirely under the designer's control, making it easier to predict how users will absorb the information.

Print is permanent—once printed, we cannot change a document unless it's re-printed, so it's designed to be useful as-is for its intended lifespan. Digital experiences can be fluid and subject to rapid change. This can be helpful, allowing the content to evolve according to seasons, current events, or other factors. It can also be a drawback, as users cannot return to the original presentation to reference older information such as offers, examples, or terms and conditions.



Whether printed or digital, materials should engage the audience and encourage them to act. The action may be overt, such as buying a product or it could be more subtle, such as changing one's views on a political issue or candidate. Digital and print design simply use different processes to achieve these goals.

Creating Print-Friendly PDFs

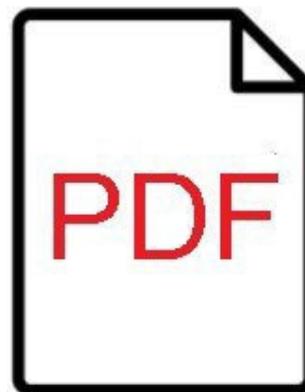
Originally published in November 2020

Portable Document Format files (PDFs) are an efficient way of digitally sharing and outputting files across multiple platforms, including printing, losing no essential information in the transmission. Adobe introduced the file format almost 30 years ago.

Because PDF is now really an industry standard, a set of regulations was established and continues to be developed by the PDF Standards Committee. Specialized versions of PDFs have been created for specific purposes. PDF/a is for electronic document archives, and PDF/UA was formed for accessibility purposes. PDF/X drives general commercial printing, and variable and transactional documents use PDF/VT.

PDF/X ensures materials print exactly as designers create them, including images, colors, fonts, logos, and layout. Designers can include only static elements in these documents, meaning each impression in a print run must be similar.

High volume personalized documents like bills and statements use the PDF/VT standard, which makes it possible to print documents efficiently, where text and images change from page to page. Static elements such as lines, logos, and boxes are rasterized (RIP'd) once and stored, allowing the jobs to run much faster since the RIP must process only the page-specific variables.



PDF is not foolproof, however. Pre-press specialists often encounter issues with files they receive from customers and designers.

Listed below are some of the most common complications challenging printers attempting to process PDF files. Printers should encourage designers to contact them early, especially with variable print jobs, so experts can aid with specific requirements necessary to output the designs.

Fonts

Fonts are one of the biggest PDF frustrations. Designers sometimes choose unusual fonts for their creations and then fail to supply the fonts to the printer. All fonts used in the project must be embedded in the PDF. The font embedding process may differ among design software. Designers can use Adobe Acrobat to view the PDF specifications of their files, ensuring they have embedded all the fonts before sending them to the printer.

In rare cases, designers may create a font outline. This turns a font into a vector image. The disadvantage to this approach is the text cannot be edited.

Image Resolutions and Clarity

A sharp printed image must be at least 300 dots per inch. This resolution applies to photos, logos, and graphics. But extra high resolution can also be a problem. For most applications, markedly high resolution graphics do not improve the print quality; but they do slow down the RIPing process.

Another issue associated with photos and graphics is cropping. Instead of hiding excess areas of a graphic with a clipping path, designers should remove the unnecessary sections and re-size the image. The RIP still processes extra, unprinted portions of graphics, extending the time necessary to run the job.



Color

Designers work on monitors that display colors made of red, blue, and green pixels (RGB). They may forget that print devices use cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK). Before creating a PDF, designers must convert their project's colors to CMYK, which can sometimes change the colors slightly. Printers must inform the customers if an exact color match will require special inks and increased costs.

PDFs offer designers flexibility while still providing a good portion of the standardization printers need to produce high quality output consistent with the design, across multiple platforms. The graphics industry enjoys the ease and consistency PDFs bring to managing digital output. But nearly three decades after their introduction, constructing a proper PDF still requires some vigilance.

Data Enhancement for Printers

Originally published in January 2024

Data enhancement and enrichment is the practice of adding details to data records, enabling marketers to fine-tune outbound marketing campaigns. Options include adding geocode coordinates for mapping, estimated income, gender, age, or home ownership to prospect records. Other enrichment opportunities include appending email addresses or phone numbers and filtering lists to remove unresponsive records. Identifying and eliminating duplicate contact records further improves data.

Transcend the Obvious

"Everyone understands that printers print and mailers mail. Show me something new and different that improves my response rate and makes me want to do business with you."

The marketplace knows what printers and mailers do. Yet most service providers' websites feature a long, lackluster list that includes business cards, envelopes, brochures, forms, binding, folding, and a hundred other products or services every printer offers. Use website real estate and the short attention span of most visitors to focus on customer acquisition. How can you escalate the success rate for your customer's printed materials en route to their prospect's mailbox?



There are only so many things a printer can do to a piece of paper to make a profit. You already do them. The next move is monetizing data to add revenue to each job. Data enhancement options are many, and your clients need some or all of what this tactic can offer.

Targeting Your Customer's Customer

Combining creative copy and graphics with a relevant offer improves the odds of a positive response. But even the most engaging mail piece will only generate the desired response if sent to the right audience. The better the targeting, the better the response. The following summarizes data appending options and techniques print/mail services can offer to add value and revenue.

Address Standardization, Cleansing, and Updating. You already offer NCOA move updating and standardization with a CASS-certified application as a precursor to presort postage rates. Please do not discount the value of these programs because they are familiar. Everything discussed here pivots on clean, current, and correct mailing addresses.

