

Working (More Closely) with Your Printer

By Darren Buford and Amy Klein

First, let me be clear, from the top down, we're a nimble organization; we pride ourselves in making the most efficient and lean products possible, all without sacrificing quality. This philosophy carries through our organization and extends to our many departments, from the publisher on down. Creating the best products for our members at a fair value is a primary goal.

One of the ways we've been able to accomplish this goal is through the close relationship our staff has developed with our printers over the past 14 years. It has become one of our greatest strengths as an association and a producer of print and digital publications.

Rather than keeping our printers at arm's length, we have benefitted greatly through regular, honest communication. We not only speak regularly with them via email and phone, but we've found it immensely valuable to visit their facilities and schedule annual meetings. These meetings have been critical, serving as a chance to reevaluate the past year and to brainstorm the future of our businesses. Their team of representatives and ours meet to hash out changes in the industry and recent production and technological advancements.

I should also mention a secret weapon of ours: we're incredibly fortunate to have an art director on staff whose background includes eight years doing production in a printing plant, plus many years as a production manager; therefore, she's quite familiar with print buying, negotiating, and press structures. Since I work so closely with her in my role as the director of editorial, design, and digital strategy, I've also come to appreciate greater involvement with our printers. It truly is the best way to learn every facet of your magazine's life, and while my background may be in editorial, that relationship has helped me to think more like a publisher, always with an eye to the bottom line.

Though not an exhaustive list, the following tips have been instrumental in both advancing our products and in generating significant savings.

Reevaluating Existing Print Products

When working more closely with your printer, there's no better place to begin than reassessing your current print publications. It's probably a given that each issue you're weighing the incoming advertising dollars versus the page counts of your publication, but when was the last time that you did a deeper dive and reconsidered the makeup of your publications themselves? This should be done at least once a year, or when it's time to reprint your materials.

Within the past few years, we have:

- Increased the page count of one of our flagship publications, while ever-so-slightly reducing the quality of the paper (brightness, weight), and increasing its size from 8½" x 11¾" to 9½" x 11¾". Believe it or not, there was no increased cost in making these changes. The page count jump from 52 pages to 64 pages was more efficient for the plate creation and press run, there were some savings from the reduction in the quality of the paper, and the price was negligible with the increase in width.

The result: a larger, more attractive publication that now shines versus its competition. We would have never known some of these possibilities had we not conversed with our printer.

- Decreased page count of our primary publication from 128 pages to 120 pages, ceased polybagging our member newsletter with our member magazine and instead glued it inside the middle of the publication, and increased the width of the magazine by an inch. There were some savings in the page reduction because it's a more efficient book for press, but the real savings came from reimagining our member newsletter. This change eliminated the polybag, which was a costly expenditure, reduced mailing costs in the process, and increased the visibility of our newsletter.

The result: more than \$100,000 in savings in a year.

- Ceased producing a bloated, 200-plus-page business guide that mailed with our member welcome packets in favor of a shorter, more appealing 16-page version, then coupled that with pushing some material online and into digital versions.

The result was \$100,000 in savings from the production of the print product combined with the significant savings in mailing costs, as we were able to transition from pricey Priority envelopes to First Class envelopes.

Have you recently reevaluated the “guts” of the publications you produce to determine if there are cost savings, or determined if there are costs savings to be had there and shifted those dollars into areas that need more fleshing out?

It may be worth a meeting with your printer. Now, not only do we annually revisit the makeup of our pubs to determine if they're efficient, but when we start any new print project, we bring an internal checklist of specs to the table that must be met in order to move forward.

Postal Services

Be sure to check in with your printer regarding mailing scenarios as well. Many large printers have postal experts on staff, able to provide you with the best advice for getting your materials into your readers'/members' mailboxes. Because we're a national magazine, we rely heavily on the US Postal Service for distribution. Our printer has helped us greatly reduce mailing costs through a co-mail system in which multiple magazine titles within the same area are mailed together, thus reducing the overall costs. Check with your printer to see if they have a dedicated postal services person on staff.

Digital

Many printers have made the jump to include digital offerings. We currently rely on a third-party vendor to complete our digital replicas and digital-only products, but we're aware that our printer is an option, if we choose to switch in the future. One benefit is the ability to submit files only once, since we're already submitting the PDFs for print at the end of each cycle. There certainly would be some efficiencies gained from doing so.

Another reason to check in often with your printer is to make sure of any new technological developments on their end have been communicated to your team. For instance, during our last brainstorming session, we were made aware of some new preflight and mapping offerings for our design team. This helped to change the efficiency of our work flow.

Advertising Strategies

There have been several times in the past few years where our advertising manager has consulted our printers for advice in creating some sales strategies. Because we work with one of the largest printers in the United States, they were able to pull examples of what has worked and what hasn't from their bevy of other publications. This not only helped our advertising manager strategize, but also helped her be able to communicate advertising options more directly with our existing and potential advertisers.

Fulfillment

Though we have not pursued this strategy, many printers offer fulfillment options, from packet creation to distribution. For those wishing to take some of these operations from internal or third-party vendors, it may be valuable to check in with your printer to see if this is an option.

Multiple Printers

Finally, though we handle our largest print products with our national printer, we still maintain several local printers as a way to make sure our pricing is competitive. Using local printers also saves on high shipping costs back to the office. And by checking in constantly with the local and national printers, we're better able to judge the market. It's a way to keep them and ourselves honest. If we're staying on top of these changes, then they will, too.

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