

# Digital Printing & the Impact on Yearbook Publication

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## **Introduction to Yearbook**

Traditionally, yearbook publishing has been a field where a school needed a printing representative, a printing plant, and months of work to produce the annuals that are so treasured. Until very recent years, the work was all done with hard copy photos and (just a little farther back) paste up typography. There was no way for schools to do the majority of the pre-press and proofing on their own. As the digital world develops, however, this is beginning to change greatly.

Initially, as digital options led to less pre-press, there was a turn to “rep-less” printing, companies offering to take a school’s files through an FTP site and produce a book without having to deal with a sales representative. This hasn’t been hugely successful because most school teachers didn’t want to have to know the technical end of printing, and a call from a service tech was confusing. Though now, with better digital presses and the improvement of methods of submission, there are fewer technical problems that the school has to deal with, and more and more of the pre-press and even proofing are done directly in the classroom.

With the influx of the digital press, yearbook companies (as well as every online photo printer such as Snapfish) can now offer fast turn around on yearbooks as well as personalized smaller books for clubs and sports teams. A yearlong process, could in some cases be condensed to a few months or weeks towards the end of the year- ideally for a small school. This change in deadlines greatly impacts all aspects of the yearbook business because it can be difficult to explain to a school on traditional offset why the school down the road on digital has extra time at the end of the year to finish their book.

## Digital Press 101

Though not the first digital press (HP launched the Eprint 1000 in 1993), in 2002 Xerox's iGen 3 "claimed that [it] will allow low enough pricing to allow a printer to produce a children's color picture book 'at a profit.'" (Digital Press Discussion 2003). This press opened the door for many companies to begin producing short run jobs at a much lower cost. In the yearbook world, this allowed for a variety of program options; smaller schools had an affordable option to print just one hundred books at a reasonable per book rate. Even large schools, selling 1500 books, are closer to the short run jobs made easier by the digital press than jobs that print hundreds of thousands of copies.

To cross into the digital world efficiently, my printing company purchased an iGen4. This printer was superior with the ability to print oversized sheets and the system's automatic testing to ensure consistent images (Xerox 2008). The purchase allowed us to expand our market and drive down the cost. Currently, Xerox has a significant lead among printers-44.2% over HP's Indigo at 16.1% (Sorice 2004). The largest concerns with digital press have always been primarily quality based; it is easy to see the difference between our traditional print books and the digital ones. In a study by the RIT Printing Industry Center, Professor Robert Chung explored the differences in traditional offset printing and the wave of digital press (2007). In his study, he found that the number of print demerits were always higher off the digital press, albeit only in small margins. Color has a hard time coming out exactly to match, and the machines must be carefully maintained to prevent them from going down. Some of this is due in part to the lack of standards and regulations on digital printing and the lack of trained press technicians in house when a problem does occur.

However, in an article from American Printer, Going Digital, Staying Lithographic, the author points out that "vendors have probably pushed the appearance of digital color as far as it needs to go... the widespread adoption of desktop color printing devices have accustomed people to the quality and look of digital color" (Henry 2007). In another RIT survey, one of the digital service providers as-

essed the need for a set of digital print standards by saying, "our expectations are relatively unimportant. Digital color has met our clients' expectations, and therefore it has met ours" (Pellow 2003). For us, schools are used to the look off of much lower end copy machines and desktop printers, a book coming off of a digital press isn't going to look bad to their eyes.

As the world continues to change however, HP announced in May of 2008 that they will be focusing their technologies on new products to improve speed, reduce the costs for digital print providers, and focus on color (Kapel 2008). The next few years are expected to bring larger web-fed digital presses as well as more presses designed for high-quality publishing. As HP currently holds the number two position in the digital print world, their goal is to be the best and surpass Xerox. Despite any limitations, the consensus across the print world is that "everything that can go digital will" (Kapel 2008).