Proprietary Change of Address (PCOA). PCOA takes records not processed by the USPS National Change of Address service and applies a 2nd pass process, using referential data to find moves beyond those identified by NCOA. Every data enrichment service's PCOA is different (hence, proprietary), so test a few to see which one you like best.

Geocoding. ZIP Codes are weird things. They vaguely follow population patterns but were established in 1962 and have mostly stayed the same. If the client sells a regionally sensitive product, geocodes are a more effective way to target who gets mail and who does not. It enables targeting income

clusters, residence types, and age groups. Geocoded addresses imported into mapping applications identify customer density.

Suppression. Your clients have records to whom they should not mail. The chance of response is zero, or there could be compliance and ethical considerations. Filtering lists to remove the deceased, the incarcerated, or residents of nursing homes is not only a matter of data accuracy, but also of ethical concerns. Households receiving mail for a deceased family member is painful and may result in reputational challenges.

Duplicate Address Detection. What defines a duplicate record is a decision for the client. They also decide the disposition of that record. Process the list and create a report of suspected duplicates. Provide (sell) the information to the client and let them decide. Your mailing software may have a duplicate checker built in, but you need something more. Use an application that creates match codes, scores the amount of duplicated data, and looks at the whole record, not just the address or name. Independently entered data may not be identical, so relying on only exact matches will miss some duplicates.

Duplicate address removal saves postage, printing, and potential embarrassment. It supports a green initiative by eliminating redundant copies. This is a quandary for printers. Eliminating addresses means fewer printed pieces; however, the customer relationship benefits outweigh the revenue on a few additional copies purged by a de-duping exercise.

Non-profit organizations are especially susceptible to the negative ramifications of duplicate mail. Three matching mail pieces arriving on the same day, at the same address, asking for a donation conveys a culture of mismanagement and waste.

Append Data, Add Marketing Channels, Make Money

Added email addresses and phone numbers enable businesses to diversify and expand marketing programs. Printers can manage projects that include email campaigns, text messages, phone calls, and postal mailings. Aggregate as much relevant data as possible for each contact to give yourself numerous campaign integration options.



The ability to enrich data and target prospects with precision is a great way to add value to the services you already provide. By explaining the options to their clients, print service providers can improve customer relationships and generate new revenue streams.

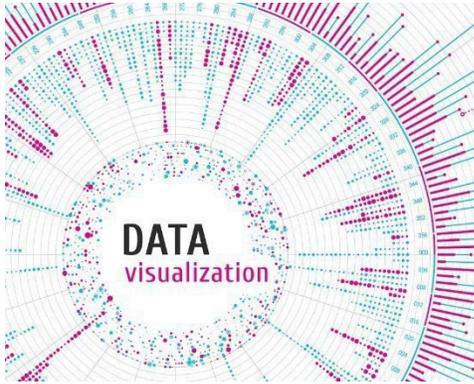
Here are some specific ways print service providers can use data enhancement to improve customer acquisition:

- Create targeted mailing lists. By segmenting their customer lists based on demographics, interests, and other factors, print service providers can create targeted mailing lists that are more likely to generate a response. Many printers enjoy higher profit margins for variable data printing.
- Personalize marketing materials. Data enhancement can be used to personalize marketing materials, such as brochures, postcards, and emails. This can make the materials more relevant to the recipient and increase the chances of a conversion. Customers who run campaigns with favorable ROI figures will ask you to repeat them.
- Develop multi-channel marketing campaigns. Print service providers can use data enhancement to develop targeted marketing campaigns across multiple channels, such as email, direct mail, and social media. This can help their customers reach their target audience more effectively and efficiently.
- Improve campaign ROI. By dropping unlikely buyers from the mailing list, print service providers reduce waste and increase the return.

Don't overlook data enhancement as a way to distinguish your print service business from the competition and build a loyal customer base.

Data Visualization: Making an Impact with Data You Can Print

Originally published in May 2021



Data, as they say, is king. But data, in its raw form with lines of numbers, can be challenging for readers to absorb and process, especially if you want them to discern key themes or trends.

The human mind processes information in various ways. Writers and communicators can produce reams of copy but, depending on what is being communicated, this approach is not a welcoming or interesting presentation. By itself, copy and numbers are not visually appealing, they don't draw us in or encourage retention. Most of us, however, are

receptive to visual information, that's just how our minds work best. That is particularly true when dealing with data.

The best way to drive home a point that includes data is with data visualization.

What is Data Visualization?

Quite simply, data visualization is a means of imparting information and bringing data to life through visual treatments. Visual information is more easily absorbed and understood more quickly. It entices readers with entry points into a story or a report, injects color into presentations and other works, and provides visual texture to any narrative form. Its goal is to communicate information clearly and effectively.

What Are the Types of Data Visualization?

We can make data visual and dynamic in several ways. Here are some options.

Infographics include imagery, charts, and minimal text that provide information in a graphical, visual manner. Infographics can explain data, but done properly, they can also illustrate concepts, themes, or overarching messages.

Charts come in a few common forms: bar, line, pie, etc. These are graphical representations of data. There are subtle differences between them, however. A bar chart shines if you're trying to show similar information over several years, such as annual corporate revenues, for example. Line graphs can handle more inputs, if, say, you want to compare revenue growth for three companies over a selected time frame. A pie chart is more ideal for illustrating parts of a whole, such as showing how revenues from a single year break down by company division.

Diagrams can be a broad area that encompasses many approaches. It includes flowcharts to show progressions or steps in processes, tree diagrams for family or corporate histories, or wireframes to illustrate information structures.

