Guidelines for Print Buying or How to Maximize your Print Buying Power

Everyone already possesses the skill to buy based on the lowest price. Online shopping has made that task easier than ever. So print buying must be simple; get a few price quotes, pick the cheapest, and go on with your day, right? A novice to vendor relations may be uninformed as to how difficult a job a purchasing agent can be. It's not always easy to compare apples to apples, and sometimes what you are really looking for is an orange. Building a relationship with the right vendor will get you to a better understanding of how to get the most out of your investment. Printing isn't just a product you buy but a tool for increasing profits and growing your business.

Everything you give to your customers makes an impression. Business cards, envelopes, brochures, invoices, presentation folders, and checks all impact how they think about your business for better or worse. Our guaranteed products and services help retain clients and gain new ones by conveying an atmosphere of professionalism and success. People want to do business with people they perceive as successful.

Buying print properly requires at least a basic understanding of the print industry. Ignorance can quickly get a print buyer into a lot of trouble. Mismatching a print job to an inappropriate vendor can cause an inflated price, missed mail dates, or a lost client.

But all hope is not lost. To ease the procurement process and avoid potential sourcing issues, consider the following guidelines below to ensure successful print campaign and a happy client.

Some of the most basic ways to save costs and avoid surprises include:

1. Combining multiple versions onto one press sheet to reduce plates and plate changes (also referred to as "ganging" or "combination")

2. Combining multiple jobs to be delivered on one truck or shipment.

3. Considering a slightly thinner sheet of paper.

4. Be clear about how you plan to use the printed item. Ask yourself, "What clients will see this?" "Will the quality match the image I am hoping to convey about my company?" "Is this a one-time use item or something that will be used over the course of the year?"

5. Offer size flexibility. Using standard sizes can significantly reduce costs by eliminating paper waste and die cutting costs.

6. Take advantage of high-volume price levels by running a job one time. **Discuss with us about free warehousing of large orders!**

Get 2 or 4 Bids for Jobs

Successful print buyers know their vendors and build win/win relationships with them. Sending a blanket bid request to all printers in the area is a good way to alienate potential partners. Printers that bid often and don't get a win feel rejected and stop bidding. In a similar direction, only bidding to 1 vendor opens the door to pricing inflation and missed opportunities. Managing a core vendor list and employing it properly is critical to improving overall vendor pricing, competition, and performance.

Bid job with clear specifications.

Understanding how a printer creates a price can be a major advantage for a print buyer. Creating bid requests that are thorough and take advantage of a printers pricing system can yield lower prices per item and eliminate costly and frustrating miscommunication. The key to understanding a price is to understand the multiple variables that comprise that price. ARC has a long history, over 37 years, in helping customers learn about how they invest their money and the ways to make the most of that investment.

To receive an accurate quote, the following information must be decided upon:

- Total Quantity
- Total Versions
- # of Colors
- Paper Stock
- Finished Format (Continuous Forms as rolls or fan-fold, flat sheets, folded sheets)
- Flat Size and Finished size
- Dates (Art, Approval, Delivery if available)
- Delivery Location

Other critical information can be included such as:

- Declaring any colors as metallic or fluorescent
- Varnishes or Coatings
- Perforations, Die Cuts, Hole Punches or Pin Feeds
- On folded product, if scoring, gluing, gate folding, and banding is required

Incorrect specs can open the door to unfavorable after-the-fact pricing increases which can damage relationships.

