

Finishing Without Failure

Avoiding the real-world production pitfalls that make you finish dead-last.

BY DAVE KING

Is it realistic to think that if you do your job correctly you should *not* expect to be paid for it? Is it fair that one customer gets their jobs done faster than another *for the same price*? Is it right that you have to stay late and finish the graphics, when the rest of the office *goes home*? How far are we expected to go in the name of *customer service*?

All great points, but what are you going to do about it?

THINGS CAN GET UGLY

Okay. Consider this scenario. ABC Corporation calls asking for 10 30" x 40" Lambda prints mounted onto Sintra for an upcoming trade show. A price of \$135 is agreed upon (the client providing images on disk) and a 72-hour turnaround time. ABC ships the disk via FedEx. So far so good. Or so you think.

The file you receive on Monday is in 8.5" x 11" format, the logo is a GIF file and all the fonts are missing. An 8.5" x 11" file won't scale to 30" x 40" and the GIF logo won't work. The client agrees to fix the file and re-send the disk. A new disk arrives with proper size formats and all the fonts, but the GIF logo file was simply scaled up in Photoshop to 300 ppi and saved as a 48 meg TIFF file — and it still looks like crap. The client doesn't understand the difference between vector and pixel-based files, but finally agrees to let you fix the file. You agree to recreate the logo as an EPS file, but now your designer needs PMS color information for the logo's corporate colors. The client never heard of PMS colors. By Thursday you have the files you need, but realize you only have three hours to print, laminate,



An idle printer is lost profits. Consider queuing up longer jobs to print through the night. Prints will be ready for finishing first thing in the morning.

mount and package up these graphics before UPS comes for his daily pickup.

Then you realize that you didn't even get the satisfaction of billing them for a *rush* job, and now your *boss* is upset. You have put two-and-a-half hours of design time into a half-hour billable job. You've invested over two hours of your own time in phone calls in the job — but you sold it for your standard price, without a rush charge. I know this has never happened to you, but I thought you would get a kick out of *my* day!

AVOIDING THE PROBLEM

So how do you prevent this kind of thing from happening? Good question.

First, talk to your new clients about these types of problems up front. Discuss PMS colors, vector files, logos, and realistic turnaround times — and most of all, discuss *rush charges* and when/why you have to charge them.

In most cases these problems are easily avoided, but some clients will never learn, and will leave you if you charge them *rush*. The key to success is to determine the *value* of a customer — if the customer brings you a lot of business and the profit margin is high, then it might be worth dealing with the occasional short turnaround. But, if you're servicing an account that demands low prices and fast turnaround, and they only do occasional business with you, you might want to stick to your guns on the *rush* charges, even if they go away. Sometimes it takes them trying their luck at another company for them to realize how good they had it with you.

EDUCATE, EDUCATE, EDUCATE

The next step is to educate your sales people as to the real capabilities of your shop. If you have one inkjet printer that

moves at two inches a minute, then ten 30" x 40" prints are going to take about 150 minutes (2.5 hours) to print. Add about 30 percent more time for finishing and you have a realistic job turnaround estimate. Since only one job can run on the printer at a time, it should be very easy to plan out your day for the printers. Next, you need to set realistic goals for your front-end people. If you have two inkjet printers — one with indoor inks and one with outdoor inks — then you need to schedule your front-end work based on each printer's ability to get the work done in a day.

Never let a printer sit idle. This results in a *huge* loss in revenue. If you have orders for one banner, one outdoor sign, one outdoor site sign and three different poster orders; then you need to review the