Maps can illustrate population density with varying shades of color to show population numbers or other statistics in different regions. They are useful for more than pinpointing geographic locations.

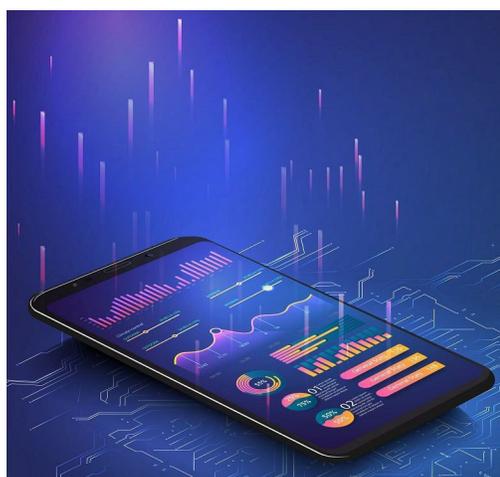
Best Uses of Data Visualization

More than anything, data visualization makes absorbing information easier and more effective. Our brains absorb and retain information when it features color, texture, images, and interesting font treatments. Visual treatments simply supply more ways to engage our neuropathways.

Data visualizations make great entry points into reports and stories. An entry point is a visual treatment that draws readers into a story. Five pages of black type are hardly appealing, but five pages with diagrams or charts that illustrate the highlights of the article will pique reader interest more effectively.

Trends and themes become much easier to comprehend when you present data visually. Contrast a long line of numbers to analyze the rising cost of real estate, for example, with a colorful chart that makes the trend jump off a page or instantly identifies which neighborhood is priciest.

A good infographic can bring clarity to an issue. Say you're discussing spending trends for the coming year. You can list items, but the story will pack a bigger punch if you use icons or other imagery to illustrate the data for each trend and leverage fonts and color to provide hierarchy for the information.



Visual treatments are effective strategies for zeroing in on a key takeaway from a report, a story, or a blog, especially if you have crucial data to communicate. Say you're comparing the performance of various software systems as determined by a reader poll. Instead of paragraphs, a colorful chart could instantly highlight the best feature of each system under discussion.

Designers can make abstractions more accessible. They can make a complex scientific process much clearer to readers by adding illustrations. The same approach can be used if a complex issue can be broken into segments and presented in small, digestible pieces of information.

Visuals are more evocative than raw copy or numbers if you're communicating to elicit an emotional response to a sensitive issue. Designers can depict the devastation of rain forests, for example, with effective colors, fonts, and key data points that will generate the response you're after much more effectively.

Best Practices for Data Visualization

Bringing data to life relies on creative thinking about effective communications as much as it does about graphic skills. Here are some thoughts to keep in mind.

- Great data visualizations starts with refining your thinking. When presented with data or concepts, always ask yourself, "How can I show this visually?"

Using Fonts with Variable Data

Originally published in June 2021

Fonts have personalities and convey different moods. A typeface or font matched to the personality or attributes of a specific individual or group can be the element that makes designs resonate with the viewer. Today's variable printing technology makes it possible to match typography to audiences, but font usage in variable documents can be tricky. Fonts will display differently, depending on their attributes.

Font Considerations for Variable Documents

When designers create a variable project, they leave spaces in the documents into which the software will place the variable text. Since data files are not always available at design time, designers may guess at how much space to reserve for the variable data. Choosing too large a font for the data will cause unwanted line wraps or printing over static graphics or text. A too-small font results in odd-looking unused document spaces.

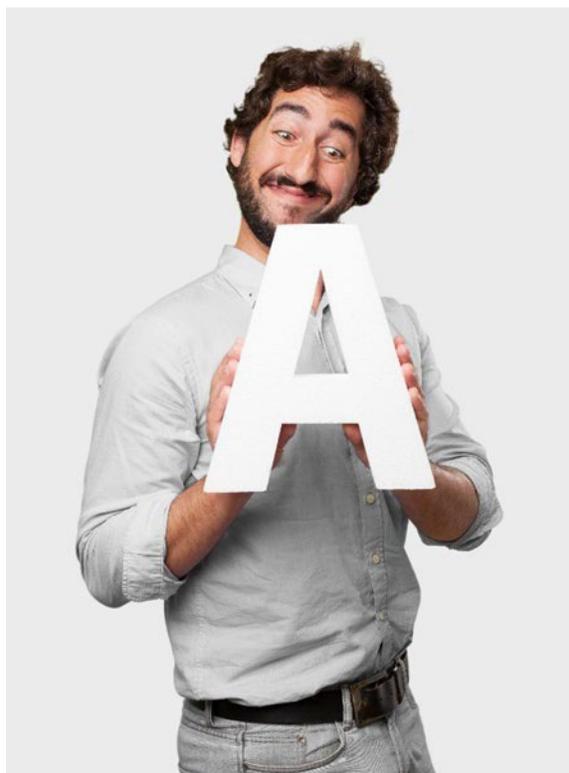
For mailed communications, printers must take care to use font sizes and styles that conform to US Postal Service standards for automated mail. Address block elements must fit inside the space for the label or envelope window.

When the same document template is used to display variable data rendered in different fonts, some compromises may be necessary. Even if the chosen fonts share the same point size, they will probably include variations in widths, weights, kerning, line spacing, and other attributes that affect how the variable elements fill the space reserved for them.

