

Publishing Executive

9 Tips for Hiring Today's Magazine Printer

By Steven W. Frye

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Printers can no longer sell 'quality' as the difference between them and their competitors. Today's print buyers expect excellent quality, and now they are looking for printers who help reduce costs, increase schedule efficiencies, enhance marketing and even generate new revenue. 'Ink on paper' has become the least important criteria when hiring a printer.

The line between the publishers' and printers' duties is increasingly graying, which can be both a benefit and a problem. The benefits are obvious: increased efficiencies and customer loyalty. The problems are less obvious. Now when hiring a printer, all of these value-added services need to be analyzed as to their relevance, benefit, learning curve and cost. Here are a few tips that can help you negotiate a new printing agreement in today's integrated environment.

1. Communicate your expectations. Printing presses cannot tell the difference between your publication and another. It is your job to clearly communicate what you are buying, so the printer knows what it is selling. Explain who you are, how you are staffed and equipped and, most importantly, what your goals are. Clearly define those goals and priorities.

2. Ask how the printer will help you achieve those goals. Ask for examples of how it has helped similar publishers. Ask for a customer service rep who is qualified for your type of work, proactive with new ideas and empowered to act on your behalf.

3. Involve all relevant staff. If the printer offers services or systems that affect other departments, include those respective departments in the review process. Have them analyze and rate the items offered.

Examining the Contract

The agreement between you and the printer is like an insurance policy—you hope you never have to use it, but are glad you have it in time of need. Most boilerplate contracts drafted by printers are remnants from an almost ancient era. Many still have language from the days of film, with archaic spoilage allowances and rigid terms. And almost none address the printer's responsibilities and liabilities for its distribution services.

These contracts are written by the printer, and some are more customer-friendly than others. However, some publishers accept the terms verbatim without realizing they have the right to negotiate them. The following tips can help you examine a contract's coverage of necessary terms.

4. Do not sign any agreement that does not define the printer's performance responsibilities. Add language that describes these responsibilities to your contract.

5. Be sure you can terminate the agreement if the printer defaults on performance. However, it is only fair to allow a reasonable period of time for the printer to remedy the problem.

6. Be sure all items are insured while on the printer's premises. This includes original materials, inserts, paper, finished and semi-finished work. No matter what a printer says, it is responsible for everything in its possession.

7. Delete any reference to film-based prepress services. Modify the contract to describe your electronic workflow.

8. Define the printer's responsibilities as your distributor. Define nonperformance, acceptable and unacceptable remedies, dispute-resolution processes and termination clauses.

9. Add language that covers any value-added service, system or software promised to you during the selling process. Define usage, training, updates, support, cost and other applicable terms.

An important note: Most, if not all, value-added services offered by printers can be negotiated for little or no cost. Printers benefit from their use and realize that having a customer use these services makes it harder for the customer to leave. Add language regarding future promises.

The Bottom Line

Printers are now selling items that print buyers never before had to consider. Be sure to thoroughly review, analyze and negotiate every value-added service. By carefully selecting a printer that understands and cares about your company, that is proactive in suggesting revenue-producing plans or cost-saving measures and that implements efficient workflow processes, you will gain a partner who has a vested interest in your success.

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