To arrive at a price per M (M=1,000), a printer must take the following fixed and variable costs into account:

1. Plates – this involves imposing and burning plates on a computer to plate processor for each color required to print. Some printers use polyester plates (least costly but quality can suffer) and metal plates (Better quality at slightly higher cost). Each color requires a separate, one-use printing plate. For example, a 4 color process over 4 color process job will require 8 plates. A job that prints black over black, however, only requires 2 plates. (**Fixed Cost**)

2. Ready the Press – This involves bringing the correct paper to the press, putting appropriate inks in the ink fountains, hanging plates, and setting color and register. Each job requires a make ready, although multiple versions are further classified as plate changes. (**Fixed Cost**)

3. Proofs – Proofs can be created digitally (PDF) or as hard copy (sent via mail or UPS for approval). This gives the client an opportunity to review the artwork one last time before production. Each copy version requires a separate proof. (**Variable Cost**)

4. Paper – Did you know that paper can sometimes amount to 60-70% of the cost of a print run? Material cost takes into account paper to be used for the job, including spoilage during the print run. (**Variable Cost**)

One of the most daunting, yet important aspects of print buying can be understanding paper. Misquoting or misrepresenting paper to the end user can be a costly and damaging mistake. Below, basic paper buying terminology is reviewed so that print buyers can better understand what to ask for during a bid, and also speak intelligently with their clients regarding paper selection.

Weight/Thickness

A paper basis weight is a measurement of the weight of 500 equally-sized sheets of paper. This becomes especially critical when meeting postal specifications, such as 7 pt and 9 pt. It also affects the "feel" of the paper in your hand. Most copiers use 20# text. Color copiers will sometimes use 28# text for better color representation. Business cards typically start at 80# cover and go up from there.

Brightness

Brightness is a common term in measuring the amount of impurity (lignin) has been removed from the paper stock, on a scale of 0-100. Mills use many techniques, such as bleaching and using additives to achieve brighter paper. Common brightness for offset paper in the United States is 92 (foreign paper often ranges from 94-96), while newsprint can be as low as 65 bright. Coated and specialty papers

can vary based on the grade, so if brightness is critical to the campaign, it is important to specify during the bid process.

Opacity

Paper opacity is a measurement of the light that passes through a paper stock. In the papermaking process, the hardwood and softwood fibers interweave to create natural paper opacity; papermakers may use additives like clay to increase opacity. While paper opacity is generally good in most standard paper grades, additional opacity (classified as "opaque" may be necessary for a particular product. Many financial reports are printed on opaque paper, and opaque paper is a common solution for jobs with significant ink coverage when bleed-through is not an option. Because opaque paper requires special additives and techniques to achieve it's inherent property, it tends to cost 30-50% more than standard offset.

Coated vs Uncoated

Coated paper uses the same basis weight measuring system as uncoated paper. The primary difference is the coating that is applied to one or both sides of the paper (often referred to as coated-one-side or coated-two-side; c1s or c2s). The coating offers enhancement to the printing surface; ink tends to sit on top of a coating rather than soaking into the paper fibers, causing the image to "pop". Other characteristics, depending on the finish, can also be improved or augmented. Coated papers come in a range of finishes from very glossy to very rough (called matte).

Finishes

Whether specified or not, all papers are "finished" to some degree, coated and uncoated alike. Coated papers are most commonly associated with different finishes, with matte and gloss being the most common. Within those two finishes there are a few others that are more loosely defined, like satin and dull.

5. Ink – Using standard colors can reduce costs. When starting a new project, discuss with ARC ways to incorporate standard colors into the branding process. (**Variable Cost**)

A color is primarily replicated one of two ways in the offset printing process; Process color and Pantone Matching System (PMS) color. Understanding the differences are critical to extracting the best possible quality out of your print campaign. This choice can significantly affect price. Different situations call for different implementation of Process and PMS color. By knowing the advantages and potential pitfalls of each printing process, designers and print buyers can make better decisions on how to create and execute a print campaign.

Process color, is achieved by printing cyan, magenta, yellow and black on top of each other in a sequence to produce an image. Each printing plate is specially created in the prepress process to attract the perfect amount of ink to replicate the image. Almost all magazines, catalogs, and publications are produced using process color, where there may be an infinite number of colors to reproduce. By examining full color print through a loupe or magnifying glass, you should be able to see thousands of little dots that are arranged to make up the image. Process color generally requires 4 printing plates for each side of the printing surface – one for each color.

Process Color – Benefits

- The ability to reproduce an infinite number of colors with only 4 plates.

