



**COURIER  
PRINTING**

A CONSOLIDATED GRAPHICS COMPANY

## THINGS YOUR PRINTER WISHES YOU KNEW

BY KEN MORRIS

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# SPECIAL DELIVERY

## INFORMATION YOU CAN USE

**B**efore I became a printing consultant, I was in communications (writer, designer, art director, illustrator, et. al.) for about 20 years. I've spent more time as a consumer/buyer of print than as a purveyor, and having seen the transaction from both sides, I understand the time constraints, learning curves, and frustrations that apply everywhere.

What I don't understand is the way many print buyers don't bother staying knowledgeable on the print process. Maybe they feel that beyond some imaginary line a deeper level of knowledge isn't necessary. Maybe they feel in light of alternative technologies that print is a bit passé or elementary. Perhaps they feel that the final ink-on-paper process is always someone else's—the printer's—problem, so why invest the time?

But, as it is when dealing with auto mechanics, knowledge is power. And, in the world of limited time and constrained budgets, when you must buy print it behooves the decision makers, purchasers, and designers to understand the process as best they can.

And there's the rub—and the source of frustration for both buyer and seller. An uninformed buyer becomes an unnecessary skeptic. And a well-meaning consultant-salesman finds himself explaining creative remedies, necessary actions, and incurred charges while watching a customer with furrowed-brow scratch his head.

So, here's my wish list of things I wish my customers knew (and things I tactfully try to relate to them).

### I wish they were better educated. . .

I'm not talking about academic degrees. Learn trends in the printing industry. Go on-line and see what's out there (see the list of links, next column). Subscribe to printing trade magazines. Then, spend time with your printing representative—not just the obligatory five-minutes-and-send-him-out-the-door. Ask him questions (find out if the rep can answer most of them—if he can't, get another rep). Ask him about the trends you've been learning about elsewhere. Then, call out the less knowledgeable.

The quickest, cheapest way to educate yourself

is to periodically visit web sites on graphic arts and commercial printing. Here are a few to go back to periodically:

[www.idealliance.org](http://www.idealliance.org)  
[www.swop.org](http://www.swop.org)  
[www.sappi.com](http://www.sappi.com)  
[www.flintink.com](http://www.flintink.com)  
[www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)

Tour printing facilities and ask questions. What kind of presses do they have? How old is the equipment? How well do they maintain them? Do the presses have any special capabilities? Are they still on a film-based or computer-to-plate workflow? Can they handle PDFs? What kind of color proofs do they use? Do they use on-screen soft proofs? Does the bindery operation offer anything unique?

If you buy printing and you have a reasonable conference-attendance budget, consider going (or sending one of your designers) to a printing trade conference every few years. You'll be surprised what you can pick up there, and you'll sometimes confound your own printing vendors by being a couple of years ahead of them. And, if you attend one of those conferences, share the knowledge with others you work with.

And listen to your designers on printing vendor issues. They usually have the most invested in what a printer can and can't do. Most usually, an accomplished designer will be ahead of the curve on new technologies. They'll usually know who can execute their designs according to what the technology will allow.

### Bring the printer into the project early

If you are working on a new, unusual project (odd trim size, unique inks or coatings, etc.), before you get too far down the road, meet with a printer—even in the pre-bid process (a service-oriented printer will help you plan things and then take his chances in the RFB contest later).

It's more efficient to design for the press's abilities and finishing capabilities. Bring a mock-up or folded comprehensive. Trim sizes should be flexible in case you can get more pieces out

# THINGS YOUR PRINTER WISHES YOU KNEW

CONTINUED

of a sheet. Will the brochure fit on a more efficient press with a design modification?

Let your printer know the job is coming as far in advance as you can—six weeks in the case of web printing. Paper availability is unpredictable since mills have been retooling in recent years. Because of the variety of papers customers request and because paper inventories are a drain against operational costs, web printers tend to order stock as they need it. As a result, costs and delivery times are unpredictable. Some stocks are even subject to allocation—the quantity of certain papers may be limited to a printer. Printers have actually had to turn down jobs because they've already used their allocation from the mill.

Bearing all that in mind, make sure you build the total turnaround time into your RFQ/RFB process. If you need the job printed by a certain date, make sure you don't crowd the printer on getting the stock he's quoted your job on.