## Bringing Schools the Digital Revolution

The greatest challenge for any publishing done within a school is the lack of technologies available. Budget crisis continually impact schools and more often than not, they feel that as long as there is a functioning computer lab of some degree, they are in good shape. With printing however, more and more of the workload is being handled in a classroom, and the limitations of out of date programs and old computers are being felt. Desktop computers that are more than two years old "act like boat anchors attached to the stern of your workflow" (Hinderliter 2003). Newer computers are much faster, their hard drives are more compatible with upgrades, and they most likely have more efficient networks. In most schools however, this is more of a dream than a reality.

As an RIT study discovered, "successful digital printers have maintained a continued focus on diversifying their offerings" (Pellow 2003). Many of the yearbook printers have developed alternatives to traditional desktop publishing programs in order to keep accounts that cannot afford costly computer upgrades. One such option is the plug-ins to accompany programs such as PageMaker and

InDesign. These plug-ins allow for image placement and color correction in a fast, simple process (among other things). However, many schools cannot even afford PageMaker or InDesign. For these schools, the most common alternatives to a traditional desktop publishing program include online page creation programs and proprietary software.

With online page creation, schools do not need to spend money on software, but they are being offered many of the same features that they can find in programs such as InDesign. Work can be done ideally from any computer, any where, at any time, and when pages are completed, they are electronically sent to the printing plant as a PDF file to be printed with very little inspection. Schools like this option because it does not tie them to one location for their work, and the features are relatively easy to use and navigate. The weakness with an online option, however, is that many school networks place high security features on the web settings so that it can slow down the process greatly. Old, overworked networks can prevent schools from uploading photos or even sending their pages to the plant.

Proprietary software is also provided to the school at no extra cost with the mindset that they do not need any additional programs than what is provided. Most of these programs control the entire creation process through the use of templates, set typefaces, and pre-selected colors. Most photos and art can be imported and placed on a page for resizing, color correction and other adjustments. When the book is done, the entire file is compressed and sent to the printing plant to be run, electronically or on a hard disk, again with little inspection. The weakness of the proprietary software is that it can usually only be loaded and accessed on one computer. In some cases a school doesn't have more than one computer, but in a large classroom that would slow down the book creation process greatly.

So far, the more successful alternative has been the online page creation. Every company has seen a huge boom in the use of these programs, and many yearbook printers have outsourced their web development to ensure that their online program succeeds. Schools want their online programs to

do more than simply create a page template; web sites must keep the book organized, have different levels of security, and manage all of the links for the art and photos.

## **The Impact of Snapfish**

For years, a school yearbook was the printed recollection of the entire school year. For high school students, it was the capstone of their senior year. Of course, there have always been the collections of personal pictures stuffed in photo albums or even more creatively scrapbooked together versions with elaborate papers and graphics, but they didn't carry the same weight as the actual school yearbook, with captions and copy to explain and capture the year. And then things began to shift.

When digital cameras became an affordable option in photography, the world had to find ways to soothe the demand to print and share these photos. At first, you could send your photos to the same places you always developed your traditional film, and soon you were able to upload the photos to those printers right from home. Online photo sharing became larger and larger when you didn't even need to print the photos, but instead you could just send the link to your friends and family to view. Eventually, these photo printers realized that people didn't want to just order 150 prints of, say, their senior prom- they wanted to order a complete photo album.

Most online photo printers like Snapfish, Kodak Easy Share, and even Walgreens offer some form of book creation. The sizes and options are fairly standard across the board and prices are extremely reasonable thanks to the digital press. Much like the Offset Paperback Manufacturers out of Philadelphia, "do-it-yourself" book printing has increased company volume in leaps and bounds (Pellow 2003). The worth of the small online photo companies has exploded with the digital era.

Even a company such as Apple has realized the worth of being able to create complete photo albums. Apple's albums are some of the most advanced and attractive on the market. Their templates have a greater variety than many of the more simple competitors, and they offer a greater

selection of cover materials. Like the other companies, turn around time is talked about in days and not weeks. An afternoon spent creating an album digitally can be rewarded in three business days as opposed to dropping off film, waiting for it to be developed and then having to still put it all together.