- Relative low cost of ink as compared to PMS mixed colors.

- Hides small imperfections that occur during the printing process, such as hickies and small scratches, because the color is built out of 4 colors.

- Mitigates "ghosting" on challenging artwork as multiple colors make up one.

Process Color – Cons

- When printing text or narrow creative built from 4CP (4 Color Process), registration (keeping all colors in the build perfectly aligned) can be challenging on some offset presses and may not produce acceptable results
- While some may come very close, PMS colors won't be replicated exactly as intended.

A **PMS color**, also known as a "spot" color, is an ink color that replicates the intended color exactly. A PMS color is called for when color variance simply won't do, like Coca-Cola red or Southwest yellow; in other words, for branding purposes. PMS colors, have numbers associated with them like 185 or 287, which can be referenced in Pantone color guide. By selecting a PMS color, you can be sure that from roll to roll of finished product, the color you selected will look the same every time.

PMS Color – Benefits

- The ability to replicate a color exactly as intended throughout a print run, mitigating color variance.
- Eliminating registration concerns since there is only one color.

PMS Color – Cons

- Because there is only one color, the potential for small, visible print imperfections becomes greater. Difficult art that lends itself to ghosting may create print issues
- PMS colors are ideal for situations with less than 8 colors. Some presses are 10 color capable, which makes them perfect for running 4cp + 1 spot color on each side.
- Ink cost is marginally higher
6. Print Production – print production is the process of running the press. The number of impressions, ink coverage, and paper stock are variables that affect efficiency and price (**Variable Cost**)
7. Plate Changes – Plate changes occur when there are multiple versions on the same job. A version change generally uses a similar looking image, but can be caused by an offer rate change, a date change, or other minor copy changes. (**Variable Cost**)
8. Cutting – Many of the press sheets we produce are extremely large and require cutting before folding or packaging as flat. Cutting includes electronically programming the cutter for the job, jogging the sheets properly so that they can be cut with precision, and restacking as necessary. The primary variables that affect price and efficiency is the number up on the press sheet and the paper weight/thickness. (**Variable Cost**)
9. Folding – Generic inserts that fold have many variables. Using a 5" bundle as a standard, Tidewater Direct standardizes its production based on paper caliper and number of folds. In addition, gate folding and fugitive gluing affect folding efficiency. (**Variable Cost**)
10. Packaging – ARC believes strongly in tracking packaging costs. We reuse and recycle all packaging materials. Depending on how the product is to be used (**Variable Cost**)
11. Shipping – Freight cost included in price per M includes the cost to deliver the material to the final location (**Variable Cost**)

Create a schedule

Consider your entire production window before requesting a quote. It's best to try to include the exact dates, or at the very least a production window and approximate dates so that vendors that cannot complete within the time-frame don't offer pricing. By communicating schedule early and often, it gives vendors fewer excuses to miss those dates. Encourage regular updates for larger jobs and stress schedule importance when it truly is critical.

Have a Paper Trail

Consider using e-mail as opposed to the telephone. E-mail leaves a traceable history of conversations that include scheduling and pricing. With a written history, it's difficult for a vendor to deviate from what has been previously agreed upon. A vendor that doesn't react well to e-mail is antiquated and should be replaced.

Work with your vendors to solve problems

Murphy's Law applies to printing just like anything else – even when you've followed the 4 previous guidelines and have done everything right, problems can occur. It's important to remember that printing is a custom product, and mistakes can happen. A good print buyer uses these "bumps in the road" to build better relationships, not destroy them.

When a mistake occurs, it can be advantageous to calmly address the problem via e-mail first. Include the nature of the problem, and how much product has been affected. Include any information from the product label that can help your vendor trace the root of the problem and identify it. When the scope of the issue has been identified, articulate how you expect the issue to be resolved.

A good vendor will respond quickly to a request like this, and is more interested to in maintaining a strong working relationship than making convincing excuses. **If your vendor gives you the cold shoulder when these issues arise, consider other vendors that may handle these situations as you would expect like us, A.R.C.**