

Printing Across Borders
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Print Standards and Print Buyers in the United States

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Who Cares About Print Standards?

Many people have devoted their personal time and energy toward developing and promoting print standards. The industry should appreciate these efforts, for everyone stands to benefit from well-written standards. With that said, let's look a bit further into our motives. Print standards work is not an entirely altruistic undertaking. Honestly, we all have our interests, and in some way, print standards serve our interests.

If you look at the PAB list of attendees, you'll find representatives from printers, prepress houses, equipment and software manufacturers, consumable manufacturers, trade associations, academics, and consultants. Each attendee has some obvious and legitimate interest in print standards. This is a good thing. It is difficult to write standards, and even more difficult to get them in use. If our work is to succeed, we must understand how each group benefits, and make that known, far and wide.

For over two years, we've worked on projects related to print standards (in the US). In that time we've spoken to many printers. We've talked to owners, technicians, and salespeople. The companies have ranged in size from mom-and-pop operations to large conglomerates. We started our work with the naïve assumption that everyone was in favor of standards. We learned quickly that's not the case. About half of the printers we've spoken to are opposed to standards. Why? Because they perceive that printing to standards makes their work a commodity. The profit margins in commercial printing are already razor thin, and they believe standards would make them even thinner. Another belief among printers is that they print "better than standards". For many printers, quality is their primary means of differentiation.

Because there is so little support for standards among American printers, we believe that commercial print standards in the U.S. are doomed to fail, unless we get some help from another group. That group has strong financial interests, and is known collectively as the print buyer. It includes corporations and/or their ad agencies. Print buyers can save money, improve quality and reduce response times by adopting print standards. And they have the financial clout to make it happen.

Strangely, there is not a single person on the PAB attendee list representing a print buyer, unless you count consultants as representing their corporate or agency clients. The absence of print buyers in standards work, and their essential role in standards adoption, led us to conduct some interviews. The results are interesting and encouraging.

Summary of Interviews with Print Buyers

When asked, “What are the biggest problems you face in your work?” the most common response was lack of “consistency”. This could mean many things, so we asked additional questions at a later point in the interview. Nearly all of the buyers we spoke to considered lack of consistency a major problem.

When asked, “if files were changed based on the printer’s proof?” the answers varied with the print buyer, and the particular printer they were using. One agency buyer, whose proofs were made by an internal prepress department, was opposed to printers changing their files in any way. The following question, “who paid for these changes?” revealed that buyers don’t generally pay for this work. [However, if this was common practice, it certainly would be built into the cost of every job.]

When asked, “what standards are you aware of?” most buyers have heard of SWOP and a few knew of GRACoL. No buyer knew any of the specific content of either of these specifications. No buyer could identify any other specification or standard.

Buyers were asked to rate the importance of possible benefits standards would provide, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The average response was:

- 3.0 - Assurance they're dealing with a competent vendor
- 3.0 - Consistency from a single vendor
- 5.0 - Consistency of appearance from multiple vendors
- 2.5 - Consistency of appearance regardless of materials
- 3.0 - Consistency of appearance regardless of process
- 5.0 - Consistency of appearance across borders (Asia mentioned as a concern)
- 2.0 - Metrics for acceptance/rejection of work
- 5.0 - Improved quality
- 3.5 - Improved response time
- 3.0 - Reduced costs

One print buyer told us that he would expect, and be willing to pay a premium for work that was printed to standards. He was willing to pay a 5% – 10% premium. This was a surprising result, in contrast to the many printer’s belief that standards would bring prices down.

When asked, “Do you support the development and adoption of print standards?” the answer was a unanimous and enthusiastic “yes”. Some comments were:

- “provided they are at a high level”
- “yes, get it done, the quicker, the better”
- “yes, 100%”

When asked, “would your company demand compliance with standards from your suppliers?” the answer was “not demand” or “not at the outset”. The implication was that print buyers would prefer to work constructively with their suppliers towards the adoption of standards, rather than threaten them with loss of business.