For school publishers, to let this share of the market slip away would be devastating. Jostens Publishing launched a program called "Our Hub" recently in order to capture this market (Jostens 2009). Students, who know the publisher because they purchase the yearbooks, can go online (where many go to order their yearbooks anyway) and they can create an entire book of their own. For a sports team or a club, this is a huge draw. Pricing is planned out well, not too expensive for the single student ordering an album (about \$35 for a 22 page book), but the price decreases if you are ordering several for a team or club members. The company provides templates and artwork and the students can log on and create something that is a step above their Snapfish photo albums.

## **Saving the Yearbook Industry**

Much aligned with the sentiments of "everything that can go digital will," the yearbook industry must stay current and adaptive in order to survive. The use of the Internet to create pages, increase sales, and involve schools is a huge step in the direction of all successful digital printers. As the RIT survey on The Role of Value-Added Services in Successful Digital Printing states, "while all of the digital print service providers all have websites, the successful digital printers offer more complex services. ... Successful digital printers have maintained a continued focus on diversifying their offerings" (2003).

Without a concise plan of action, the small printers out there will slowly eat away at the profitability of school yearbooks. The Our Hub program with Jostens has proven to be successful, recently partnering with Pop Warner to provide books marketed to the parents of kids in little leagues across the country. When you look online, you will see that the templates are not just geared to high school students. The company hopes that through word of mouth or parent involvement, the product will be of

use to a greater market. There are currently templates for everything from weddings to Girl Scouts. The website is flashy and engaging and the process of creating an album is very easy.

Currently, my print company only has one plant offering the digital services. The other five focus on more traditional methods of print. In order to compete with other companies we will have to increase the number of digital presses we use. Until we have the presses to support the demand, we haven't been able to market ourselves fully or offer options such as the Our Hub line that Jostens finds success with.

## **Educating the Future**

The final key to keeping ourselves current and necessary in the digital world is through continued education. Schools will adapt with the changes in technology, even if it is slowly. As representatives for a print company, we have to know the latest methods, trends and technologies, and offer them to our customers- or risk losing our footing.

It is critical that reps join different professional organizations so that they are a part of the print world. The Journalism Education Association and the National Scholastic Press Association are not strictly "print" organizations, but as it impacts the schools, the discuss topics as varied as yearbook staff problems to digital color variations. School teachers are on these forums reading the posts and reading the newsletters, and you would be surprised to know that accounts have been lost because a sales rep didn't show their customer the latest program options but they read about it. Also, subscribing to trade magazines such as How will help to keep you current in trends and issues.

Adobe is a great way to stay current and educate your self. Sign up for their seminars and classes. They offer many small local events during the year, but also conventions such as Photoshop World that will help to inform you of new technologies. Being part of the Photoshop World has let us instruct our schools how to get the most out of their digital photos and the know how to place and colorize the photos so that proofs do not come back as a surprise. Also, buy the products that Adobe

and Pantone have to offer. The ColorVision Spyder is “a monitor calibration system that assures designers of monitor accuracy and consistent color output to print, Web, or video” (Brown 2005). This, or a similar product such as Huey, will help to ensure that your print quality matches the customer’s expectations. You can essentially print a proof of a questionable item and allow them to check over everything before even sending it to the plant. Having the know-how to use that kind of equipment (even doing some of the cheap and easy monitor calibration methods) and the foresight to show it in a school will make you appear as the expert as well as indispensable to the school.

A final thought on the future of digital printing is to be an active part of the revolution. Tour your plants to talk to the pressmen and know how it all works. Take classes on web development so that you understand the processes involved in your own website. Push yourself so that you don’t fall behind. If you have the mindset that traditional offset printing is superior or if you focus on the few weaknesses of digital, you will fail in the print world. In the yearbook world, we like to think that the students producing these books are the future journalists or publishers. Once in awhile they will find that inspiration and get motivated to join the print industry, if we provide them with as much information as possible, they will be the ones to keep revitalizing the print world.

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