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Digital Printing vs. Press Printing — A Comparison Guide

When it comes time to print your brand identity materials, there's one overarching question for you to consider — whether to print the resulting materials on a digital printer or traditional press. There are many differences between the two processes, some of which are outlined below.

Digital Printing

Less expensive — Digital printing is a direct-to-paper printing process. As a result, it often runs about one-half of the cost of press printing.

Lose color accuracy — Digital printing is a four-color printing process. Four colors — cyan, magenta, yellow, and black — are printed in tiny dots that when visually mixed together, create various colors. This, in addition to the different set-ups and settings on the machines from press-to-press, batch-to-batch and printer-to-printer, can produce a wide range of different color results. You can never be certain what you'll get.

Lose color range — Four-color printing has limitations on the brightness, saturation, and range of colors available — when mixing colors in this way. To produce bright reds, oranges, blues, and purples, especially, press printing is a better choice.

Cost of proofing — Proofing is one way to produce accurate color. Proofing can be costly, especially when compared to the overall cost of the job. But, since the proof is created on the same equipment that the final job is printed on, it is often quite accurate.

Can be faster — Since no pre-press work or press setup is needed, running your job on a digital press can be faster, depending on how many jobs the printer has in the queue before yours. Some printers can even offer same-day service. Three days is a standard turnaround time for many of the web-based digital printing companies.

Limited paper choice — Digital presses can only accommodate a limited paper thickness, and many digital printing companies only offer smooth, white papers. Thus, if a thick business card is important to you, then digital printing is not your right choice.

Limited choice of material sizes, styles, and formats — Digital printers will offer a very specific "menu" or range of products. If you want to create innovative marketing materials, such as the brochure-style business cards that we create at elf design, then digital printing is not a choice for your project. Large formats are also not available with many digital printers, as the largest paper size they can accommodate is 11" x 17".

Press Printing

More costly — The difference in costs is mainly due to setup costs. For press printing, films must be produced, and plates may have to be produced as well, which are additional items that add to the overall cost. Additional time is involved in setting up and aligning the press, as well as washing the press. Also, there are more overruns from traditional printing, since you cannot program in a specific number of pages to be printed as you can with a digital printer. Most printers consider overruns to be billable, or they add an additional cost for that into the initial estimate. Jobs done on a press will typically run about twice the cost of digital printing.

Excellent color accuracy — The Pantone Matching System (PMS) offers great color accuracy. Pantone colors are mixed to precise, pre-set specifications, which are printed each year in their color matching guides. You can consult these books to see exactly what the final color will look like in advance. It's a lot like going to the paint store and specifying colors for your home on the paint chips they offer — you know what you'll get. So, if color accuracy is important to you, then press printing may be the best choice.

Brighter colors are available — Since the Pantone colors are mixed using inks, they can be created to be much brighter and more intense. So, if lively colors are important to your brand image, then press printing may be the way to go.

Cost of proofing — For four-color press jobs, proofing is often not too expensive when compared to the overall cost of the job. However, it can be inaccurate, depending on the type of proof run and the type of press on which your final job will be printed.

For two- or three- color jobs printed using the Pantone system, complete color proofing is often not available. However, samples of the colors are available in the Pantone books. And, inexpensive laser prints or inkjet prints can be created to view the positioning of the elements of the page. With a little imagination, you can visualize how the final job will look.

Press printing can take longer than digital — There are several additional steps involved in press printing, which are taken care of using direct-to-press, digital technology. Films and plates must be made, the press set up, run the job and then tune us needed for drying. Then cutting, folding, and other finishing must take place.

Types of paper — Choose from an entire rainbow of paper colors — fire-engine red to deep blue, sunflower yellow to pitch black. There is also a wide range of thicknesses and textures from which to choose, including specialty papers, such as vellum and metallic papers. If you are considering using nontraditional paper your card or materials, press printing is the best way to go.

Wide range of finishing techniques — All finishing options are possible with press printing. Metallic inks can be run through the press as easily as can a nonmetallic ink. Embossing, die cutting, and foil stamping can be done in traditional printing houses. You can create materials that really stand out using these techniques.

Innovative formats, shapes, and sizes are possible — Traditional press printing can accommodate a wide range of paper sizes and can result in innovative and creative finished projects. This is largely due to the "have-it-your-way" range of options, where you can specify special sizes and finishing techniques.

We hope that the above primer on the pros and cons of both digital printing and press printing helps you to decide which you will choose to produce your materials.

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