

On Paper

BY CONSTANCE J. SIDLES



Choice Paper

RECENTLY, WHEN A FLOUNDERING magazine asked me to analyze their operations, I recommended downgrading their paper stock. The editor blew up—*boom!*—Krakatoa in gray flannel. “We cannot print on lower-quality paper,” he exploded. “But we can’t afford first-class anymore,” erupted the publisher. “We’ll lose readers if we downgrade,” fumed the art director. “Readers will lose *us* if we don’t,” the production manager quaked.

Soon after, the magazine folded, and the publisher joined the print industry’s equivalent of the bread line: he became a consultant. I ran into him the other day. “You should have given us more options,” he said, still smarting.

He’s right, agrees one Midwest printer. “Art types tend to buy paper with their eyes. Publishers buy with their wallets. Both are wrong. Instead of trying to decide between cost and quality, they should find the paper that meets all of their needs.” He suggests that print buyers ask themselves five questions before buying paper.

• *Can the paper do the job physically?* Check out factors such as strength, surface finish, brightness, opacity, overall runability, thickness, and weight. Ask yourself what jobs the paper must perform. Are you mailing it? Then it must be a certain thickness. Are you stapling it? Then it must withstand puncturing. Are you applying a glue dot? Then its surface must take adhesive.

Tell your supplier just how you plan to use the paper, including delivery method, and get a commitment that the stock you choose can deliver all the characteristics you need.

• *Will the paper do the job graphically?* When light hits paper, it reflects back certain wavelengths—that’s how we see color. Ink absorbs some of the wavelengths, but allows others to pass through. Smooth-finished paper reflects light most accurately, allowing the ink colors to reach our eyes in purest form. Rough-finished paper scatters light, causing colors to look gray. Similarly, blue-white paper reflects light most neutrally, allowing ink to determine the colors we see. Papers with a color cast skew the inks.

But is that necessarily bad? No—it only means you must be aware of how paper finish and color will affect your design. Ask to see printed samples, and then decide if the effect you see is the one you want.

• *Can you afford it?* The raw cost of paper isn’t the only factor of affordability. Paper should reinforce the thrust of your design and the message of your copy.

National Geographic, for example, is printed on the finest coated paper

because the publisher wants it to be one of the most beautiful magazines in the world; readers are expected to archive their copies.

On the other hand, *The Progressive* is printed on a cheap ground-wood paper; text is what counts here. Printing this highly political magazine on high-end paper would be ludicrously expensive and would also compromise its message.

• *Is the paper available?* Just because a supplier offers to sell it doesn’t mean it’ll be there when you need it. I once produced a magazine that was supposed to have 8-point covers. When the printer couldn’t get the paper in time, he substituted an 80-pound sheet, with predictable results from my boss, the Darth Vader of publishers. Get a written commitment and double-check it before your print date.

Also consider whether you’ll be reprinting your design. If paper consistency is important for the reprint, you must be able to buy the same paper stock when you need it. While there are no guarantees, you should be all right if the mill makes that sheet in large amounts. Specialty papers, however, are more problematic. Mills follow market fads when they make these papers, and fashions can change abruptly.

• *Is the paper politically correct?* This is an important issue for some readers, and thus for you as well. Should your paper be recycled? Recyclable? Chlorine-free? Tree-free? Most of these papers cost more, but if your clientele cares about the environment, the extra charge may be worth it. ♦

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