THE PERFECT PAIRING

A PRINTER'S GUIDE FOR COLLABORATING WITH DESIGNERS

GIMBEL & ASSOCIATES

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Do You Offer Design Services

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.
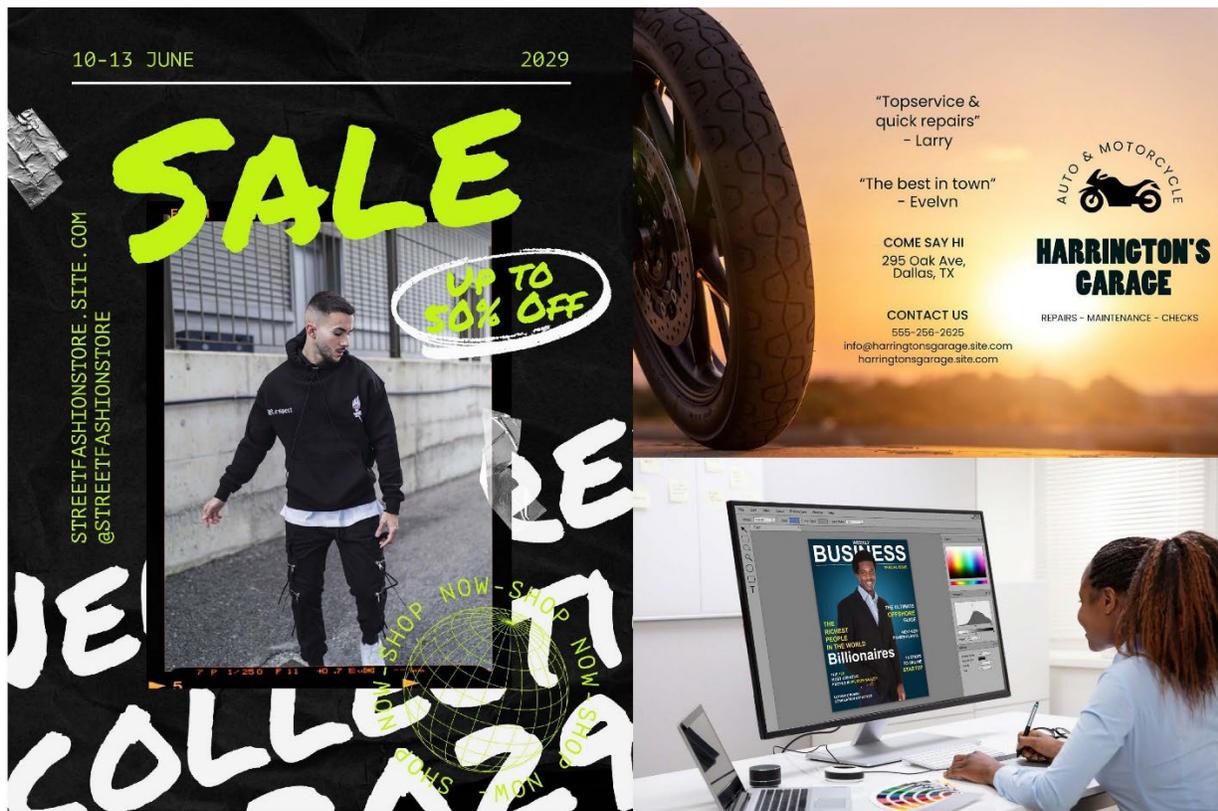
The Right People

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 preflighting 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.

Questions Printers Wish Designers Would Ask

Printers understand about the impact printed items can have on people. Interacting with print involves multiple human senses including smell, touch, and hearing-besides the visual aspect. Designers that concentrate mainly on digital mediums may not realize how to get the best results from their printed projects. They don't know what they don't know

Printing can involve complicated and exacting specifications that creative people must take into consideration during the design process. Informed designers working closely with printers will produce the most desirable outcome. Dialogs that begin with the questions below create favorable collaborations.

Question: At what point in the design process should I consult with a printer?

Answer: Start talking with the printer as early as possible in the project. This is especially important for designers who have limited print design experience. Decisions made early in the design process can have a huge effect on print production. Poor design choices impact quality, timing, and cost. Printers can show how to leverage variable data and images, suggest ways to save money on finishing costs, or help design pieces that meet postal regulations and qualify for postage discounts. With print it is often helpful to begin with the end product and work backwards through steps like layout and data acquisition.

