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To Coat or Not to Coat... That is the Question

I'm sure you, like many Indigo owners, have already begun to realize the enormous benefits of Indigo ownership: flexibility to meet customer demand on small run jobs, a wide range of options to present to your customer for various design ideas and the beauty of variable data printing with offset quality at the touch of a button and little or no make-ready.

That being said, you no doubt have arrived at the challenges of media selection when printing your customer's masterpiece, trying to make the best choice for your customer and your bottom line. This article will attempt to provide some guidance on your choices and alert you to possible pitfalls that you might encounter when making your media decisions for a given project.

Option 1: Optimizing DIY Style

Almost all Indigo films and some papers need to be optimized, or coated, with a treatment that will allow Indigo inks to properly transfer, adhere and dry on the substrate.

Several coatings available on the market will do the trick for many substrates. Indigo owners have been known to optimize their own substrates to control the amount of media they need and also perhaps to save some money in the process.

This option can work if the printer is familiar with coating weights, has the correct coating process and has enough volume of the same material where it makes sense to do so. The pros:

- Better control over needed material and inventory
- Saving money
- Ability to shop for the most economical material to coat
- Response time to obtain the material needed to print

However, the cons to this option can greatly outweigh the advantages:

- Inconsistent coat weights can produce inferior print results
- Coating can induce curl (in sheet-fed applications), which requires special tools to compensate for satisfactory processing
- DIY coating provides no guarantees to performance since the application is not covered by the coating manufacturer
- One coating process will not work for all types of substrates

Therefore it is advised that the DIY coater should have the following in place to justify using this method:

- Extensive coating experience using flexo or gravure coaters and understanding the importance of coating weight, viscosity, dry times, etc.
- Have projects using the same material, that are large enough to justify the expenditure of time and energy on such a project
- Have the available time on the coating equipment (or flexo press) to properly coat the substrate and convert it to print-ready condition
- Be willing and able to absorb any claims should the material fail to print (i.e. the savings should significantly outweigh the potential for liability)

Option 2: Toll Coating

Toll or contract coating is common among printable substrates and pressure sensitive applications. In toll coating, the customer specifies the substrates, coatings and expected performance (or end use application) and the toll coater will typically coat the material according to the buyer's specifications. In other cases, the customer will actually run or direct the coating process (usually with a toll operator present) and pay specifically for time on the machine and shipment of materials

Regardless of who directs the coating process, toll coating can be the next best thing to DIY because the buyer has access to the right tools for the job and the expertise necessary to get the job done right the first time. The upside to this process is, again, based mostly upon economic concerns over performance requirements. Toll coating works best when:

- A large amount of material (at least two to three rolls of wide-roll substrate) need to be coated, which can result in economies of scale
- A unique substrate that is not readily available in the marketplace is being used
- The cost of toll coating is below the material and expense cost of what purchasing certified material would be
- The toll coater is very familiar with the print application and is willing to handle a claim along with you, the printer

The drawbacks to this process, however, can be equally hazardous to the ill-informed:

- Coating equipment may be poorly maintained or worn out resulting in inconsistent material
- Toll coaters may not have available machine time when the buyer needs the work done (remember, this is "on demand" printing)
- Time on machines includes set up and clean up, as well as roll change-overs - all of which drive up costs considerably
- In sheet-fed applications, an additional sheet-conversion cost needs to be calculated into the overall cost (including tip-sheets for some synthetic applications, i.e. clear PET)

Option 3: Purchasing Certified and Optimized Material

This is the most common and reliable method of acquiring Indigo media. The typical Indigo project is less than 5,000 sheets (or equivalent mini-rolls). The very nature of on-demand printing requires a sort of "mass-customization" mind-set. In the new 5500, several different types of media may be stored in the feed drawers to prepare for different types of jobs. Because of this practice, the benefits of "Optimized in the Box" material are:

- Certified material is usually guaranteed by the supplier to work on the Indigo presses listed and therefore results in no waste to the printer
- It is packaged in convenient quantities and grades suitable for typical Indigo runs, while being easy to handle and parcel-post-friendly (usually 250/sheet boxes, less than 25 lbs.)
- Sales people and technical help are usually available by phone, email and the Web to help troubleshoot common problems
- Sample materials are readily available to "try before you buy" giving you and your customer a chance to sort through the wide array of available substrates before a choice is made

However, as with everything else, some drawbacks exist as well:

- Certified or optimized material can typically appear more expensive than DIY, as the buyer is paying for the converted product, the vendor's overhead and the mark-up. In addition media is usually sold in box-lots and vendors are reluctant to sell "break-packs"
- Some material may be hard to find or unavailable if it is not a popular type or application
- Optimized material is usually Indigo-specific, meaning it was not designed for multi-platform applications
- Most Indigo-optimized applications have a shelf life of one year to 18 months. After that time, performance may be compromised

To counter some of the downsides to certified material, work with your customer on known materials and material substitutes and consult with your Indigo media provider to insure that the materials your customer selects are available within the range of products offered.

In addition, don't forget to remind your customers that they are purchasing a small run of material which, although it can be printed "on-demand" does not necessarily mean "on-the-cheap." A job done on time, on spec and on budget is what added value is all about.

Whatever process you choose for your own optimizing needs, always consider what is best for your customer once the job is delivered. It is always challenging to try to justify extra costs when quoting a project or giving an estimate, but trying to shave costs and then dealing with a rejected job is a disaster for your customer and you. Choose wisely and keep those presses rolling and on demand. ☺

2008 Dscope Annual Conference Session Highlights

Make plans to attend the 2008 Dscope Annual Conference where technical users will participate in hands-on sessions operating on-site Indigo presses.

What Color is Your Solution?

This seminar will feature three unique approaches to a business solution using different toolsets to accomplish a variable imaging mailing. Panelists will be asked to outline and review the process from piece concept to production, detailing applications used, file formats and press-ready file types created for production.

Problem Solving Methodology

In today's dynamic marketplace, thinking outside the box to solve our customers' problems is imperative. Learn better methods and techniques to solve challenges. Understand the process of solving a problem and test your employees' problem-solving abilities.