## The devil really is in the details

Make sure your RFQ/RFB format covers every detail. Specify "cover" or "text" with your stock basis weight. Also, when it comes to page count, think in 16s and eights—not fours. A job can actually cost more by cutting four pages, and save money by adding four pages. RFBs that ask for the savings by cutting four pages leave procurement officers shaking their heads at why the numbers don't make sense ("I've cut four pages, why does this cost more?").

Efficient presses are geared to printing in multiples of 16. If you have to use a smaller signature, at least keep it in eights. With the exception of covers, stay away from thinking in fours.

## Know your paper grades

When specifying a job on coated papers, specify grade, not brand. I get quote requests all the time with one or two brands specified on the RFQ with the notation "no substitutes." I know they're try-

- Number one and premium stocks are used for best-presentation scenarios: Art books, annual reports, presentation of high-end art and imagery.
- Number two sheets are used for brochures and magazines where paper is important but the printed piece has limited life.
- Number three sheets are used in place of twos for tighter budgets.
- Number four and number five stocks are usually web printing stocks and are used mostly for broad-distribution publications.

ing to make sure the pricing is an apples-to-apples comparison, but there is another cost-effective way to control the specs and broaden the parameters. Domestic coated stocks (whether matte, satin, or gloss) are graded by the industry by number—one through five, the higher the number the lower the grade. Some sheets are graded above number one, and listed as premium.

Grade numbers are based on brightness. And, most people can't tell the difference between the top three grades. Printers know where the price breaks are and can take advantage of buying power.

The next time you specify a job, instead of naming a stock, like "Somerset gloss" just put "#3 gloss"—you'll still be getting an apples-to-apples comparison on the grade of stock, but your parameters will broaden somewhat and you'll likely get lower pricing on your quotes without a drop in paper quality.

And, don't be a paper snob and assume everything you print has to go on a number one sheet—that's a waste of money. Pick the grade that suits the job. Once again, most recipients can't tell the difference between grades one through three, especially with heavier ink coverage.

## Do you really need those proofs?

We're discussing contract proofs here: PolaProofs®, Kodak Approval® proofs, DuPont WaterProofs®, and similar color accurate match proofs. Color contract proofs are important to the color quality of the job, but if the photos and art in your publication consist mostly of snapshots or less-than-critical color subjects, consider continuity and error proofing and let the printer run the job for densitometer-controlled "pleasing color."

Continuity proofs in the age of filmless computer-to-plate prepress are those bound ink-jet plotter proofs you check for type flow, page continuity, color breaks, and crossovers among other things—but not color accuracy. Those proofs are generally a part of the printer's operation anyway to check impositions, and are built into the cost of your job. Check them well to make sure your digital files kept all of their fingers and toes through digital translation.

If most of your publication has mostly snapshot quality images, but you have a few high-end color images, just order color proofs for those pages—feature stories, magazine covers, color critical subjects, etc. Proof to those pages and let the color elsewhere on the sheet fall at the pressman's judgement.

One more recent option involves "soft proof-

# THINGS YOUR PRINTER WISHES YOU KNEW

CONTINUED

ing” with PDF files. This is especially valuable where your printer is in a remote location. Rather than shipping proofs back and forth via overnight carrier, the printer can produce PDFs of the imposed pages, e-mail them to you, and you can check them on your computer monitor. Bear in mind that—as of yet—proofing for color accuracy on your monitor isn’t a recognized practice since monitor settings vary with each monitor (stay tuned, though—it’s around the corner). But avoiding overnight shipping can shave several precious days off of a publication’s production cycle.

And, if you do use high-end color contract proofs, please don’t use colored markers to indicate corrections. Use a basic black fine-point permanent marker. Colored marks on a contract proof can effect color judgements for retouchers and pressmen. And use standard proofing marks so we can understand what you want us to do.

## A little light reading. . .

If you are using contract color proofs, please judge them under standard color lighting—5000° K lighting. This is the same lighting your proofs are evaluated under and your pressman makes his color judgements by. If you can make the trip to the printer and view the proofs there, it’s probably a good idea. If you can’t make the trip, then get or make your own viewing booth. If you can’t afford a color viewing booth, at least put 5000°K tubes in your ceiling fixture.

