

Eight Things Every Print Buyer Should Know Before Choosing A Printer

by Aaron Corson

So you have to produce a printing project? Don't worry. Almost everyone has to do it at least once in his or her life. And most have survived. We've collected the best tips from those survivors and offer them to you as a survival guide for print buyers.

1. Like fingerprints, no two printers are alike. Every printer specializes in certain aspects of the printing industry based on its personnel and equipment mix. Some do short-run full-color work, while others focus on long-run, black ink-only jobs. Some printers are digital, and some have full-service design departments. Many printers tend to specialize in printing for particular industries.

You need to ask yourself what you need from a printer. Assess how many printing projects your company needs in a year—not on a job-by-job basis—and what types of projects you will produce. Once you determine your needs, you typically can find one printer to fulfill the majority of those needs. Like a job interview, ask your printer about its strengths and capabilities in relation to your business type.

2. Price is the easy answer. You may be quick to base your print-buying decision on price. While budget can be a prominent factor, consider other aspects of the purchase equation. *Quality* ranks among the ingredients for a positive printing experience. Many printers deliver quality products or they would have a rough time staying in business. So, discriminating print buyers often pursue *service* as a determining characteristic of good printers. Think about it. What is the opportunity cost of constant worry about how your project will turn out and if it will be on time?

When getting estimates from printers, you often hear of price breaks. While printing larger quantities generally offers a better price per piece, know that with new technologies you should get a reasonable price regardless of quantity, if your printer has more than one method for producing your work.

3. Work with someone you like and trust. The more comfortable you feel with your printing supplier, the better your print buying experience. And the less you know about printing, the more important your relationship with a knowledgeable salesperson. Allow the salesperson to teach you about print production associated with your projects.

You want your representative to be upfront and honest with you, and you need to be honest with them, as well. Schedule a review with your sales rep every six months to let the rep know how your printing needs or budgets have changed. Tell them if you are about to award a job to another printer based on price or capabilities.

You may not know if your printer has new equipment to eliminate the need to look elsewhere. This review also helps you in price negotiations as you start looking at printing needs as a whole, rather than on a project basis.

4. Know as many of the details of your job before asking for a price. You can quickly tell when you call a competent printer. A good printer asks many questions about your project rather than just blurting out a price. Be prepared before making the call. Have a solid understanding of what you need so you can give them the right answers. And if your printer doesn't ask the right questions, you still have all the right answers.

You may want to provide a written description of your job(s) and, in return, ask your printer for a detailed estimate and print schedule to assure you both understand the project. This also helps if you compare pricing.

5. Make sure your printer is accessible. Communication is the key to a successful printing project. Know when and how you can reach your printer, because you typically don't get to choose your deadlines.

Beyond their regular office hours, a printer should have an up-to-date website loaded with tools to help you work with them at any time. You should be able to transfer art files, place orders and look up resource materials to help get your project completed...even if you should be fast asleep.

6. You may think you know your job, but be open to recommendations. Remember all those questions your printer should ask? A good printer asks the tougher questions: "How will this printed piece be used?" and "What do you want to achieve with your project?" Through these questions, a printer can determine your needs and may suggest a better vehicle for achieving your goals.

To save time and money, trust your printer's skill and understanding of its industry. If you design your own artwork, consider getting your printer involved in the design stage.

7. Learn the printing industry. As with any profession, you encounter a seemingly foreign language when talking with printers. The more you know about printing, the more comfortable you will be in working with any printer. If you don't understand something a printer is trying to tell you, ask him or her to explain it so you can continue to learn this unique language.

A good printer's website should be loaded with resources that provide a good starting point in your quest for knowledge. But don't pretend to know everything right away. Print buying requires on-the-job training.

8. Mistakes are inevitable, but it's how they're handled that matters. Printing is a customized industry. Your job, while presumably similar to hundreds of others, is yours and yours alone. Mistakes will happen, especially if you do mounds of printing. Before you do encounter mistakes, find out how the printer plans to correct the situation.

Know if the printer has a quality assurance system in place to ensure your projects are completed right and on time. Ask if the printer has any tools in the production process that you can see to guarantee quality. If the printer is willing to put the commitment to quality on paper, your job has a better chance of coming back the way you want it.

*Aaron Corson
(aaroncorson@njc-ids.com)
is a partner and client
development specialist for
NJC Printing & Graphics,
a leader in the printing
industry in the St. Louis
area for more than 36 years.*