Question: What can printers do besides print my project?

Answer: This is a great question to ask. Designers shouldn't view printers as a black box where designs go in and print comes out. Besides the actual application of ink on a substrate, printers are skilled at coordinating steps like bindery, delivery, or mailing list acquisition. Designers are frequently unaware that printers can also assist with tasks such as installing large graphics like banners or other display items, fulfilling orders for print-on-demand collateral or promotional items, or setting up landing pages and micro-sites. Printers can help with many details critical to a campaign's success.

Question: What do I need to know about color reproduction?

Answer: Designers typically work with the RGB (red, green, blue) color system, using their computers to create graphics for electronic display. Web pages, digital ads, and HTML emails all use RGB because that's how electronic devices display colors. Printing

presses create colors with CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, black). A graphic created for web presentation can look slightly different in print, depending on the chosen colors, the substrate, and the printing press technology. Designers must convert their digital files to CMYK before sending them to be printed. Exact color matching, using the Pantone Matching System (PMS) as a spot color is possible, but will increase costs. Spot colors are necessary in retail and packaging where a brand's color must be exact every time. In other applications, colors the CMYK color gamut can be reproduce will suffice.

Question: What's the best way to send you files?

Answer: It's always best to send print-ready files. When printers need to manipulate or convert files, it will affect the budget. If timelines are tight, unanticipated re-work can cause delays. Designers commonly send files in the Adobe PDF/X-1a format. Always be sure to embed fonts. Missing fonts are a common mistake that causes production delays. Do not send native files like InDesign.

Question: How should I proof the work?

Answer: Printers recommend allotting enough time to proof the work several times before sending the files. Watch out for design elements like kerning and other type-related issues in addition to spelling, alignment, and text accuracy. Printers will provide digital online or printed proofs, but making type changes by this stage of the project can be expensive. Both these proofing methods allow designers to make sure they have included all the elements, positioned them correctly, and the colors are approximately correct. For exact color matching, ask for a press approval.

Print professionals are proud of the materials they create. They welcome opportunities to meet with creative people early in the design process because it helps them avoid unnecessary problems, expense, or delays at production time. By reaching out to the printer, designers can discover techniques and embellishments that make their creative projects stand out and create value for their clients.

Printers: What other questions do you wish more of your customers would ask? Send us your comments using the form below this blog post.

Designing for Direct Mail

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 mailpieces. 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 mailpiece 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 mailpiece 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 ¾" from the bottom of the piece. Delivery addresses can appear anywhere within the vertical limits, but cannot be closer than ½" from the left or right edge of the mailpiece.

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 mailpiece, 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 mailpieces.

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 Mailpiece 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 3 ½ 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.

What Designers Should Know About Data

Today, the most effective marketing programs are fueled by data, which can be an anxious topic for creative people. It doesn't have to be. Learning some basics about data is all it takes to leverage the power of data and avoid mistakes that result in re-working the design.
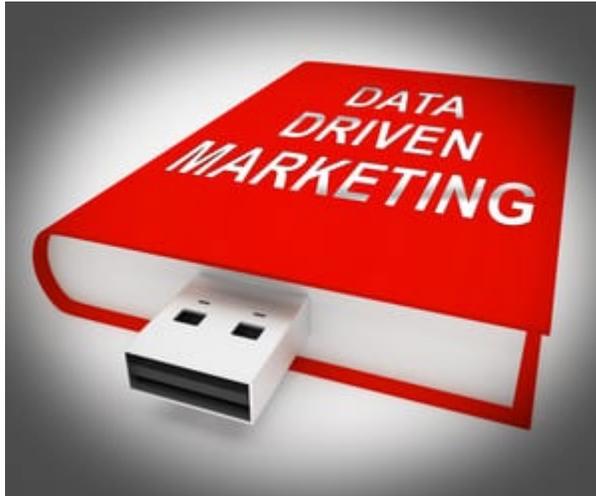
Why is data important?

When it's used properly, data can increase customer engagement and responses. The more you know about your recipients, and can use that knowledge to drive the images, text, and offers, the better you can create meaningful communications. A customers' shopping history, for example, can predict their interest in future purchases and allow you to design interesting offers to which they are more likely to respond.

Even the most basic information about your targets such as location, gender, and age can make a big difference, turning a generic campaign into one that is personalized.

How can data help my design and marketing projects?

