

When Assessing Digital Printing's Value, the Printed Piece Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg

By Bob Wagner

Because the density of ice is less than that of seawater, icebergs float in the ocean but leave about seven-eighths of their mass below the waterline.

When compared to traditional printing, much of the value of digital printing is also below the surface, in cost savings, new revenue opportunities and workflow efficiencies that just don't show up on traditional job estimates. They derive from:

- Improved work processes in the agency and between client, agency and print provider;
- The innate differences between offset and digital printing, which enable digital to deliver lower costs for short runs and fast turnarounds; and
- Communications programs that often justify higher print costs with an improved return on investment.

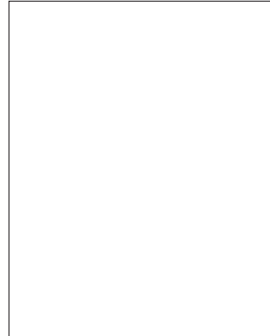
Done well, the benefits accrue not only to you, but to your print provider, client and client's customer, too.



Improving Work Flow

Excellent color image quality in the latest generation of digital color presses enables the technology to play a more business-critical role in your workflow, cutting costs and boosting revenue.

One trend is to produce near-contract-quality comps and proofs in house, accelerating approval processes, cutting vendor costs, and even serving as a profit center. The most



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effective creative work flows use carefully color-managed comps every step of the way, helping to set client expectations early in the process, avoiding potentially costly confusion later on.

To better control costs and improve efficiencies, some agencies outsource document services management, supporting both administrative and creative functions — including color management.

Another trend, especially among firms with direct marketing accounts, is to test personalized print jobs — and even produce small runs — in house.

Working with variable information printing systems helps creatives to better understand system capabilities. And cost-effective test mailings clearly establish which concepts deliver the best results.

For jobs produced on digital color presses, the favorable economics of short-run, fast-turnaround digital color printing enable proofs and final pieces to be printed on the same press. These on-press proofs are less expensive than traditional proofs — and more accurate. They can show exactly what you will get, using the target substrate and finishing technique — leaving nothing to the imagination. Further, on-press proofs are so inexpensive that running as many as necessary to get the job right is rarely a burden.

Digital vs. Offset

Digital and offset technologies are complementary, with different strengths and cost bases. When above the waterline costs are compared, digital requires less job preparation, making it more cost-effective for quick turnarounds and shorter runs. Offset is cost-effective for longer runs.

But digital can deliver additional value beyond what's in the typical print estimate through personalization capabilities that are unavailable from other print technologies, and because it integrates more "purely" into digital systems.

For example, by storing documents electronically and printing as needed, much warehousing can be eliminated, and with it, obsolescence of out-of-date documents, generating considerable savings. One-pass printing of stationery and content further eliminates costly production and storage of letterhead, and simplifies paper loading, cutting labor costs. And once a file is print-ready, delivering it over the Internet for local printing can speed up job deliveries by hours or days, cutting costs by replacing or supplementing overland shipping.



Printing full-color mailings with variable information, including barcodes, in one pass saves time and money.

Personalized, variable information printing has been shown in numerous studies to boost direct marketing response rates — and return on investment. It can also cut costs. For example, health maintenance organizations can send members directories of service providers in their immediate area, rather than the whole region, reducing print volume and associated costs, and cutting postage with a lighter package.

Recipients also benefit. Pieces that are tailored specifically for them facilitate understanding, boosting satisfaction and contributing to fewer customer service calls, reducing costs yet again.

From Jobs to Programs

Many marketers now rely on digital printing as a foundation service of their communications programs to add communications value and automate production, which reduces labor costs and eliminates errors and costly re-runs.

For example, in many one-to-one marketing programs, digital printing is integrated with other media, such as personalized Web sites, email and telemarketing, to deliver better response rates than any of the vehicles alone. Once an automated

system like this is in place, the customer is typically not inclined to move it, so it generates ongoing revenue. In addition, it can be easily replicated for other customers and other industries.

One increasingly popular approach is a Web-to-print system that enables personalization of print orders submitted over the Web for lights-out production. Some systems enable franchises to choose from among several corporate-approved print pieces, which they can customize for their own market and even personalize for their own targets.

In some leading automated fulfillment and Web-to-print systems, digital printing not only delivers the required fast, cost-effective turnaround of small print quantities, but new revenue opportunities, as well. For example, a travel guide and itinerary fulfillment application from dsi Digital, Rainham, U.K., offers personalized advertisements based on the traveler's destination city and demographics. They are produced automatically by systems programmed to recognize certain triggers.

Please note, however, that you won't develop valuable programs like these by working only with what you see on the surface. Rather, you need to go below the tip of the iceberg to explore the digital depths beneath the waterline.