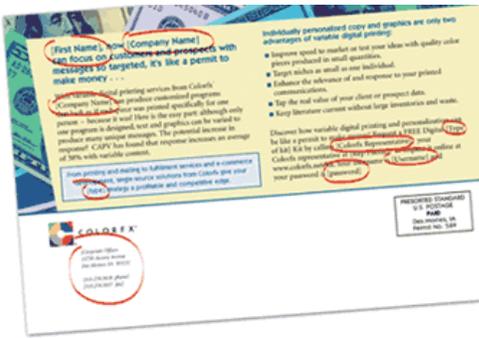
Consider a line of text with 30 characters that features an abundance of wide characters like W's, em-dashes, or capital letters. It's going to consume more space than a 30-character line populated by lots of narrow characters like lowercase i's and l's.

Data analysis prior to production will help to at least determine the longest and shortest number of characters to insert. Printers may suggest design adjustments or a change in font selection based on their data file assessments, but adjusting for all combinations of lengths and characters is probably impossible.

Variable size images will make predicting space for the variable text that surrounds them even more difficult. Designers should be encouraged to include consistently sized and shaped variable images and photos.



Why Bother?



If working with multiple fonts for variable text is more work, why would you want to run projects that use this technique? Well, it depends on the planned use of the printed pieces and the variability of the intended audience.

- If the data file includes senior citizens, it may improve readability to use larger, bolder type for them, but regular size fonts for everyone else.
- Referencing foreign names or locations for some individuals? You may need a font with specific characters not included in the reduced character set of some fonts.
- Printed pieces targeted to teenage girls may use one font to attract their attention, while fonts appealing to teenage boys are different. By varying the font dynamically according to the sex of the document recipient, printers can run the entire file as a single job.
- Specialty fonts may allow organizations to use the same document template to communicate messages in different seasons. Halloween-themed documents may look different from those produced during the Christmas holiday, for example, just by altering the font.
- Brands are sometimes identifiable by fonts. Postcards aimed at the alumni of different colleges, for example, may benefit from brand recognition by printing the messages in each institution's preferred typeface.

Besides improving connections with readers, dynamic fonts for variable data can turn a job that would have required separate set-ups, tracking, and management into a single large job. This tactic improves productivity and efficiency while lowering production costs for print providers.

Typefaces are more complex than one might expect, especially when connected to variable data printing. Practice and planning will help you gain command over the intricacies of typeface usage and help you turn out more effective documents.

Guide to Digital Printing and Variable Data

Originally published in January 2023

Most of us are bombarded daily with thousands of marketing messages. Our phones, computers, televisions, social media channels, radios, and emails continuously clamor for our attention with promotional hits.

A marketer trying to cut through the noise faces almost impossible odds. The good news is that one of the most effective tools for bolstering engagement and response is individualized marketing through variable data printing. The most effective marketing is for an audience of one and leading-edge marketers increasingly use variable data printing (VDP) to ensure their client's messages are heard.



For printers, this represents a big and profitable opportunity. Our eBook from Gimbel and Associates, "A Printer's Perspective & Guide to Digital Printing and Variable Data," is a thorough and in-depth source for helping printers transition to this business model. You can download it for free.

What is Individualized Marketing?

Each piece in an individualized print program is different and geared to the unique needs and preferences of the target client. By varying text, photos, design, offers, and colors, individualized marketing is almost as good as an in-person sales call.

For printers, the advantages of offering individualized marketing are compelling. In a word, it creates profitable revenue streams that are simply not available in the offset market. Variable communication produces response rates up to 600% higher than traditional printing, lowers cost per acquisition, and generates much higher ROI. When you offer this service, you can charge a higher price per piece and enjoy higher margins.

VDP is also an opportunity for printers to position themselves as solution providers rather than simple output facilities. Services that go hand in hand with variable printing include web hosting, database management, fulfillment, electronic communications, and multi-channel marketing execution. This strategy is ready-made to boost revenue. It also helps to secure more business from existing clients and frees up the time and expense of pursuing new business.

How to Transition to this Business Model

Individualized marketing is more complex than an offset workflow and it's best to consider all the elements working back from the finished product.

A mailing house that knows how to handle variable print jobs, can maintain integrity of every piece, and can track each piece is crucial to the success of any campaign.

Equipment requires critical assessment. Choosing the most advanced print engine is probably the best choice, but many options exist: continuous feed or sheet to sheet, inkjet or toner, four or six colors? Equally important is finding the finishing options capable of keeping up with the presses without

Production

creating bottlenecks. At the front end, a raster image processor (RIP) must process information fast enough to keep the print engine running at its rated speed.

The same applies to software. Systems must process the database and the variable images, but it may be necessary to tie them into CRM or MIS programs for efficient management.

Other considerations include setting up a PDF workflow that integrates several process steps, including preflight, imposition, and picture replacement. Ensure the shop is JDF compliant so all equipment functions seamlessly together.

Consult with experts who can help cut through the clutter and identify equipment and software that performs best for the work being produced.

Lastly, printers that set themselves up as solution providers may need to bring in partners with expertise in direct marketing, creative design, campaign management, and other skills. They can share in this revenue as well.

Adopting to a new business model is not always easy, but with the right experts in your corner, the process becomes much more manageable and effective. Our book is a great place to begin your journey to individualized marketing.--+



The eBook discusses the advantages of digital printing — in particular, how this technology allows printers to produce data-driven, personalized materials that greatly improve the performance of marketing communications. The book includes an overview of variable data printing, a glossary of terms, and a special “Printers Perspective” section that addresses the questions on the minds of print industry executives. This 50-

plus page resource is available to print professionals at no charge.

