The Printer’s Customer: Where Automation Begins

Immediacy, everyone wants it. Immediacy is the time it takes to move a message from concept to the final consumer or audience. Your motivation may be different. If your message is conveyed by direct mail you are expecting sales; if you are an advertiser in a magazine or newspaper you are expecting a response, increased store traffic or a change in some other metric; if you are a cataloger you are expecting sales via the mail or through your website; and so on. No matter what your motivation is for producing the message there are many reasons to move that message quickly and no reason to hold it back.

If you are in the business of producing messages — whether as a publisher, corporate marketing communications (MARCOM) professionals, advertising agencies, catalogers, whatever (we’ll call everyone “publisher” from here on out) — you desire more immediate means for delivering the message and eliciting a response. There are real financial ramifications to being more immediate and this is an advantage that the Internet or television advertising have had over print recently, regardless of the ability of print to deliver better quality and to convey more meaning.

So what’s happened recently that brings printing back into the mix? Publishers have the ability to initiate and directly drive print jobs produced at printing companies with zero latency; same day or next day delivery to the consumer. Combined with print’s advantages in quality and message conveyance, not only is print competitive with electronic media, it has the advantage. Internet advertising sounds great, but in practice it takes days for ads to proliferate and it may take weeks for pages published on the Internet to make significant gains on the search engines. Broadcast isn’t instant either, production of television spots can take weeks or months and even if you are ready, distribution to broadcasters must be planned out well in advance.

I’m not saying all forms of printing are now competitive with electronic medium; actually its pretty specific to digital printing fronted by web-to-print systems, but the standards and tools that are available today to completely automate every aspect and put the publisher behind the wheel are becoming available for other printing applications.

Diron, Kodak, Objective Advantage and Duplo have presented a seminar for a few PIA Affiliates in which they demonstrate a digital printing job that is touched just three times by anyone other than the publisher:

1.) Once to load the paper to the printing press and hit “go,” (and this step can be optionally eliminated),
2.) Once to move the paper to the finishing machine, and
3.) Once to put the finished product in the mail.

There are a few factors that make this possible. First of all, in web-to-print applications the “template” that the customer modifies or ads content to is predefined and tested. This means that the trim size of the printed piece is known, imposition options can be calculated in advance regardless of the number of pages for each printing, color conversion and other prepress operations can be automated, and the parameters necessary for printing and finishing can be defined before the job is ever created. Secondly, all the
systems can exchange ever increasing job detail via Job Definition Format (JDF). Third, the customer is accepting of soft proofing.

Prior to 2006 the software and systems that used JDF as the glue in integrated process automation were largely relegated to tools for printers, prepress services, and bindery services. Last year both Adobe and Quark release layout tools that allow the designer or print buyer to originate JDF job tickets