



LAUGHING BEAR 120 NEWSLETTER

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The Surviving Small Press: Before You Hire a Printer

Years ago I worked for a company that dealt with the Army. One project was to produce a full color comic book of tips for maintaining the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Since I the only person there with any publishing experience at all (and it was minimal at the time), I was chosen to find a printer.

We wanted 4,000 copies of the prototype book on glossy paper. I took a dummy of the book around to all the printers I could find who did color printing and, after the bidding was done, we selected one who assured us they could handle the short run job and do it right the first time.

When the books came back from the printer the color registration was off by as much as a quarter inch in more than half of the copies. That means if there was a part of a picture that was orange it would have yellow ink bleeding out one side of the orange area and red coming out the other. The books looked horrible.

I took a box back to the printer's salesperson and asked what happened. He said that because of the size of his press the color would never come out right on such a short run job. We'd have to do a run of at least 10,000 to get 4,000 good books. About 3,000 at either end of the run would be ruined because the press would be getting up to speed and then slowing down – only the books in

the middle of the run would be acceptable.

Now the question is: Who was responsible for the print job being a disaster?

It was me. I got a bid on 4,000 books. I did not specifically say that I wanted 4,000 beautiful, usable books nor did I ask the printer how much overage (wasted copies) we'd have to add to the run to get them.

I assumed the printer knew what I wanted and he assumed he knew what I wanted, too. Unfortunately we didn't get together and compare our assumptions. He assumed that, as with most comic books, some poor registration would be acceptable. I assumed he'd realize that for a multi-million dollar contract nothing but perfection would do.

This doesn't mean you have to become an expert in printing to hire a printer. But you do need to become an expert in communicating your printing needs. A mistake can be costly and put you behind schedule.

As soon as you decide to do a book and publish it yourself, start talking to printers. The book may be a year off. You may not even be sure you can afford to publish a book; but you won't know anything until you ask.

A printer would much rather talk about a project sometime in the distant future than have you come in a couple weeks before you need the finished copies.

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Computer To Plate

Plates for offset printing are made by first photographing each page and developing the film. Then a graphic artist "strips" the film negatives onto frames. A frame is a paper or polyester sheet with a hole cut into it for each page to give the film more support and make it easier to handle, especially when there are several pages mounted (or "imposed") for printing the book "4 up", "16 up", etc.

The film images are then transferred to metal plates. The plate is coated with a chemical emulsion, and when light is shot through the negative onto the plate, the chemicals harden in the printing areas exposed to the light. A water-receptive material that attaches only to bare metal is then applied to the plates.

The offset printing method uses the oil and water principal so ink sticks where it should and washes away where it shouldn't. That works well, but it makes printing plants huge producers of toxic waste. Even if you submit your book to the printer as a computer file, the pages are still printed out and plates made in this way.

Computer To Plate (CTP) technology is the hottest subject in printing today. With it your computer file is transferred directly to a printable plate with all the pages imposed and ready to mount on the press. The reason you won't find CTP in your local print shop yet is the machines cost \$200,000 to

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Before You Hire a Printer *(continued)*

Printers, like everyone else, want to do a good job with the least amount of hassle and end up with a satisfied customer who'll come back. The best way they can accomplish that is to help you to give them exactly what they need to print your book so it comes out looking exactly the way you want it.

There is no one right way to do a print job. While you may think what you are asking for is obvious, the printer doesn't know whether you are asking for a 7" x 7", Smyth sewn, perfectbound book printed on blue satin finish paper with full color photographed page numbers printed halfway off the page corners because you have an artistic vision and lots of money or you just don't realize that such a print job is going to cost more than a house.

Start out by explaining to the printer what you want to accomplish with the book. Bring in samples of books similar to the one you are considering. Ask about the best way for you to prepare and deliver the book to them. Discuss budget, whether there will be illustrations, how you intend to sell it. Lay out the project and see what they think.

Be flexible. You can still afford to be at this stage. If you wait until the book is finished, you may find yourself locked into some expensive choices. So bat around ideas early on. The input you get may well help you better define the project for yourself. You'll have a better idea of number of pages, illustrations, the type of illustrations, page size, binding, and what it all will cost. It may make the project easier to complete since you'll know what you are getting yourself into.

Talk to several printers. They don't have to be local to give you an estimate and advice, but it is

easier. Even if you expect to end up working with a company in another part of the country, talk to some local printers. Get a lot of bids. But also take some time to learn as you go. It helps to have some clue of what you're doing, so take what one printer tells you and try it out on the next.

Find someone you can feel comfortable with. A lot of print salespeople promise the world but don't have any idea what they are talking about. A really high or low bid is a good sign they don't. Ask for samples and references. If they don't give samples, ask for titles and look for them in bookstores or the library.

A good printer will be proud of their work and you just might find they've already done a project exactly like you have in mind.

