



**COURIER
PRINTING**

A CONSOLIDATED GRAPHICS COMPANY

UNDER- STANDING WHAT IS AND ISN'T PREPRESS

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SPECIAL DELIVERY INFORMATION YOU CAN USE

Ever since the advent of desktop publishing, lines have blurred and definitions have become, well—less definitive.

Typesetting, scanning, and color correction have all become do-it-yourself operations. And, now, we have the venerable PDF, having moved from the realm of universally readable office documents into the world of press-ready file transfer, with the blessing of printing standards overseers. That, along with high-speed multiple-CPU computers and broadband internet access to vendor FTP sites near and far, magically greases the rails of what once was a slow and tedious process.

Technology and modern production

And, just as technology moves the designer more and more into what used to be the purview of others, technology also moves from the other direction—from the press backward. Computer-to-plate workflow has eliminated the need for costly intermediate film production and stripping, in the process redefining color proofing workflows. Color management systems, once intended to bridge scanning capture to monitor calibration to in-house color output, are gaining ground among commercial printers to not only fingerprint color proofing devices but the pressroom as well. With PDF soft proofing taking the place of hard proofs, and virtual on-screen color-accurate proofing coming in a few years, the meeting of the two technologies, both designer- and pressroom-driven, brings another blurry boundary—where does the designer's product and responsibility end and the printer's product and responsibility begin?

Prepress is the bridge between creativity and manufacturing. And, while technology has taken the designer further into the duty of prepress professionals, there still are boundaries as to what is and is not prepress. And so, for the sake of understanding, here is a quick primer as to what currently does and does not constitute

prepress. At the very least, hopefully you'll have a better appreciation of what happens on that bridge when the printer receives the fruit of your labor.

Defining prepress

Basically, prepress is what's done after you deliver your files to the printer or service bureau. Prepress is almost never (except in the most sophisticated cases between high-end production facilities) done before the job gets to either the film preparer (service bureau) or printing facility (especially with computer-to-plate shops). Prepress involves the translation of your DTP files into a format for plating involving the conversion of all art and fonts in the file to a high-resolution bitmap—or rasterization. To do that, your document files must be raster image processed, or RIPped. As RIPped product, the files are locked down digitally, maintaining integrity between proofing and plating. In CTP workflow (unlike film-based workflow), the proofs never physically see the plating medium and are derived directly from the digital media. On approval, the digitally-imposed files are now etched directly onto the plate.

What design shops do with files internally before shipping the job to the printer is NOT prepress. You may make printouts to check individual plates via your design software. You may preflight the project to make sure you are sending everything. You may check all of your linked images to make sure they fall within the printer's standards. You may do all of this to make sure you are sending the best, most streamlined project possible to the printer—and that's the responsible thing to do. But, that's not prepress.

And, while PDF workflow simplifies the procedures in prepress (fonts and links imbedded, images cropped to their most economical size, etc.), the process of making a PDF doesn't qualify as prepress. Contrary to some understandings,

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PDFs are not rasterized—they're simply consolidated. Fonts may be imbedded, but they're still in outline form—not yet bitmapped. PDFs have to be RIPped just like native DTP files.

Even high-end agency production needs prepress

I deal currently with a very sophisticated advertising agency with a very expensive in-house RIP and high-end color proofing system. They make beautiful color contract proofs to submit with their jobs. In their case, after rigorous comparison testing between their proofs and our proofing protocols and actual web-printed test subjects, they submit those proofs for color control along with their DTP files, fonts, and links for their catalogs.

Their job still goes through prepress just like everybody else's. Their RIP isn't compatible with mine—their RIP is strictly for in-house proofing, ours is ultimately for plating—so we still RIP, impose, and render a bound continuity proof to accompany their high-end color proofs. The only advantage—a significant one—via their proofing system is supreme in-house color quality.

As it has for the past twenty years, the boundary between designers' and printers' responsibilities will continue to shift. Foreseeably, the PDF file and the newer Adobe PDF Print Engine with JDF (Job Definition Format) standards built in should govern as the most basic format for easily transmissible files. And, the printer will still be able to apply color-management curves to your job before putting it through their RIPping framework tuned to his proofing, presses, and inks—and plate and print the job accordingly.

Talk to your printing representative

For now, ask your printing representative for a tour of his prepress shop. Get to know the prepress supervisor. Different shops have different protocols and capabilities. Nail down where your design shop's responsibilities end and where the prepress shop's begin. It'll make for a more understanding relationship, potentially more budget savings, and, ultimately, a better end result for you, the customer.

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