When asked, “how can we gain more support for standards in the print industry?” some answers were:

- “show a positive effect on the bottom line”
- “get print buyers to support standards”

When asked for recommendations to the technical people creating print standards
Answers ranged from:

- “sell and explain [standards] to the average user”
- “talk in my language”
- “talk to people who buy printing”
- “make more information available, promote”
- “explain how to incorporate standards”

Conclusions

In our work, we’ve seen little support for print standards by U.S. commercial printers. There are exceptions to this, of course. But, based on the overall situation, we believe that commercial print standards will not succeed, if we rely on printers to promote and implement them.

Print buyers are a powerful group that could reap large benefits from standards. They are supportive of standards work, and would push for adoption among their vendors. They don’t know or care about the technical details of standards work. But they are very clear about what they expect from standards – consistency. Most importantly, they have the financial clout to get things done.

Print buyers representing large, multinational corporations are especially interested in, and supportive of, international print standards. If the PAB initiative is to succeed, we need their participation. Standards groups should go out of their way to recruit these print buyers as members. Once they are involved, we should listen carefully to their needs, and make sure our work fulfills those needs. That is the surest way to gain adoption of standards in the marketplace.

In addition to involving print buyers with the development of standards, we must reach out to all interested parties. We must make them aware that print standards exist, and offer significant benefits for those who adopt them. All of this is needed, in addition to sound technical work.

Interview Questions for Print Buyers

Background Questions

- What kind of printing do you buy?
- How many agency clients do you serve?
- How many different printers do you use?
- Do you use a prepress company to prepare files and proofs? If yes, why?
- What kind of proofs do you use?
- What is the approximate dollar volume of your print purchases?

Current Problems

- What are the biggest problems you face in your work?
- What steps are you taking to solve these problems?
- Do you think print standards would help solve these problems? How?
- Do your printers make their own proofs of jobs supplied with proofs?
- Do you make changes to files based on the printer's proofs?
- Do you pay for these changes?
- Do you press check your print jobs? On what proportion of your work?
- How well do your printers match the okayed color proofs?
- Do you ever check the consistency of the press run?

Knowledge of Print Standards and Specifications

- Which print standards and specifications are you aware of?
- Do you have copies of these standards and specifications?

- Have you studied the technical content of these documents?
- Are you aware of standards for paper and ink?
- What groups are involved in the creation of standards and specs?
- Have you heard of:
 - SWOP
 - GRACoL
 - SNAP
 - ANSI
 - ISO
 - CGATS
 - ICC
 - FOGRA
 - IFRA
 - ECI
 - Idealliance
 - TR-001
 - DTR-004
 - ISO 12647
 - Altona Suite
 - ISO 2846

Current Use of Print Standards

- Which print standards and specifications do you use?

- How do you use them?
- Does purchasing/sourcing use print standards and specifications?
- Do your printers use print standards and specifications?
- Did you first initiate discussion of standards, or did your printer(s)?
- Are your files and proofs prepared in accordance with standards?
- Do your printers use color management technology? How?
- Do your creative people use color management technology? How?
- Does color management eliminate the need for print standards?

Expectations of Print Standards

- What benefits do you expect from print standards?

(Now, ask about the benefits we've identified)

- Rate the importance of these possible benefits on a scale of 1 - 5 (5 = very important)
 - Assurance they're dealing with a competent vendor
 - Consistency from a single vendor
 - Consistency of appearance from multiple vendors
 - Consistency of appearance regardless of materials
 - Consistency of appearance regardless of process
 - Consistency of appearance across borders
 - Metrics for acceptance/rejection of work
 - Improved quality
 - Improved response time
 - Reduced costs

Support for Standards

- Do you support the development and adoption of print standards?
- What level of standards would your company require?
 - Private (just for your own supply chain)
 - National
 - International
- Would your company support a standardization program for your supply chain?
- Would your company support participation in standards development work?
- How do your suppliers feel about print standards (if you know)?
- Would your company demand compliance with standards from your supply chain?

Recommendations to Technical People Creating Print Standards

- What should be done to make existing print standards more useful to your company?
- How could we gain more support for standards in the printing industry?
- Do you have any other comments or suggestions?