

Five Key Paper Considerations when Designing for Digital

By Amy Kearns

Common wisdom in graphic communications holds that the right paper makes a good design look great — and the wrong paper can make a great design look terrible.

Now consider this: the right paper for printing on traditional offset presses may be the wrong paper when printing on the new generation of high-quality digital color presses.

Digital printing complements traditional offset by providing designers, print providers and their clients with advantages such as personalization, economical short runs and powerful integration for Web-to-print systems. However, where offset presses essentially print on any material that absorbs ink, digital printing requires paper to withstand and perform well in the extreme heat and pressure used to make dry ink (toner) adhere to the page. So print specifiers need to understand the requirements of their print technology as well as those of the design when selecting paper that optimizes the final piece.

Today, the selection of papers that are qualified to deliver excellent performance in digital printers and presses — known as “digitally optimized” paper — is large and growing. The same is true for papers that run well in both offset and digital presses. So don’t be shy about investigating the possibilities.



The following are five tips on selecting the right paper for digitally printing your design:

1. Specify a digital grade for a digital print job.

Digitally optimized substrates are designed specifically for performing well in digital printing devices. Selecting the right paper delivers two benefits. First, the overall look and feel of the finished document will be enhanced to generate the best possible response from your client and your client’s customers. Second, print production is more likely to run on schedule and on budget, avoiding the lost productivity print services providers sometimes experience when trying to make less than optimal paper run through their presses.



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Consult with your printer about paper choices. Your printing services provider should be able to steer you toward papers that run reliably in their presses — and to show print samples of the selected grade used on the digital press they plan to use. Weigh cost considerations as you do in choosing design and print services resources — premium grades may be the best stocks for premium designs. Minimally, avoid undercutting a design to save a few dollars on paper. That can be the difference between retaining and losing a client.

2. Specify the right shade of paper.

Shade is a measurement of the color of paper. Rules about selecting the right paper shade apply equally to offset and digital printing. The main consideration is that the paper shade should complement the colors in the design, ensuring that images look real and “pop” off the page.

White shades fit into three basic groups: true white, cream white and blue white. True white shades reflect the total color spectrum equally and are generally preferred for graphics-intensive designs. It is the most neutral shade, enabling images — and particularly skin tones — to be reproduced in their most natural states.

By way of contrast, blue white appears brighter and whiter to the human eye, but presents a cooler spectrum of color than those of true white shades. Cream white is popular for book text and usually exhibits color with a yellowish tint.



3. Account for paper grain.

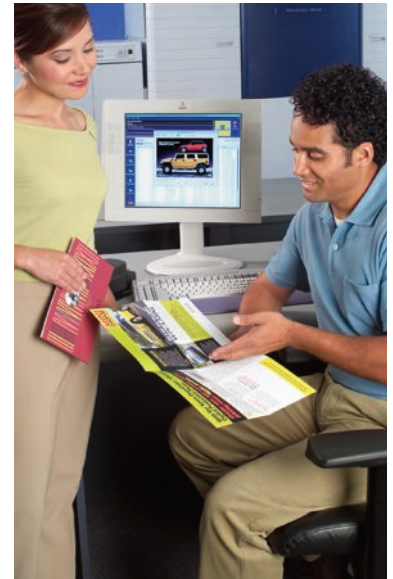
If your piece will be folded or finished in some way, aligning the paper grain correctly minimizes “toner cracking” on folds, buckling when binding and other quality defects. For example, when producing a book, grain direction should be parallel to the spine. Consult with your printing services provider to be sure you’ve accounted properly for the paper grain.

4. Design for standard sizes.

Papers come in standard stocked sizes for good reason. For one, they are readily available. For another, they are “precision-sheeted” to ensure the “squareness” of the sheet and to minimize dust and loose fibers that can contaminate the press. Should you request a non-standard size for a print job, you typically increase your costs and turnaround time and introduce a degree of risk to the finished print quality. Paper that is not precision sheeted can present registration and alignment issues, and can result in dust contamination that leads to poor image quality from “hickies,” white spots, deletions and other visual defects.

5. Experiment.

The range of digital papers continues to expand — so don’t be afraid to experiment. Talk to your printers and their paper suppliers to learn what can be done with different combinations of images, digital presses and digitally optimized papers. Try some short test runs using different stocks, so that you can see the effect on your own designs — digital print on demand makes these short runs very affordable. Let your creative juices flow, you’ll be amazed at what you can create.



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