And, if you’re a designer, calibrate your monitor to 5000° to 6500°K. It comes out of the box from the manufacturer at around 9500°K and everything you see on the monitor is tinged blue (they do that to make whites look whiter). If you used the uncalibrated monitor image to get your color in the ballpark, your actual printed image would have an overall yellow cast. Ultimately, when adjusting color on your monitor, use the Photoshop “Info” palette readings—you can only trust your monitor so far.

## Do a (pre)press-check

Before you send your printer digital files, check with him on how to set them up. Make sure you send everything they need. Going back and forth to get fonts and missing links takes time neither customer nor printer wants to spend. Take advantage of built-in “Collect for output” or “Package” features in your DTP software, and use the preflight feature to fix trouble issues before you burn the disc for the printer or post to his FTP site.

Ask your printer about his specifications for maximum CMYK ink coverage and dot gain. Please check your Photoshop color settings to render converted RGB-to-CMYK files according to those specs. Make sure your maximum ink coverage is in line with what the printer expects. Many printers use SWOP (Specifications for Web Offset) standards—no more than 300 percent total ink coverage in any one area with 20 percent dot gain.

## Praising the PDF

Send the printer PDF files whenever possible instead of native files. They’re more stable, fonts and links are imbedded already, and placed images are cropped to their most efficient form. Most printing prepress departments love PDFs, and many printers grant a PDF discount on the prepress price.

## Alterations are expensive

Don’t use the printer’s prepress department as part of your editing/proofing cycle. Printers will do alterations for days if you want them to, but the charges add up. Ask your printer early-on what his alteration charges are. How much do they charge hourly to work on your color files? Sharpen your internal proofing skills to keep alterations down. If you have to make those fixes or adjustments, make sure they’re worth the money.

And, if you’re going to hone down your proofing skills to save on corrections, why not send PDFs to your printer and take whatever PDF discount they offer.

## Do attend press checks

Officially, printers encourage press checks since they benefit both customer and printer. Printers like press checks since the customer owns the color liability with the sign-off. And, if the printer has any questions on color subject issues, you’re there to answer them.

Press checks benefit the customer in that you get a first-hand view of how your vendor treats your job. You have absolute say over problem issues. Most importantly, you are serving notice to your printer that you are keeping an eye on him.

## And now, a few things about your printing rep. . .

Your representative is going to look for ways to save you money on the job simply because it’s in his best interest—he’s competing against other hungry printers. He is seldom going to try to up-sell you

# THINGS YOUR PRINTER WISHES YOU KNEW

CONTINUED

on features—he wants to keep your costs down. If you know he's looking out for you, saving you money, finding more value in what he can deliver, he knows you'll likely pick up the phone and dial his number next time.

Realizing that, if the rep tells you that you need something additional on the job—a coating or varnish, a different kind of binding, etc.—you should be able to feel comfortable with the recommendation, not skeptical.

A good rep wants to be a resource for you. He wants to be your go-to person on printing issues. If his standard, constant reply is “I don't know, but I'll find out for you,” find another rep.

Every good rep knows you're going to take service for granted. You should be getting good service from every printer you deal with. If you aren't, why are you dealing with them? If they're giving you great price and questionable service, how do you know they are giving you the best options for the most value on your projects? Could they be saving you more money or giving you better value by looking out for you better?

Finally, from a representative's perspective, keep a good relationship with your rep so he

feels good about going the extra mile for you. True, in front of you, he's the face of the company he represents, but when he returns to the printing plant with your job, your rep becomes *your* advocate. He has to fight for space in internal schedules to meet your deadlines, usually against business ten or fifteen other representatives have brought in. He has to get key production people to flag your job and invest in the urgency of your project in a place where multitudes of other customers are vying for press space, all with their own urgency. Your rep is sometimes going to spend a lot of professional—and sometimes personal—capital and solicit a lot of favors to get your job placed ahead of another equally—or more—demanding customer. And he'll keep going that extra mile if he knows you appreciate it.

Lastly, bad things occasionally happen. One of the ways to judge your printing vendor is to observe how fast and how well he takes care of mistakes. Give him a chance to do so—and the credit due when he does it well.

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