High-Tech Direct Mail

Originally published in August 2023

Everyone in the printing business knows how direct mail has resurged as an important marketing channel. However, it's not appearing as it did in your grandfather's mailbox! There's no "spray and pray" anymore.

"In 2022, we saw marketers starting to shift their digital marketing budgets to direct mail solutions," Meg Ugenti reported last month in Forbes. "This trend will hold steady as the digital marketing landscape continues to be more crowded and less predictable than traditional offline marketing channels."



In a recent article from Practical Ecommerce, Eric Bandholz explained how Apple's iOS 14 privacy change has upended advertising on Facebook. "Merchants accustomed to stellar ROI must now accept modest or less-than-modest performance, he reported, citing the intriguing case of Pig of the Month. The Ohio-based direct-to-consumer seller of barbeque quotes company founder Lea Richards: "With post-iOS 14 ads not working, we're getting back into direct mail. We've found good results, up to six-times return."

Today's direct-marketing mail is personalized, targeted, segmented and loaded with opportunities for interactivity and tracking. Advanced software automation helps printed mail find its new role among integrated marketing strategies. The first step in the second half of 2023 is to use data to drive "super" personalization.

Getting Personal

"Getting personal" with customers, real personal, requires data. Research proves that companies can generate faster rates of revenue growth when they excel at demonstrating customer intimacy. The closer organizations get to each consumer, the bigger the gains, reports management consultancy McKinsey & Co.:

- Personalization matters today, perhaps more than ever! The COVID-19 virus and the surge in digital behaviors raised the bar. Note: Three of every four consumers switched to a new store, product or buying method during the pandemic.
- Over 70% of consumers expect companies to deliver personalized interactions—and 76% get frustrated when this does not happen.
- Personalization drives performance and better customer outcomes. Companies that grow faster drive 40% more of their revenue from personalization than their slower-growing peer counterparts.

Today's software automation allows print service providers (PSPs) to leverage the power of personalization in creative ways. But doing so at scale and on demand requires additional, robust support from solutions that integrate to bring personalization to retail marketing. Increasingly, marketers in the retail space are tapping into shopper data to bridge the gap between online and in-store shopping experiences. Seamless interactions, personalized experiences, localization down to an individual store-based level; all this detail is produced faster than ever.



Available software tools can automate multichannel production for communications printed at point-of-sale (POS) as well as for online digital ads. Ultimately, these marketers can enable the selling of complex, printed output and automate backend print/fulfillment processes.

Targeted and Segmented, Too

“The beauty of any direct marketing campaign is the ability to personalize your marketing message and content directly to your audience,” continued Ms. Ugenti, who is corporate marketing director at Focus USA. “Some of the most successful direct mail campaigns I have been a part of took great care to ensure that the imagery and messaging were extremely relevant to the individuals or households that we were reaching.”

“If you are a national brand and have chosen to use background scenery in your images, invest in dynamic images that will update to recognizable landmarks in the areas that you are mailing into,” Ugenti explained. “If you are using images of people, make sure that those images are as diverse as your target audience.”

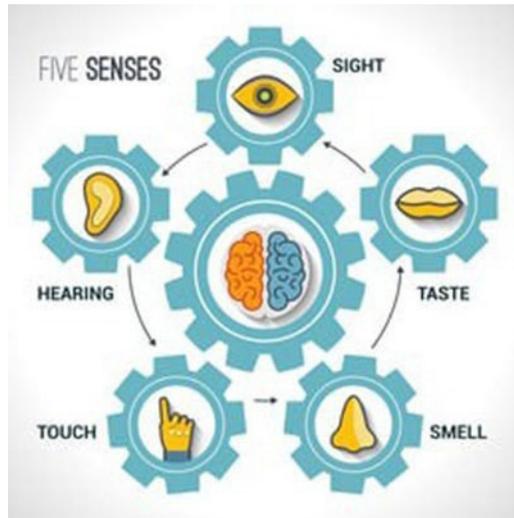
Variable-data print (VDP) elements are enhanced (think **XMPie**) by solutions that leverage the power of Adobe’s Creative Cloud, allowing marketers to add personalization via InDesign plug-ins. **InDesign’s uCreate Print** extension can also seamlessly connect and work directly with documents to produce high-speed, high-volume output.

For multimedia integration, some software can add personalization for more channels. Seamless integration ensures that customer dialogs are in sync at all times and across all touchpoints. Marketers can personalize images for print, email, and web purposes. Designers working in Photoshop or Illustrator can produce powerful, visually rich, personalized templates and embed them easily into print and/or digital documents.

“Personalization is not only a crucial capability, it’s one that punches above its weight—no matter whether the company is a digital native, a brick-and-mortar player, or a behind-the-scenes producer or supplier,” conclude McKinsey’s researchers. “Consumers don’t just want personalization; they demand it. With store and product loyalty more elusive, getting it right matters.”

Print: A Multi-Sensory Experience

Originally published in October 2021



Unlike one-dimensional digital ads, printed marketing materials connect with more of our senses. You can see vividly printed pieces, but you can also touch, feel, and even smell them.

A printed piece appeals to us visually and makes us want to touch it. We become engaged at a deeper neurological level. This heightened response makes us more receptive to messages conveyed through print. Printers can intensify this haptic response with embellishments that add tactile appeal. Printers have historically performed embossing, debossing, foiling, die cutting, spot varnishing, and raised UV in post-press production, often outsourcing the work. Today, printers can

embellish documents in-house. Some techniques can even be performed inline on an offset or digital press.

