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Avoiding the Pitfalls of Going Digital

There's a lot of misinformation out there and I will be taking you through the most common issues that I have encountered, and the products that I feel you should have in order to make the best graphics in the most efficient way possible.

By David King

I spend a lot of time doing Print Shop Makeovers for sign shops all over the USA & Canada, and everywhere I go, I see the same problems replicated from shop to shop when I encounter a shop that has a printer, laminator, and cutter.

FULL STORY

These problems almost always start with the line "My distributor said to…," and almost every single thing I am told that the "distributor said" was just plain wrong!

Of course, during the course of the Makeover, my customer will ask me, "Well then, since just about everything that I was told you have proven wrong, how do they get away with this?" So, I will be taking you through the most common issues that I have run across, and the products that I feel you should have in order to make the best graphics in the most efficient way possible.

Color profiles for your printer
When I get to a shop and ask them to show me their workflow, I am amazed at the amount of time that is spent on the computer trying to figure out how to get the color right. Most of the time, they were told that not only must they use a profile for each media, but they must also learn about color so they can "get the color right." WRONG, WRONG, and WRONG… In 90% of the shops I visit, using just one profile can make just about everything RIGHT! Profiles are only a small part of the color management process. In order to become color savvy you will need to understand the media color, media finish, printer heat, printer resolution, Pantone (PMS) colors vs. CMYK, RGB vs. CMYK, file resolution, and software applications (Vector vs. Pixel). Only after you understand these issues, can you (in almost all cases) use just one profile and 90% of your jobs will come out fantastic and the colors will be right on!

Media for your printer
The next fun task I have is to take the

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media/material and throw most of them away. You really only need three adhesive-backed vinyls for 90% of your jobs. They would be a low cost permanent adhesive, a removable intermediate one, and a premium cast vinyl. You will also need three window films, clear, translucent, and perf. You also don't really need more than two banner materials, a 13oz block-out and a mesh. Of course, you can also have on hand a few other specialty materials, such as wallpaper, Tyvek, etc., but generally, this list covers 95% of all your needs.

Printer heat

WOW, this is one of the most surprising issues for me. In so many of my cases, the heat that is recommended for many of these medias is way too hot. Most vinyls do not need more than 30°c for pre-heat, 35°c for print-heat and 50°c for post-heat. If you use what most manufacturers "recommend," your vinyl will buckle and cause heat strikes. The shop I was at earlier this week was running the heads on high (raised above the media to the highest level) until I fixed the setup and now they run everything at the low setting. I also setup their printer so that the RIP is not waiting for the printer to heat up or cool down between jobs. Setup properly, you can increase your output per day by 20% minimum.

Laminator

This is, without a doubt, the most upsetting part of my MakeOver, as most distributors sell totally inadequate laminator solutions for the intended job. When I say inadequate, I mean a totally useless piece of equipment that cannot run 10' of laminate without buckling the vinyl and destroying the graphic. This most recent MakeOver trip (and at three of my other MakeOvers), I had to tell my clients that the laminator they purchased for around $2,500 was only good for a boat anchor and they had to go out and spend about $9,000 for a real laminator. Let me make it very clear, the laminator is the most important part of the purchase, despite that the distributors "throw it in" like it's a sample roll of vinyl. Shame on them!

Printer Server - RIP

I already know your question here, and, yes, you can use Flexi as the RIP and it works great. Unfortunately, most of the companies that I see are never shown how to use the Flexi RIP properly. One hour of training and the jobs are flying through the system and everything is working great. If you have purchased a real RIP program like Onyx, then you are all set with a very powerful and great RIP print server. Either way, without a good understanding as to how to make the RIP work, you are going to waste a lot of time and media.

Laminate

Again, another surprise for me, as when I have shown my clients what laminates to purchase, they reduce their waste by 50%, and if they print 10 prints, they ship 10 graphics. I show them how over 75% of all the jobs use just one laminate, and how to cut the waste, the number of errors and redoes to almost nothing. To sum it up, when I am done with one of my MakeOvers, you will see that 95% of all jobs use one of two laminates.

Working area

When my clients upgrade their shops to a new Light Table like, Large Format Digital Graphics.com, they find that they produce 50% more graphics in the same day. They reduce the cutting errors, they are now able to make backlit graphics much easier, cut fabric with the heat knife without issues, and reduce the scratching of banners on the smooth glass surface. Yes, these units are a bit pricy (about $4,000), but once you have one in your shop, you will see how much money you save and will kick yourself for not having gotten one sooner.

Cutting tools

A panel saw is an absolute must! Sure, you can cut everything by hand, but let me tell you that a good panel saw is the best, fastest, and most accurate way to cut graphics short of paying over $70,000 for a digital die cutter. I recommend having a very solid panel saw in your shop. Also, a Fletcher wall cutter is a great tool to have in the shop, as the panel saw cannot cut everything. Wall cutters are best for Foamcore, Coroplast, Polystyrene, and cardboard. These substrates will not go through a panel saw without issues. Next, you need a snap blade. I like the ones they sell at Home Depot for about $5 each. They are tan with a black strip on the handle and they are the best choice for a cutting tool in your shop. The snap blades are great because you can keep snapping the dull blades off to keep the knife consistently sharp, and the cost is low for replacement blades. A corner rounder is also a great tool to clean up the edges on products like Dibond.

Cleaning chemicals

The best for me is 70% Isopropanol Alcohol, applied with a terrycloth towel. The towels come from Home Depot in the cleaning department for about $12 for 50 rags. Use this to clean all of your boards, vehicles, walls, and floors before installing graphics. For the best price, be sure to get the alcohol from the local drug store in the quart bottles. Cleaning off adhesive is best done with Xylene, it is fast, and cleans the adhesive off everything (including vehicles) without damaging the surface. As far as application fluid goes, don't purchase the expensive stuff; just use a drop of joy soap in a bottle of water. Remember that all vinyl attached to clear surfaces should be done

with application liquid. Silicon spray lubricant is ideal for all metal parts on your laminator, panel saw, wall cutter and other items that need lubricant.

The message to you is that selling a solution for making large format graphics is a "solution sale" not a printer, cutter, and laminator combination sale. You must be very careful that you purchase the right printer for the work you are doing, the proper media for the jobs you will be taking on, the appropriate substrate for the application, and the correct laminate for the finish and durability of your graphics. If you do not know what is the "best choice" for your company, than I suggest you hire an industry expert to come in and help you make the right decisions, and to show you how to make all of the equipment work together to produce the industry's best large format digital graphics.

Good luck, and be smart with your money, and I will see you on the show floor!

Dave King is "Commander of Results" at MarketKing, the master of printing and graphics that offers the Print Shop Makeover. This program is designed to teach business owners how to be successful with large format digital graphics. For more information, go to **www.TheMarketKing.com**.