When you have accumulated enough data about your audience, you can segment them into groups that share characteristics. By analyzing and synthesizing bits of data, you can create programs that target each of the groups differently.

Let's say you've separated the audience by age and gender. You might design pieces featuring photos of people in the same sex and age as the group members, even if the product and offer are the same for everyone. Or, you can make different pitches to each of those groups that resonate more precisely with them based on other data you've gathered.

At the next level, you can create individually personalized pieces. With today's printing technology you can create highly personalized and targeted marketing pieces. Designers can change almost all elements on each sheet that comes off the press, including fonts, text, images, graphics, and positioning. Several studies have proven variable data printing (VDP) increases recipient engagement.

What data should I seek?

Ask the IT people to collect any piece of information you feel is crucial for understanding the client relationship and creating relevant programs. This may include individual buying histories, engagement histories, demographic data, complaints, and so forth. Focus on information that will help sell the product or service. Work backwards by thinking about what you want to achieve, then consider the information you need to reach your goals.

Before deciding to use data explicitly, make sure the data is current, accurate, and consistently formatted. Sloppy personalization will kill your campaign quickly. Has IT cleansed the data so some records aren't listed as Dave Smith and others as Smith, Dave? Investigating the state of the data in advance influences how you set up and deploy data.

It's best to let the data determine how to design a piece, rather than doing all the design work only to find the data won't support it.

How do I organize the data files?

Follow a basic spreadsheet setup. Each row of information in a spreadsheet of data corresponds to a different art file, while each column represents a field corresponding to a space on the artwork.

Use a simple and consistent naming system for the columns, such as first name, last name, address, city, image one, image two, and place the name of the images in the proper columns. Use the exact name of each image. You can use .jpg, .esp, or .tif extensions. Designers can include variable text in the spreadsheet to correspond to its position on the artwork. More complex variable documents may require VDP applications that can work with a relational database, extract the data, and compose the documents.

Pay attention to requirements regarding fonts, size and resolution for images, image formats, size of text fields, or how to use special items like barcodes or QR codes. The IT team or print service providers may relate specifications necessary for taking advantage of favorable pre-sorted postal rates.

What printing technology is used for variable data printing?

Variable data printing is done on highly advanced digital or inkjet presses. Traditional offset presses cannot print variable documents, though some shops use hybrid presses that apply variable data to offset pages as a second operation. Take advantage of the economies of VDP to design materials that appeal to the different segments of your audience. You'll notice an improvement in response over a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

Data requires a small effort to master properly, but it produces proven results.

Educating Digital Designers About Print

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.

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 mailpieces 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 are 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.

How Color Choices Affect Printing Costs

The story of color is 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 perhaps we simply want a visual change. Whatever the actual reasons, design trends are shifting to a more muted, less vibrant color palette.

With that in mind, let's consider how the printing process can affect color choices and see how to use color cost-effectively without reducing its visual appeal. Besides the amount of ink needed to print a brochure or a wine label, crucial elements such as the number of colors, and the paper or other substrates on which the images are printed, have a great effect.

Ink Consumption

It may surprise you to know that ink consumption is usually a small part of total printing costs. In theory, a brochure or a poster with less ink coverage will lower ink usage and therefore reduce ink costs. While that's strictly true, unless you're executing long runs, the amount of ink consumed will not impact the price of a print project. Usually, it's not enough to affect the colors you choose for your job.

Before we go on, let's discuss the importance of talking to your printer early in the project.

Jobs will run more smoothly when designers share concepts with their printers before submitting files. This is particularly true for complex projects or those with intricate details. Color management can fall into this category, given the choice of printing technology available today. Offset, digital, and inkjet technologies all have their quirks for handling and executing color. Design decisions may hinge on the type of press on which your print provider will run the job. We're going to focus on offset printing for this discussion.

Spot Colors vs Process Color

To achieve brilliant, vibrant, or fluorescent colors that scream for attention, it's often necessary to run spot colors, which can significantly add to the cost of a job. Designers sometimes believe they must always use spot colors to produce a specific color, but that's not true. It may be possible to create the preferred effects more cheaply with process colors.

Presses print with four process colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK). Printers can create almost all colors by mixing these four inks on the press in varying ratios. Printers create entire books, magazines, and brochures with only CMYK.