Die cuts, varnishes or foils help people remember and recognize your customers' brands. Embellishments heighten perceptions of value, status, and prestige. Tactile experiences increase retention and can improve response rates. Embellishments can also have measurable profit-driving results, generating a higher ROI on your customer's marketing investments.

Embossing and Debossing

Embossing creates a raised pattern in the substrate with an embossing tool that presses a pattern or design into a page. Debossing depresses the image into a substrate, creating a concave impression. Some digital presses can now create this effect inline as part of the printing process, reducing time and costs.

Foiling

Foiling adds glossy or matte metallic finishes to a printed piece. Foil communicates higher value for the product, service, or company associated with the printed material. Hot foiling uses a metal die made in the pattern of the image to be foiled. A machine presses the foil against the substrate under intense pressure and high heat. The excess foil is then stripped away. Another foiling method, cold stamping, uses glue to adhere the foil to the desired areas.

Digital presses can replicate foiling with metallic ink, often as a fifth color. This gives printers an opportunity to apply a metallic look to variable data — something impossible to do with traditional hot or cold foiling methods.



Die Cutting

Die cutting is another embellishment technique improved with technology. In fact, die cuts no longer require a die! Digital die cutters use lasers to cut intricate patterns into substrates. Printers can economically add this haptic element to printed pieces, even on short-run jobs.



Coatings and Varnishes

Coatings can be applied to selected areas of a page. Printers can highlight a company logo, for instance, on a folder or report cover. The coating makes the logo reflect more light. Coated images stand out against a matte background.

UV curable coating fluids dry instantly under UV lamps, allowing printers to apply fluids in thicknesses that make the coated portions rise above the surrounding area. With this technique, printers can make memorable pieces for their customers, creating touchable effects such as fish scales, sand, or water drops. Printers can create more tactile effects with coating techniques such as glitter, metallic sheen, or pearlescent coating.

Brands want their materials to stand out, get attention, and be recognized. Printers that can help them achieve those goals by exploiting the influence of touchable print. Special attention and creativity that gets results will forge strong relationships with your customers.

Print Projects and Accessibility

Originally published in August 2021

Printers often focus on how a project looks. Are the colors right? Is the registration exact? Any smears or smudges? Are the graphics and text sharp and clear? These are all important, of course, but we usually base the analysis on what we can see, hold, and touch. How often do you consider the suitability of a printed piece for someone with a disability? Nearly a quarter of the global population is disabled, and regulations like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) make looking at a piece from an accessibility aspect important.



When you think of disabilities, you might be considering only impairments we can see. These are obvious to us. Not so noticeable are difficulties with thinking, memory, learning, or communicating. Designers and printers must also consider them as conditions that affect an individual's ability to read and understand a printed piece. Accessible design doesn't have to limit creativity. It's all about making adjustments so the printed or electronic piece can connect with the entire audience.

Web pages are an area where design decisions can make it difficult for a disabled person. Pay attention to how you lay out the screen. It makes a difference for aids such as screen readers. Navigational tools should be easy to use and keyboard functions should be available, when possible, not just mouse clicks.

People with seizure disorders are sensitive to blinking and flashing elements. Designs that feature elements with over three flashes per second might trigger a seizure. Parallax scrolling gives the viewer the illusion of depth by causing background images to move at different speeds than the foreground, but can be troublesome for viewers with motion disorders.



Color

A common accessibility mistake is to make color the only way to convey information. This presents problems for color-blind people who cannot distinguish between different shades. Soft yellow text on a muted orange background, for example, is a poor practice. If using color to highlight headings, for example, try adding a design element such as bolding, in case the reader can't see the color difference. Underlining hyperlinks in the text will

help them be recognized as links and not missed by those challenged by the color scheme. Substituting color for words helps declutter forms and documents, as you can eliminate some instructional text, but make sure the meaning of text is clear, even without the highlight color.

Contrast

Dark text on a white background is best for readability, but not as interesting as other color combinations. Just make sure the background and the text have enough contrast to be clearly seen, especially with small print. Contrast in images is also important. Simple illustrations with thick dark lines and shapes are the easiest to interpret. Avoid super-intricate illustrations with thin, fine lines and lots of colors.

Text

When designing for accessibility, keep font treatments simple. Stick with common font families such as Helvetica, Arial, or Gill Sans. Avoid condensed or italic fonts and use decorative or cursive faces sparingly. Do not place text on top of images. Upper and lower case is usually easier to read than all caps. Be careful with kerning. Letters that touch one another are difficult to distinguish. You wouldn't think of it, but alignment makes a difference. The beginning of a line is more difficult to find with right aligned or centered text. Left alignment is best.

Organization and Hierarchy

Clearly organized information is critical for readers with visual or cognitive challenges. Print the most important information in the largest font. Print additional headers in decreasing font sizes. Hierarchy also helps screen readers translate web pages for the visually impaired.



Print

Paper choice is important. High gloss paper can be difficult to read in certain light, so avoid it when possible.

Printed materials can be more accessible when they include QR codes that link to a video or an audio recording.

Accessible design requires thought, and may suppress over-the-top designs, but the end goal is to make things easier for all readers. Printers and designers who can review pre-production designs with disabilities in mind will be less likely to produce materials that don't meet societal standards.

The Expanding Reach of Print Personalization

New Content

If one clear trend is dominating marketing, it's personalization. In fact, personalization is now considered essential for any brand that wants to stand out with consumers and successfully nurture customer relationships. A 2022 study by Salesforce found that 73% of shoppers expect brands to understand their unique needs and expectations.¹

The best way to demonstrate this understanding of individuality among consumers is by creating marketing messages that apply to the recipient and are engaging in their presentation.