Discuss cost cutting measures. If you are doing a small book and want to use a special paper, maybe the printer has another job coming up with similar paper. You may be able to use some of the leftover paper from that job or tack your paper order onto the other and save some shipping costs.

If the paper requires special press setup, schedule your press run to follow right after the other job so you can save on those charges as well.

There are four expensive steps to every simple print run. First the press has to be inked and the plate and paper loaded. Then the press starts up and takes a while to get up to speed. During that time paper is wasted as the press isn't running fast enough to print well. Third, when the press is shut down, paper is wasted as it slows to a stop. Fourth, the plate has to be removed and another loaded. At the end and sometimes between plates the press has to be cleaned.

Each time the press has to be run to print a plate for your book, you pay for all those things. The

way to save money is obviously to have the press run as few times as possible by putting as many pages as possible on a single plate. This is called printing "up".

If a book is printed four up, that means four pages are printed at the same time. If the same book has 120 pages, it would have to go through the printing press 30 times. If you could find a way to print the book eight up, it would only have to go through 15 times and save you 50% on preparation, startup, shutdown, and cleanup.

How many pages you can fit on a sheet of paper obviously has to do with the size of the pages and the size of the sheet – and the size of the printing press. The pages need to fit on the sheet as economically as possible (with as little space between them as possible) because not only do you pay for wasted paper, you also pay for every slice of the blade that cuts your pages apart and trims off the waste.

Since the page size, sheet size, press size are so important, it would be really nice if there was an industry standard to go by. There is, sort of. Most books published have pages 5.5" to 6" wide and 8.5" to 9" tall. Most bulk paper and press plates are sized to accommodate those sizes. But to find out exactly what a printer is using, you need to ask the printer.

A fraction of an inch in either direction will not only affect charges for extra cuts, it will affect the number of words on a page, the size of your margins, and the size of your illustrations.

Your book will be cut again when it is bound. The basic economical page size for a finished book is 6" x 9", but the size when it is printed is a fraction larger. When the book is bound and all the pages folded and stapled or glued

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Before You Hire a Printer *(continued)*

together and inserted in the cover, the book needs to be trimmed square to get rid of any imperfections in stacking or pages sticking out. The size after the book has been trimmed is called “trim size”, and that is the size you need to be aware of for shipping, displaying, and marketing. It is also the size you need to be acutely aware of when formatting page margins.

Bleeding is another consideration in page size. When you want ink to go out to the very edge of a page, that’s a bleed. The printer is not able to print to the edge of the page, so to create the effect extra margin is left on the page and they print beyond the edge of the page into the margin. Then the margin is cut off and the page looks like it was printed to the edge. The margin that is cut off is wasted paper and the cut, of course, is an extra charge. For most books the only bleeds you’ll find are on the cover.

Color printing is very expensive. For each color on a sheet of pages, the sheet has to be run through again. So if you have a page with all the text in black ink and a blue accent line at the top of the page, the page will have to be printed twice – the paper will have to be loaded twice, two plates will have to be made, the press will have to be started and stopped and cleaned twice, and there will be twice the wasted paper.

A multi-color press can cut down time by running the paper through a series of drums each with it’s own plate and color. That cuts down on wasted time and paper, but you still pay for two plates and twice the cleanup. There’s also the extra overhead the printer carries by having a very expensive piece of equipment and someone trained to run it.

If you are using a single color or two in addition to black, ask the

printer when they have other jobs scheduled for those colors. You may have to have all your black printed at one time and the other color printed a week later, but you will save by not making the printer do extra work. It may be that the printer has a press reserved for a specific color they use often. Consider changing your accent color to that one.

The cover of your book is usually the item on which you’ll least want to spare expense. If it is full color, find out from the printer whether they will do it themselves to contract it out to another printer. Contracting it out may save you money, or you may feel that with the printer taking a percentage on it it may cost you more than having it done somewhere else, but in either case it could affect your schedule. If it is being done somewhere else, the printer will not be able to guarantee when it will be done. If that’s the case, have the cover done first so it is ready for the rest of your book.

There are several different ways to do a cover today. You can just use a heavier paper as is for a natural finish, have one side lacquered for the most common shiny finish, get the new in-vogue satin finish, but again, look at the books you most like for ideas and show them to the printer. And handle and beat up the cover you like. Especially do not choose a black matte finish before you’ve seen a book cover that has one. Every fingerprint shows.

Find out how many extra covers will be printed to allow for waste (overage), and request that they be saved for you. Extra covers can be used for Promotional purposes. Some publishers even have the backs of them printed with information about the book to be used in direct mailings and other marketing packages.

Binding is another item that is

regularly contracted out. The standard binding is perfectbound. That’s where the pages are stacked and glued like a notepad. You can also have them sewn in signatures and then perfectbound. A signature is a stack of 16 or 32 sheets with four pages each that are all folded together and sewed along the fold (the spine). The signatures are then stacked and glued into the binding. This kind of binding is more expensive, but very strong. Cloth bound books are made with sewn signatures. That is called “Smyth sewn” binding.

