

# Publishing Executive

## Want Less Work, Better Quality and Lower Costs?

By Steven W. Frye

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Buying printing these days is simple as well as complicated, depending on the area you're considering. Prepress has become simpler as the PDF/X-1a format is now the preferred standard for page files. Prepress price lists at printers are now just a few line items—long gone are the hundreds of items dealing with film. But, as we all know, just because it has become easier to buy prepress and submit PDFs doesn't mean that workflow problems don't exist.

InDesign has made significant inroads to become the front-end system of choice for two basic reasons: ease of creating PDFs and the inclusion of international symbols.

But with every new application there are new problems. One publisher recently noted that files created in the latest version of InDesign offered in Creative Suite 2 cannot be read with the version in Creative Suite. His freelance designer started using the newer version, and the rest of the staff couldn't edit his layouts.

Problems with new software releases can be detected in advance by asking your printer. Most publication printers immediately test all front-end software releases and can warn you of glitches.

Bob Wiemers, operations director, magazine division, Boy Scouts of America, suggests giving Acrobat Pro to editors instead of just Acrobat Reader. It allows them to correct type errors found at digital blueline stage, even on a PDF. "Why re-open the layout in design software and re-PDF for a simple folio change, typo or key code change?" asks Wiemers.

He also suggests that production managers learn AppleScript (or make friends with a scripster) and OS X 10.4's Automator. Many repetitive tasks in production can be automated. As an example, Wiemers says, "Automatically send an e-mail notifying the color specialist when a file is dropped into a 'Ready for Color OK' folder."

Wiemers cites another example: "I found a script that exported my Excel-built production schedule to iCal. I was able to quickly find the weekend and holiday conflicts, and then publish the schedule so the entire division could add it to their calendars."

Bob Tauber, sales representative at Brown Printing Co., suggests optimizing page files to the printer's front-end systems. He points out that the digital world changes rapidly, and "if you [have been] processing files the same way for more than three years, chances are you have an opportunity to save. Do you continue to specify 'application files' in your bid specs? Many printers prefer PDF or PDF/X1a files, and price more aggressively for those files."

Russ Fisher, sales representative at Cadmus Specialty Publications, suggests that publishers specifically learn about PDF/X-1a files, which are different than PDF files. "You can have bad PDF files, but it's difficult to have bad PDF/X-1a files," he says. Taking control of your content should be of utmost importance. "PDF/X-1a saves time, money, provides a quality check on files and allows you to contact your advertisers with problems ... associated with the files supplied well in advance." Printers receiving PDF/X-1a files do not have to preflight the files. The files are basically authenticated to be accurate and can be RIPped immediately.

Richie Lesovoy, production director of Future Network USA—publisher of games, computing, action sports and musician magazines and Web sites—offers a useful tip for trying to eliminate the accidental switching of spread pages when submitting single page files to the printer. "We run into the human element of submitting spread ads as single pages and numbering pages according to book folio. Sometimes the pages (left and right) get reversed by someone working too fast. We now embed the words 'left page' and 'right page' in the PDF file above and below the trim area with large type in the slug area," he says. This allows the production manager to re-check that the page numbers are correctly ordered.

## **Quality Control**

Quality control is probably one of the most ill-applied concepts in production. It must be real quality control; the review and approval of materials must be detailed, exact (within defined, published specifications) and regular. Every ad, image and page must be approved from both a technical and content perspective. It's obviously better to catch errors before final processes than as a downstream error.

There should be at least five levels of quality control—formal quality control—in every step of the production process. Call it what you like: editorial review, preflight, final check, but call it something and make sure it gets done— every job, every time.

## **Paper**

"Don't be locked into traditional thinking, as the paper market is evolving," says Tauber. "There is now a plethora of SCA+ [supercalendar] grades that are virtually identical to a traditional No. 5 coated groundwood. If you, your readers and advertisers can't tell the difference, why pay up to 15 percent more for No. 5? There are even SCA++ stocks that rival No. 4 coated groundwood."

Tauber is right, but be aware that many printers charge an additional "wash up" fee after running SCA stocks, so check with your printer first.

