

Publishing Executive

Quality vs. Vanity

By Steven W. Frye

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I have been involved with many high-quality projects over my career and have witnessed the transformation of our industry from that of skilled craftsmen in a film environment to that of computers and digital preciseness. I can talk about the new advances in quality improvement, and I will.

But as I write this article, I feel a little hypocritical. As a consultant, it is my job to help my clients achieve the best possible quality from their vendors. Yet, I have witnessed the most ludicrous actions being taken based on the quest for the "best" and "highest" quality possible.

For example, a large consumer magazine once sent a photo editor on a press check to ensure that the editorial feature photos were printed to his/her exact standards. The editor spent a lot of time and a lot of money making color adjustments, affecting dots by less than 5 percent; considering press tolerances, the changes would be virtually unnoticeable.

Each fine color adjustment to a page with an editorial photo affected the color on another page ... including the ads. The pressmen, who are trained to focus on the ads before the editorial pages, would then try to correct the ad pages. Changes went on and on in a circular pattern.

After getting "superb" quality with the editorial feature, the editor was happy. But the pressmen felt they were printing poor quality on the other pages.

They knew from experience that bad ad reproduction equates to costly makegoods. In this case, they shut the press down, sent the customer away, printed what was, in their opinion, "good" quality signatures for the majority of the run, called the editor in at the end of the run (not the beginning as the editor believed) and let the editor color correct to his or her heart's content. While deceiving the customer is not a commendable practice, the point is that everyone was happy with the "quality"—no one ever noticed the difference between the two runs.

Color Quality Is Overrated

Here is where I put my profession on the line ... I believe that print "quality" in the magazine industry is highly overrated. There. I said it. As long as the grass is green and the sky is blue, the reader is happy.

The average reader can't tell "good" printing from "bad" printing. They read newspapers every morning, so any magazine is considered "high quality" when compared to cold-set newspaper printing.

But let's face it, we don't print to satisfy our readers, do we? It is our advertisers and competitors we worry about. And, let's not forget our own egos.

Ours is one of the few industries where we get to sign our name to our work: the masthead. Therefore, and this is a good thing, we tend to be perfectionists. But sometimes this search for perfection goes to the point of absurdness, especially when "good" quality is a completely subjective concept.

Let's be realistic. Most magazines are disposable and have a relatively short shelf life. New issues come out frequently. Quality is usually not critical to our overall success.

On the other hand, books have a long shelf life, and their subject matter may require exceptional quality. Catalogs, too, have critical color needs as they have to closely replicate product samples.

Books and catalogs have always driven the graphic industries to improve quality in printing and even paper characteristics.

Striving for the Best, But Within Reason

This is not to say that quality is not important in the sense that shoddy printing just looks bad and conveys unprofessionalism.

The good news is that today we can achieve better quality at lower runs and lower prices than ever before. Most publication printers use similar presses, prepress technologies, proofing systems and all print to SWOP standards.

But even though digital technology has made quality almost a given, many factors still can hinder the quality of the final product.

Print quality not only varies from printer to printer, but even between different plants, presses or crews at the same printer. So, the first step to increasing the likelihood of getting the quality you expect is, when analyzing printers, ask for samples that were printed at the same plant and on the presses designated for your work, using similar paper.

You also need to supply excellent materials. You need to understand how presses work and what their limitations are. If you can design with the press in mind, you will achieve a product that reproduces very well.

Where Problems Start

These days, most color problems originate on the front-end—with the publishers. When printed pages don't exactly match proofs, particularly for editorial pages, the usual culprit is the publisher's poor layout placement, not bad printing.

People often forget that each page of the magazine is printed inline with, and affected by another page. Do not place a fire-engine-red truck ad on a page that prints in line with a closeup of a woman's face with soft midtones. Either the truck will be flat, or the face will be sunburned, or both.

With good imposition planning, publishers can avoid many costly advertising makegoods.

Technology's Effect on Quality and Cost

Focusing on how ink is actually applied also is important in creating good quality.

Over the past decade, a lot of old printing hardware has been replaced with more advanced presses that quickly get up to color; achieving makeready at much lower quantities. Many of these new presses have wider formats that print more pages at a time, which results in excellent quality at lower prices for small-run publishers.

Then there's digital prepress, which is far superior to film-based prepress ... period. Digital formats have virtually eliminated bad registration, not only within an image, but particularly from opposing corner pages on a plate.

Sharper, cleaner dots were created and allowed presses to step up inline screen quality. When most printers used a 133-line screen as the standard for coated web papers, they are now using 150, creating much finer images.

Advancements in press technologies have also improved the quality of high-speed printing. To minimize press variances, many printers are now implementing closed-loop color (CLC) systems. With increased press speeds and larger web widths, CLCs have become necessary to maintain color consistency, as they significantly reduce the subjectivity of color accuracy and deliver consistent color integrity throughout the run.

CLCs use color videocamera technology to measure density at various points, identify necessary color adjustments and automatically make them. Once color is adjusted and approved by the customer, pressmen can lock in the targeted color. The system continually updates the pressmen, in real time, with color statistics, such as ink densities, dot gain, trapping and other information. A scanner also inspects the web during runs, and can automatically make adjustments to achieve and maintain color targets regardless of lateral and circumferential movements of the web.

The end result is a finished product that matches publishers' expectations throughout the entire run and from press to press and, if applicable, between plants.

One area of CLC that most publishers don't take advantage of is the statistical information generated during the run. To confirm the quality of runs, CLCs generate numeric and graphic reports of color-density measurements and other evaluations. This information can be customized for each publisher and, when applicable, their advertisers.

Another benefit of CLC information is that if there are press problems during the run, it shows the complete history; what, when, where and how many copies were affected.

The quality of folding and trimming has also improved. Webs are scanned at various points to maintain accurate folding as the run goes through the rollers.

Binding has also seen improvements. And unlike my comments about color quality, readers do notice bad binding. While color quality is overrated, binding, in my opinion, has been underrated. Readers notice when issues are trimmed crookedly, or if there are double or

missing signatures, if blow-in cards are bound in, or if pages fall out or glue is oozing.

With the advent of selective binding came the advancement of electronic readers that weigh and measure each book to verify caliper and check the integrity of the signatures. These technologies have helped minimize many of the problems listed above, but pages still can fall out, or inserts can go in the wrong place or not at all.

Most of the complaints I have been hearing from publishers about their printers is in the area of finishing, not printing.

To produce a 'quality' publication, focus on the quality of the binding. Score the covers on perfect-bound books, verify and double check all insert specifications, have pull tests with every issue and communicate to the printer your concern about the quality of finishing. It is just as important, if not more so, as printing quality when it comes to readers' impressions.

Better Paper, Better Products

The quality of paper has also improved over the years. Today's papers are brighter, whiter, stronger and lighter, and they share hybrid characteristics with foreign papers. Tensile-strength improvements have allowed better runability, not only allowing good print quality, but creating other efficiencies and ultimately lowering costs.

Better color controls, precise registration, cleaner dots and better paper characteristics have all contributed to raise the bar in magazine print quality, and lessen the need for subjective manual involvement.

Communicate Your Quality Goals to Your Print Partners

If high quality is a must for your publication, you need to stress that point, as all publishers ask for excellent quality. Communication is key.

As a former art director and production manager, I can appreciate the quest for perfection. But let us not forget that we are in the graphic arts business, and we are not creating a "Mona Lisa." We can smartly achieve the highest-quality printing without going to extremes with timely and costly adjustments that only we see. PE

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