You can also use comb binding or spiral binding for a cookbook or any other kind of book you want to lay flat when open. Comb binding uses a plastic spine with teeth that curl around and hold the pages together. You can do comb binding yourself with a machine you can buy at any large office supply store.

If you are going to sell the book primarily to libraries or for classroom use, cloth binding is best because it is most durable. Next is Smyth sewn perfect binding. Libraries and schools expect to pay for extra durability in their books.

If you are expecting to sell most of the books to the public, but a significant number to libraries, have a percentage of the run cloth bound. The libraries will be more open to buying them. When a library buys a paper bound book it usually sends it out to be rebound in a hard cover or places it on reserve to make it last longer.

However you decide to have your book produced, your printer is key to the success of your project. They will help you keep within your budget and they’ll help you create a marketable, economical book. But only if you bring them in early and make them a part of your planning process. Your printer can be the most informed, least expensive consultant you’ll ever hire. ●

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CTP (continued)

\$400,000 and most printers using them are Beta testing them in partnership with the manufacturers.

Still, CTP is considered a technology that will revolutionize the printing industry. It is touted that not only will it produce far less toxic and material waste, it will result in faster turnaround times, higher resolution graphics, cost savings for both printer and publisher, and higher quality print jobs.

Drawbacks, for the time being anyway, include cost and proofing. Your basic high tech cash layout had better pay for itself in the two to three years before it becomes obsolete, be it a \$200 desktop scanner or a \$400,000 platemaker. There is no resale value in digital equipment, so unless a printer generates the volume of business to pay a machine off quick, they'll be waiting and watching until prices inevitably come down.

The proofing limitations are more likely to be felt by publishers. If the book goes straight from your input to the printing press, you can forget about galleys and other proofing steps, unless you want to pay through the nose for them.

Color proofing can be done digitally before the file is converted to plate, but once the plates are done, so are you. They can always send you a copy of the file to go through the platemaker, but isn't that what you sent them?

This will mean the burden of proofing will be on the publisher before it goes to the printer, which means you will have to rely on your office laser printer for the closest approximation of what the final book will look like.

Odds are that proofing methods will become available as the technology matures. For now the most practical use for CTP on your part is to be able to impress your printer that you are on top of the trends in his or her business. ●

Announcements

● **Vagabond Productions** (John Bennett, ed.; 605 E. 5th Ave., Ellensburg, WA 98926; <http://www.eburg.com/~vagabond>) is the electronic arm of Vagabond Press, one of the longest running and most respected literary small presses.

The web site is one of the best designed I've seen. It is easy to navigate from Vagabond history to a catalog of books and CDs to photos to links. The look is clean and very cool. Bennett also has an e-mail list, sending out "Shards", portions of his stories and articles.

● **A Simple Guide to Self-Publishing** by Mark Ortman (Wise Owl Books, PO Box 29205, Bellingham, WA 98228; <http://www.wiseowlbooks.com/publish>) has been updated in a third edition to include digital demand publishing, online publishing, ebooks, and distributing and promoting books on the internet. The book is supported by Wise Owl's web site with articles, a quiz on self publishing, and an e-newsletter.

● **Mira** (Media Image Resource Alliance; <http://www.mira.com>) is a new service of the Copyright Clearance Center. It allows you to choose from more than 60,000 photographs, cartoons, and images to license for use in books, promotions, presentations, and more. Mira just acquired 10,000 *New Yorker* cartoons. Mira also offers free research of their archives.

● **2000 PMA Publishing University** (Publishers Marketing Association, 627 Aviation Way, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266; <http://www.pma-online.org>; 310-372-2732) takes place May 30 to June 1 in Chicago. Featured are workshops, exhibits, and one-on-one time with publishing consultants.

● **InfoPost** (<http://www.infopost.com>) is a site where you will soon be able to sell e-versions of your books or anything downloadable online (a preview site is up now).

● **Book Promotion Made Easy** by Eric Gelb (Career Advancement Center, Inc., PO Box 436, Woodmere, NY 11598-0436; \$12 + \$4 p&h) is a new 58 page guide to event planning, presentation skills, and product marketing. It is designed to help you pinpoint your audience, design events to reach them, and sell your book effectively. Foreword by Dan Poynter.

● **Small Press Center** (20 West 44th St., New York, NY 10036; <http://www.smallpress.org>) has worked out a discount program with *The New York Times* to help its members advertise in *The New York Times Review of Books*. Contact the Small Press Center for details. You must be a member to participate, but SPC is a very good organization, so you might consider joining.

● **Unwound Magazine** (Lindsay Wilson, ed.; PO Box 835, Laramie, WY 82070; <http://www.fyuocuk.com/unwound.htm>) publishes poetry, short fiction, reviews, essays, photos, and artwork. A single poet is profiled in each issue. They also publish a irregular broadside series called *gluestick* and occasional chapbooks, like Lindsay Wilson's *Days Done Dry*.

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