Additionally, when buying paper, shop around. Keep in mind, however, that not all papers (or vendors) are created equal. Homework is necessary to be sure you are not getting the deal of the century only to find out that the paper can't be hung or fed through the press. A recent entry into web papers is Chinese paper, which is finding mixed results with U.S. printers.

Ken Higgins, quality control manager at the Quebecor World Lincoln, Neb., plant, recommends checking first with your printer before jumping on any "deals," particularly with lightweight, uncoated stocks. A mill often will offer a test roll, and the printer will test it at no charge to you. Mill reps also will be

present to monitor runnability. Ask about testing before buying any paper with which both you and your printer are unfamiliar.

When a new paper stock is introduced to a printer, the printer has to set its equipment to optimize output. Higgins recommends tracking paper and ink performance during these tests.

Identify optimal ink tack and press chemistry for the specific substrate, and identify optimal ink densities. At the optimal density level, measure the print characteristics, compare them to the Specifications for Web Offset Publications (SWOP) coated-substrate targets and adjust plate output accordingly.

## **Ink**

Use PMS and other specialty inks sparingly. Most presses these days are set up for efficient four-color processing, and adding additional color units can be expensive. Stick to four-color builds unless it's a logo issue and the advertiser is defraying the costs.

Also, be aware that many of the newer wide web presses may not have additional units for PMS anyway, so now besides additional ink costs, PMS ink may result in the need to print in smaller and more expensive forms.

Not all inks are equal either. If your magazine uses a lot of PMS inks, try to discourage the use of reflex blue. It is unique as it requires longer drying time and has peeling issues. Talk to your printer about any inks it recommends avoiding and why.

Mike Chapman, print manager at Habitat for Humanity, says, "We try to choose a couple of generic 'house' papers, inks and other supplies that will be what the 'house' [printer] uses for everything." Minimizing options to creative and advertisers alike streamlines efficiencies. "This helps our vendors negotiate better pricing for both parties, as we're being very consistent in our required product line, and our overall volume usage for a particular item is higher," he says. "It's the old story, 'the more you're able to buy ... the better the discounts.'"

## **Design**

It is common today for cover designers to be independent contractors. Often they are excellent designers, but lack knowledge of the importance of the placement of a UPC symbol and label or inkjet box. There are guidelines for these items, and they should be made readily available to designers and editors.

BIPAD Inc., which regulates UPC codes, gives a copy of "Magazine Title & Issue Coding UPC Symbol Location and Orientation Guidelines" to each publisher after the UPC application process. Locate that information within your company and share it with your designers. John Harrington at BIPAD notes that the guidelines soon will be available online at [BIPAD.com](http://BIPAD.com).

Product Identification and Processing Systems Inc. (PIPS) has helpful guidelines on sizes, colors and backgrounds on its Web site's "support" pages ([www.PIPS.com](http://www.PIPS.com)).

The location of the label and/or inkjet box depends on your vendor's equipment and Post Office regulations. Printers will have specifications and associated costs that also should be shared with your designer.

Breaking these guidelines could result in expensive delays, corrections, inaccurate data and/or penalties. And since not all electronic readers are created equally, some may work with "creative" UPCs and addresses, but some may not. Pushing specs may prove costly. As Randy Wright at PIPS points out, "There's a reason the big titles, such as People and Time, don't mess around with the UPC symbols."

## **Production Schedules**

Schedules are critical not only to keep things on track, but also as a means of communication. By detailing all the steps in a process, it becomes clear to everyone when their part of the job is due. Breaking jobs down in detail is better than glossing over tasks; make the schedules granular enough to be effective, but not so detailed that they become cumbersome.

Most importantly, there must be a daily scheduling meeting with key people. This may be the design team, the production team, the prepress team or the editorial teams, but each team must meet and discuss the most pressing production deadlines.

The biggest problem here is the perception that it's "just another meeting." Not so. The scheduling meeting should never be longer than about five minutes. It should be a brief review/overview of what's due that day. Whiteboards are key because everyone has a visual reference to the overall schedule.

