The Digital Dozen
Twelve Tips to Managing Customized Print Projects

By Johnette Mongelli

Personalized digital color printing has gone mainstream, and savvy print buyers should take the opportunity to educate their colleagues on the technique and the business value it delivers.

Two of the most recent confirmations of variable information printing's broad acceptance came from market-research firm, The Industry Measure. According to the firm, nearly half of U.S. print and pre-press companies now produce variable information work ("Pricing for Variable Data Print: Baseline Data on What the Industry Is Doing Now," November 2006). And 46 percent of ad agencies are increasing monthly spending on printing for variably printed, one-to-one personalized direct mail ("2007–2008 Media Spending Forecast," April 2007).

This surge has been building for some time. In recent years, digital color presses have delivered no-excuses, professional-grade image quality and the power to process full-color images on the fly. Marketers seeking to cut through the ever-growing clutter of advertising messages have found that personalized printing delivers more targeted, more relevant content that boosts customer loyalty, response rates and return on investment. And print providers recognize that personalized printing services are more profitable and offer greater growth potential than any other segment of print.

With its reliance on data and information technology skills, VI printing can be intimidating to the uninitiated. In reality, the process doesn't need to be especially complex, but it does require an understanding of how it differs from traditional printing. Print buyers who can stay ahead of the trend have an opportunity to lead their constituents in discovering the business value personalization can generate.

"The Digital Dozen"

Following are 12 tips — "The Digital Dozen" — to help print buyers manage personalized and customized print projects.

1. Get involved at the design stage.
Unlike traditional, print, which is produced in a serial path from design to press to distribution, personalized printing requires an understanding of the audience and the means for reaching it — mail and distribution — before design can begin. In fact, the target list data can have an impact on every production function. So print buyers are well served involving themselves in a VI project at the onset, when strategy, deadlines, budget and complexity-level of the project are discussed. Keeping open lines of communication throughout the process helps avoid issues down the road.

2. Determine how the project will be produced: offset, digital — or both.
If the project uses both — for example, for a fast turnaround of an initial run on digital and for the favorable long-run economics of offset for the rest — be aware of the need to ensure color consistency between the multiple, mixed pieces.

3. Determine which text and image elements will be variable.
Typically, this decision requires input from a team that understands the available data, the budget and the team's design and production capabilities. The person who sets up the data — often the designer — should also provide the printer with detailed instructions on how the database fields link to the creative files.

Tip No. 5 >

During the design phase for the Xerox "lunchbox" mailer, the design team ran test prints of the many images it was considering. By incorporating the ones that printed the best, the team saved time, money — and aggravation — in the proofing and printing processes.

4. Make all parties aware of the maximum sheet-size

and maximum image area of the digital printing equipment selected for the project. Design for the target press.

5. Test images.

A great advantage of digital printing is that short runs — including test runs — are very affordable. Test generously during design to ensure "run-ability" and color accuracy in production. Keep testing until your team is satisfied.

6. Determine production timeframes and budgets.

Obviously, knowing when the customer wants the project completed and what they plan to pay is critical to customer satisfaction. It also helps in determining the best solutions for production and bindery equipment choices.

7. Find out how the data will be provided.

Data can be provided in many types of databases and VI printing can run from many applications. Knowing which will be used helps ensure compatibility in advance and helps the team spot potential limitations — as well as advanced capabilities that could be deployed. For example, where Microsoft Excel files are suitable for a simple mail merge, XMPie variable data publishing software can enable cross-media projects.

8. Test the shortest and longest pieces of data to ensure the information flows correctly.

Some VI programs have built-in proofing systems to help you run these tests to avoid the re-flow that can result when pieces of variable information don't fit the available space.

9. Build in integrity.

One of the worst mistakes you can make in VI printing is sending a personalized message to the wrong person. Many safeguards are built into most VI printing systems to help guard against this. In addition, always recommend using sequence number within each database record that will print during production. That way, if paper jams or bindery mishaps occur, a record easily is identifiable and quickly can be reprinted. This approach is especially useful for "blind matches" or when multiple variable pieces are collated.

10. Keep the number of stocks you use under control.

Many digital printing devices enable different stocks to be pulled intelligently from multiple trays during printing. Understanding the device's paper feeding capabilities can help you to effectively automate feeding of multiple stocks.

11. Keep the finishing/bindery complexity under control.

Using excessively complex finishing can create waste and even lead to the re-printing of some records. In-line finishing is more automated and mistake-free, so if printing equipment with in-line finishing is available, try to use it.

12. Understand U.S. Postal Services mail requirements.

Understanding and meeting USPS mailing requirements helps to ensure prompt distribution and offers numerous ways to save money on mass mailings, as well. For example, some USPS services require records to be delivered in zip code order — the easiest way to do that is by printing the pieces in zip code order and keeping them that way. And even if the project isn't for the mail, many records still need to be delivered in a certain order. For example, the project may need to be printed in alphabetical order so that the pieces can be distributed at a trade show. Other concerns include USPS size requirements. If a piece doesn't fit the USPS size specifications, the post office won't mail it.

Be a leader for your organization by taking these 12 tips to heart. By doing so, you can show your constituents the value of personalized printing and help apply the techniques to deliver bottom-line results that may well secure a rosy future for both you and your organization.

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