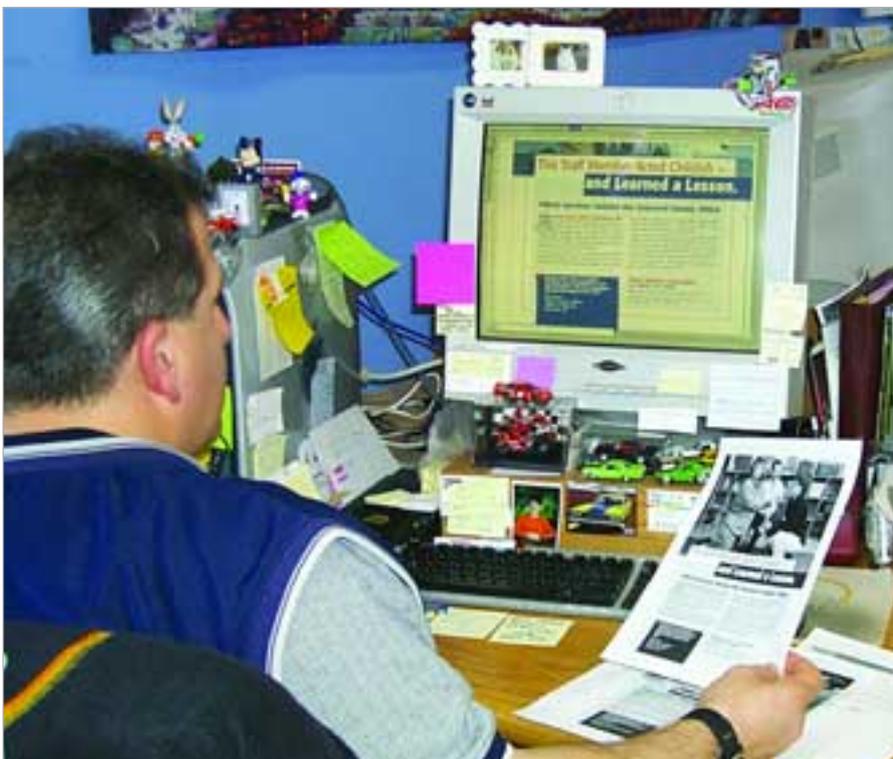
amount of work for each job (how much prep time and design time are needed for each job), figure out what files you can get over to the RIP fastest to keep the printers running. Then, while the printers are printing, you can work on the more time-consuming jobs.

If you plan your day properly, you can have the next files for printing queued at the RIP before the last job is finished printing. If you have a RIP server on your printer, you will be able to RIP and queue jobs to the printers while they are still printing other jobs. A little hint about printing graphics for mounting — you should always over-size the image (either on the RIP or at the front end) so the mounting department has a little leeway for mounting.

COORDINATE JOBS

Next, you need to work with your finishing department and set up proper procedures. If you have three poster orders, one that requires matte lam on Sintra, one with matte lam on foam board and one with luster lam on Gator board; try printing the two matte jobs on the same roll of paper. This way the finishing department can run both jobs at the same time and save time and materials.

While the printers are printing, the finishing department can be cutting the



One of the most common pitfalls among digital printers is poorly set up client files. Educating your clients up front on file specifications, sizes, formats, resolutions and fonts will save you countless pre-press headaches and rushed production schedules.

Finishing



The laminator is a key element in your production flow and should be webbed up and ready to go as the last print is finishing. While the printers are printing, the finishing department can be cutting the mounting boards and creating the packaging materials for shipping.



As your operation grows and becomes more complex, you might want to consider looking at a full order-entry and tracking system for your shop.

mounting boards and creating the packaging materials for shipping. The laminator should be webbed up and ready to go as the last print is finishing. The box for shipping should have been made and be ready to seal up by the time the graphics are finished.

If your laminator has only one set of rollers and they are hot for laminating, then you are in big trouble. Most hot rollers take over an hour to cool, and it's a bad idea to mount a print with hot rollers.

As your operation increases in size, you might want to consider looking at a full order-entry and tracking system for your shop. The two companies that come to mind are iSystems Inc. (makers of TQT Tracker) and SAP Systems.

MAXIMIZE YOUR EXISTING EQUIPMENT

Don't fall for the *I need better equipment* syndrome. You would be amazed at the number of hours that printers stand idle. Most printing equipment these days can run 24 hours a day if you can get long enough media. So, if you have large jobs that can run through the night, run the small jobs during the day and the larger jobs at night.

Since acquiring our first Encad NovaJet Pro 50 printer (back in 1994) we have always purchased equipment that can run through the night without anyone watching it. If you have one inkjet printer that runs at 2" per minute, then from 5:30 pm to 8:30 am you can print 130' of material — and if you have an average of 30" wide images and sell your prints for around \$8 per square foot (cost of about \$3 per linear foot) you will generate a profit of \$2,210 per night. If you only do this a few nights a

week, you could add more than \$16,000 to your bottom line in a couple of weeks! Plus, you would have a lot of work ready for the finishing department in the morning, thereby reducing its down time.

If you are looking at new equipment, you might want to consider focusing on any bottlenecks in your workflow. You might find that maybe a new cutter or a better mounting table, or even something as simple as a compressed air hose at the table might make the whole shop run faster.

ALLOW FOR HUMAN ERROR

So many parts of your operation have known, fixed process times — especially print production and finishing. All you need to do is understand them and make sure you allow for human error. You will always find that the jobs that are rushed are the ones where you make the stupid mistakes. I was once told a line that I loved: “You never have enough time to do it right the first time — but you always find the time to redo the job for *free!*” The average cost of a job that is done wrong is more than the profit on the job. Print smart and you will finish without failure.

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