Another key here is to consider moving the approval processes up in the production schedules. This can be really tough given the last-minute nature of publishing, but it can be done. Review articles earlier; submit concepts sooner; review text before it's poured into page-layout templates.

## **Workflow**

Workflow is another key area. Extend efficient workflow practices deep into the production process and it will yield huge dividends. In other words, develop the concept of concurrent, incremental work, and not batch work. Batch work is slow.

Try to find ways to incrementally improve workflow by slicing up jobs into smaller pieces. Have editorial review draft concepts while the designer is working on the next piece. When the review is completed, return the work to the designer for the next level of design. Don't design big batches of articles all at once, when individual articles could be moving through the production process more quickly.

The same applies to production staff: Process one ad and then submit it to preflight; don't wait for a batch of ads to arrive and then process them as a batch, which buries the preflight team. Workflow: Get the work flowing from one group to another.

## **Co-Mailing**

Now is the time to start educating yourself on distribution options if you mail in any kind of quantity. You've done a lot of homework on the actual production process to make sure your printer is the right fit for your publication. The same applies to the distribution process. Changes are happening in the industry, and it is important that you and your circulation director work together.

Gigi DeWeese, sales representative at Publishers Press, a full-service printer for the short- to medium-run magazine market, suggests asking your printer the following questions:

- Do you have capabilities to co-mail or co-palletize?
- Is your equipment in-line?
- What percentage of your customers participate?
- How much of my mail will be drop-shipped?
- Will you be using third parties?
- How is my timing affected?
- How will my bottom line be affected?

Not all mailed copies qualify for co-mailing, and offline functions, such as polybagging, may also disqualify copies. Check with your printer on the requirements and limitations for their co-mailing service. One requirement with co-mailers is the use of their list-management services.

"We just recently co-mailed our magazine with a 1.5 million quantity, and we saved a little over \$8,000 dollars on our mailing cost," says Chapman. "The savings are there, and the reason most postal savings are overlooked is because it can seem like a very complicated process because so few people truly understand how it works. Look at all distribution options: co-mailing, co-binding, drop-shipping, etc. Know what options are available to you as a periodical rate mail piece vs. a catalog or directory. Not all options are created equally."

Be aware, however, of exactly what a printer means when claiming that you will save \$X by co-mailing. Usually, this does not mean that is the savings over your current method; instead, it is the difference between co-mailing and single-entry (which is the worst-case scenario).

It is up to you to compare a printer's proposed co-mailing costs to your own and determine the true difference. Be sure all costs are included: postage, drop-ship freight, administrative fees and list-management services.

## **PostPress**

Conduct a 'post mortem' meeting on your publication. If you can't do this for every issue, try to do so quarterly. Involve everyone who touched the magazine, and discuss what went right and what needs improvement in future issues.

Look at the process that took place to put the issue together, and go through the printed publication itself. Look for recurring concerns that can be addressed. But don't forget to acknowledge what went right. This is a great time to give praise.

Take the time to critique the publication (even go so far as to give it a report card) and follow up with your vendor. Don't be afraid to show your vendor that you are improving on your end; it will encourage a mutual embrace for overall improvement. Constructive criticism, though difficult to deliver, is very empowering.

Along the same lines, meeting periodically with your printer and other vendors can likewise improve quality, reduce throughput and help you find new ways to improve production efficiency.

Ritt Schiano, vice president, Western sales, Banta Publication Group, says Banta holds annual

account reviews. "We hold a formal meeting between key customers and Banta staff members using a formal agenda. Our goal is to go through each process from order entry through each production department, and include billing and distribution to address ways to improve." Schiano points out those ideas come from both organizations. "If we can't get customers to the appropriate facility, we either send our staffs to the customer office or conduct these via conference call." Ask your printer to do the same.

**Use your customer service rep as a resource. They can help improve the format of your print order. They've seen them all—the best and the worst. Ask for ways to improve your method of submitting instructions.**

Today's electronic workflows offer new opportunities and new problems. Sharing tips, no matter how large or small, add up to a better workplace. When workflow uses common sense and adapts for new opportunities, it creates efficiencies that pay off with less work, better quality, lower costs, higher returns and happier people, including staff, advertisers and stockholders.

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