Sometimes, though, a job needs an exact, special color. That's when you specify a spot color. Spot colors come premixed from the ink manufacturer, based on industry standard color systems like the Pantone Matching System (PMS). A spot color may be necessary when you must adhere to strict brand identity requirements or when very

high production values really matter. Printers may use a fifth color for specialty shades, like a fluorescent or neon, they cannot reproduce well with CMYK. Other finishing options, like spot varnishes, specialty inks, or metallic inks can also count as spot colors.

Ink manufacturers charge more for PMS color inks. But more significantly, adding spot colors requires imaging extra printing plates, which means more time and supplies for each spot color.

In offset printing, printers must make a plate for every color, so every job requires at least four printing plates. If you run two spot colors, printers must etch two more plates for the job.

You need plates for every imposition layout, also called a signature. Let's say you're producing a 32-page brochure, which the printer will run in four signatures of eight pages each. For CMYK, each signature needs four plates, a total of sixteen to print the job. If you add two spot colors to your project, the printer will charge for making eight more plates.

Costs can escalate in this scenario. If your project doesn't require eye-popping treatments and loud colors, it's highly likely you can execute your design vision using the standard four-color process and keep your costs down.

Paper

Paper is, by far, the costliest supply element of any print job. It can have a significant impact on the overall cost of a project or the way you design a project to produce desired colors.

Paper grades absorb ink differently, based on their weight and surface treatment. Fine printing paper will be coated or uncoated. Coated paper has a very smooth matte, glossy, or satin finish, while uncoated paper has a more unfinished texture and duller appearance. Any color, even one you choose from the Pantone book, will look different on each type of paper.

Coated paper reflects more light. This makes colors appear more intense and saturated. Light reflection differs, depending on the coating. Uncoated paper is less reflective, so colors have a more muted appearance.

Paper also comes in various shades of white, from warm to bluer, cooler, tones, and in different grades of brightness. Brightness is the volume of light reflected off the paper. Paper manufacturers measure brightness on a scale from one to one hundred. High-end papers are in the mid-90s. The brighter the sheet, the more light it reflects, and the brighter the colors will appear.

Uncoated paper is less expensive than coated paper, so if a muted palette is what you're after, uncoated sheets will achieve the results you want at a lower price point. You may also want to consider the shade of white or choose a different colored paper altogether to keep colors in the desired gamut.

Color itself is compelling and evocative, and pretty wonderful. Color management can be fascinating, but highly complex. With forethought and planning about color, your printer can produce spectacular results at a reasonable cost.

Helping Designers with Direct Mail

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.
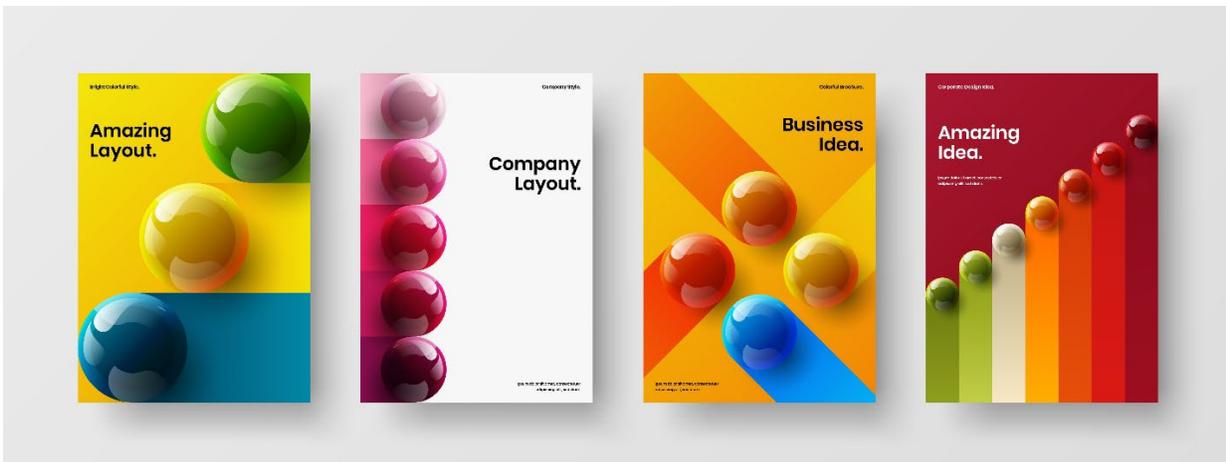
Designer Education a Good Investment

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.

All About Print Embellishments

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.