Personalized print took a big stride forward with the advent of variable data printing capabilities. At one time, simply adding the customer's name to printed materials was impressive. Today, marketers are using much more sophisticated approaches than simple text substitution.

With the growing use of CRM systems, marketers have accumulated mounds of data they can use to segment and individualize direct mail pieces. Coupled with the power of ever more powerful VDP capabilities in software and hardware, you can customize nearly every element on a printed piece to achieve optimum results.

A simple starting point is the building block of a printed piece. All text, fonts and typefaces, images, colors, and even substrates can be substituted. How a marketer deploys these elements can create marketing magic.

Let's first consider some personalization strategies:

Product Recommendations: Suggest products based on recent purchases, identify additional products customers may be interested in buying, or offer deals on items they browsed online but didn't purchase.

Rewards/Loyalty: Offer personalized rewards to customers based on purchase history, longevity, referrals, or website searches. Refine these offers further with data about age, gender, professional affiliation, occupation, location, or any other important segmentation.

Location: Direct customers to the location nearest to them and include a local map. Vary offers according to travel distances to the store or branch.

Timing: Align offers with special life events, such as weddings, retirements, or birthdays. Other important dates might include warranty end dates, product maintenance schedules, seasons, or local events.



Now let's consider some techniques to take full advantage of personalization:

Digital Links: Add digital links connecting a mail piece to your social media platforms and your website. Even better, add a QR code to each mailing that links a recipient to a personal URL or landing page. The pandemic showed anyone who ate in a restaurant how easy it is to use these codes and we're used to them. Take advantage of this easy way to connect physical mail to digital content.

Rather than just adding an individual name, modify the copy that links to the promotion according to information you know about the customer. Consider: "Mary, we have the blue pants on special for you" or "Consider these shoes to complete your semi-formal ensemble."

Colors, Fonts, and Images: Customize your colors to speak to the individuals or group you're targeting. Similarly, choose fonts and images that reflect the interests or attributes of your recipients. If you call attention to an earlier purchase, create a field and insert an image of the previously purchased item.

Substrates, Inks, and Finishes: One of the unbeatable characteristics of print is how its tangible nature can convey your brand's attributes or the ideas you want to communicate. If you're targeting customers of high-end cars or other luxury items, you can use specific substrates that convey luxury, such as a premium-weight coated stock with a satin silky coating. If you're after edgy urban hipsters, an uncoated stock will probably grab their attention.

And don't forget about finishes such as UV coatings, raised UV applications, foils, embossing, and debossing. Targeted to the right group or individual, these embellishments raise the bar for standing out and engaging the senses. When you do that, your pieces become much more memorable.

Inks, like fluorescents and scented options, also add a punch.

When you go beyond simply changing the salutation, your personalized pieces work at a deeper level. Recipients may not take the time to consider why you chose a specific graphic, but that choice communicates that you understand them. Your choice of text telegraphs that you get their needs and are not wasting their time with unwanted pitches. Effective personalization need not be explicit. If a consumer feels your marketing piece conveys the right message at the right time, they are more likely to convert.

¹ Excerpt from May 2022 Salesforce Report "Fifth Edition State of the Connected Customer" via Insider Intelligence.

About Roger P. Gimbel

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Roger P. Gimbel, Electronic Document Professional (EDP), is President of Gimbel & Associates, a global consulting firm providing business development services and sales and marketing strategies to print providers and organizations. Roger founded the firm in 2003, overseeing a team of consultants with expertise in developing and facilitating sales training and sales process management, workflow analysis, marketing strategies, multi-channel campaigns, transpromotional applications, MicroModeling™ data services and distributed print strategies.

Roger is a recognized authority in the digital printing industry, with over 40 years' experience as an accomplished printer and worldwide speaker at industry events. Roger has been a keynote speaker in the U.S., Latin America, Europe, Africa, India, China, and the Middle East, presenting strategies for sales and marketing in the digital print industry.

Prior to consulting, Roger was Director of Worldwide Operations for Global Document Solutions, overseeing operations of several facilities and global sales. Previously, he was President of Xerographic Reproduction Center, (XRC Inc.), a worldwide leader in digital print on demand.

For a summary of Roger's contributions as a second generation member of the Gimbel printing family, see "Gimbels in Print", available for download in the Library page at www.rogergimbel.com.

Roger is a founding member of the International Printer's Network (IPN), serving as its chairman for 10 years. He currently serves as the Director of Sponsorship. The IPN is the world's foremost alliance of leading-edge companies in the printing, visual communications, and graphic communications industry serving global companies.

Roger sustains his credentials as an EDP (Electronic Document Professional), which he earned from XPLOR International (The Electronic Document Systems Association) in 2001. Roger was recognized for 10 years of service to the electronic document industry at the XPLOR International Conference in 2011 and has been recertified through 2025.

January 2021, Gimbel & Associates became a Major Sponsor as a Platinum Elite Sponsor and Diamond Conference Sponsor for Xplor International.

In January of 2019, seeing a growing need in wide format and signage, Roger formed the Gimbel Signage Group to assist and produce signage for the ever-growing list of Gimbel & Associates clients.

In April 2018, Roger was elected to serve on the Print and Graphics Scholarship Foundation (PGSF) Board of Directors.

On September 27, 2016 Roger was honored to serve as the Master of Ceremonies for the Electronic Document Scholarship Foundation, EDSF Give back @ Graph, their sixth Annual Scholarship Night fundraiser. EDSF is a charitable foundation that engages in programs designed to attract the best and brightest to the industry.

EDSF grants scholarships fostering education and promoting research.

On January 16, 2015 Roger was elected a director of the Electronic Document Scholarship Foundation (EDSF). On October 10, 2014, Roger accepted an invitation to join the Inkjet Summit Advisory Board.

Roger has served as a member of the advisory council for the Xerox Premier Partners organization. In recognition of Roger's Xerox Premier Partner's Global Network Advisory Council contributions and ongoing support of the community and network, Roger was presented with the Honorary Certificate of Premier Partners Ambassadorship on October 13, 2014

Roger holds a Bachelor's Degree from the New York Institute of Technology and was a member of their Board of Trustees from 1989–2003.

Industry Awards

- *Lifetime Achievement Award*, November, 2023
Presented by Xplor International; a prestigious award in recognition of an individual's efforts and contributions that have changed the course and development of the digital document and customer communications industry.
- *IPN Innovation Award*, January 15, 2020
Roger Gimbel was presented with the prestigious IPN Innovation Award by The International Printers Network Tokyo, Japan. Gimbel & Associates received the award for sharing their concept for Strategies for Continued Growth in Print Services. Using a live link between New York and Tokyo, Gimbel & Associates demonstrated their ground-breaking ideas to this group of print and print-related companies from all over the world. "The IPN is comprised of some of the world's leading companies in the industry, so we understand the magnitude of the recognition."
- *Honorary Certificate of Premier Partner Ambassadorship* in recognition of Xerox Premier Partner's Global Network Advisory Council contributions, 2014
- *Service Recognition* for ten years of service to the Electronic Document industry Xplor International Conference, 2011

- *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the Board of Directors and fellow members in recognition of leadership and personal contribution to the International Printers Network, 2005
- *Technical Excellence Award* at Mailcom, 2004
- *Pioneer of the Decade* for outstanding contributions to the digital printing industry, 2000

Gimbel & Associates Sponsorships and Alliances

Gimbel & Associates partners with industry leaders in graphic communications and multi-channel communications to support clients with digital solutions. These alliances enable our consultants to provide the best strategic assessments, and solutions for businesses development, operational efficiency. For more information on the benefits of partnerships with Gimbel & Associates contact us at info@rogergimbel.com or 646-472-1936.

Gimbel & Associates Executive Team



Roger P. Gimbel, EDP
President

Industry expert with 50+ years experience in print and consulting.



William Martin
VP Strategic Solutions and Operations

Digital document and communications strategies, color control.



Gail Gimbel
Executive Director

Client service and event planning, oversees internal operations, works with customers and sales.



Andrew Kniberg,
Director
Advisory Services

Big-picture strategies for business transformation, sales management



Sean Burke
Director
Wide Format

Operational executive, wide format, in-plant closures, integrated business systems, color management



Allison McCord
Sr. Consultant

Instructional design, training programs for adult learning.



Randy Hardy
Sr. Consultant

Business value assessment of document technologies and production efficiencies.



Kristin Anderson
Sr. Consultant

Design-to-print workflows, VDP, W2P, and 1:1 marketing technologies and applications.



Zach Page
Sr. Consultant

Operational efficiencies, direct mail production, Lean Six Sigma Black Belt



Randall Swope
Sr. Consultant

Strategic business analysis focused on improving marketing and sales development.



Robert Ikeda
Sr. Consultant

Solution architecture, analysis with fact-based recommendations for print operations' TCO.



Tom Cochrane
Sr. Consultant

Wide format / signage, operational efficiency, sales, logistics, and process improvement



Heather Yowell
Business Development
Manager

Strategic planning, generating new business, cultivating client relationships.



Mike Hollifield
Business Development
Manager

Collaborative print and integrated solutions advisor, analyzes business challenges.



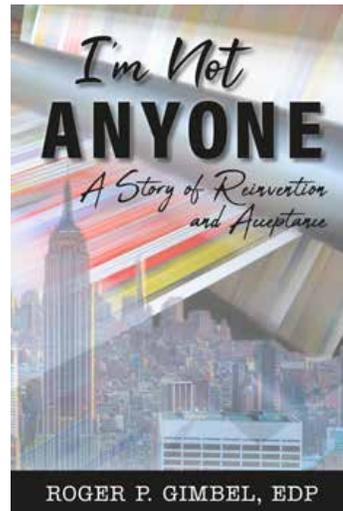
Dave Lewark
Business Development
Manager

Problem-solving and customer-centric sales for print, document, and software solutions.



Kim Keller
Executive VP, GTxcel

Transformation of documents designed for print to online experiences, in partnership w/ G&A



Renowned as an industry luminary and author, Roger P. Gimbel, EDP, stands as a distinguished figure with a wealth of experience in witnessing the transformative evolution of the print and graphics realm. As President at Gimbel & Associates, Gimbel's journey is marked by a portrayal of innovation and approval, a narrative eloquently chronicled in his acclaimed work, "I'm Not Anyone – A Story of Reinvention and Acceptance".

Within the pages of this seminal piece, Gimbel doesn't merely recount his professional odyssey; he intricately weaves together anecdotes spanning his career trajectory—from the dynamic landscapes of discotheques to the boardrooms of corporate innovation. It's a testament to resilience, adaptability, and the unyielding spirit of human potential.

The funds generated from the sales of Gimbel's book directly support the Herman L. and Audrey M. Gimbel Memorial Scholarship fund awarded annually by the Print and Graphics Scholarship Foundation (PGSF), showcasing Gimbel's steadfast dedication to nurturing the future generation of industry leaders.