

HOTSHEET

THE PRINTER—PUBLISHER RELATIONSHIP

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Sam Stedman

Ideally, a magazine's relationship with its printer should be among its most enduring and, at the risk of being dramatic, even intimate. And just like any relationship, it can take time to find the right fit, and certainly takes a bit of effort and—occasionally—patience. Spending the time choosing a good partner up front can save a lot of time and effort (and maybe even heartache) down the road.

If you've got industry contacts, asking around for referrals is an obvious place to start. If not, consider sleuthing out who takes care of the printing of other magazines that you admire. And, of course, there's always Google to help round out your options. No matter how you discover them, you're going to want to get a variety of quotes, as each different printer will have unique sweet spots in terms of both quality and efficiency. But before you begin to reach out for quotes, you'll want to ensure you've given significant thought to your current and future needs. Here are some things to think about:

SIZE

If your publication is new, you should have a target size in mind, but don't be afraid to ask if there are efficiencies to be found on their particular press by tweaking the size up or down. If you're already established, and seeking greener pastures, it may be more difficult to alter the size of your publication, but

at the very least it's worth knowing about potential gains. Remember that every printer has different sweet spots on their presses, and you'll want to take best advantage whenever possible.

PAPER STOCK

The best value is often found by utilizing the printer's "house" stock, if applicable. Not only will you be less likely to run into availability issues, but you may be able to access preferred pricing, or at least avoid any fees associated with accessing and storing custom stocks. Ask your contact for advice about what stock will provide the best value while meeting your needs. And don't be shy to ask them to send you some samples so that you can see the stock in action.

ADDRESSING & MAILING

Some printers have in-house addressing and mailing services, while others have ongoing partnerships with mailing houses. Make sure that your needs are being well met, and that all delivery/sortation/inkjetting/ mailing fees are being included in the quote to avoid nasty surprises down the road.

FLEXIBILITY

How much flexibility do you need in terms of scheduling? A particularly busy printer may not be able to offer quick, on-the-fly turnaround times. If your printing schedule is unpredictable, you will want to seek out a printer that can accommodate you.

EXTRAS & FUTUREPROOFING

Do you have special needs? Polybagging? Tip-ons? Belly bands? Subscription cards? Inquire about all possible fees, and get them on the quote. Also make sure to give a lot of thought to your future needs. Is expansion into the US market on the horizon? You'll want a printer (or mailing house) that can streamline sortation and deposit with the USPS. Perhaps you may need plate changes? Overruns? By explaining my hopes and dreams, my printer has been able to make actionable suggestions that have saved a lot of money over the years, and ultimately made me better at what I do.



Image by Bank Phrom

And while it may be awkward territory, sometimes it's best to broach difficult subjects earlier, to avoid problems later. You might consider asking whether or not the quoted price is stable, or if it's likely to fluctuate from issue to issue, or year to year. Things like paper costs, as the past few years have demonstrated, can vary quite wildly beyond the printer's control, but labour costs shouldn't. Getting a sense of how annual inflation, for instance, might show up on your invoices can be invaluable for planning purposes.

Speaking of paper costs, if you happen to print on special order stock, you may also want to discuss the feasibility and potential efficiency of a bulk purchase, which your printer could store for you. Not only does it demonstrate a longer-term commitment on your part, but if you've got the accessible funds up front, it could insulate you from the kinds of shortages and fluctuations we now know are all too possible. If they ask for a storage fee, perhaps remind them of the commitment you'd be making, and see if they might reciprocate—after all, relationships are all about give and take. Regardless of the outcome, these sorts of conversations can give you a good sense of how willing a collaborator any given prospect might be.

Obviously, you're going to want the best possible price...that goes without saying! But—at the risk of sounding like a broken record—your printer will be one of your most important partners, so there's definitely more to this story than just bargain hunting. Good communication is key to all partnerships, and remember it's a two-way street! To keep getting the best out of your printer, you will likely need to reciprocate. While everyone has their own style and needs when it comes to relationship building and maintenance, consider the following:

WHAT YOU WANT AND NEED

Personally, I'm a sucker for timely communications, and same-day responses are a deal-breaker for me. But what really won my heart with my current printer was the time my account manager took to really dig into my business to see if there were any additional ways that they could help, or serve existing needs with greater efficiency. The effort expended was really above and beyond, and some very interesting ideas were spawned along the way. A collaborator is always better than a mere service provider, and you'll be glad for the former if things ever hit the

proverbial fan. Know what you need, and what your deal-breakers are, and don't settle for less. You'll probably regret it if you do.

WHAT THEY WANT AND NEED

In addition to obvious things like paying your invoices on time, it's worth taking the time to find out how to make your printer's work easier and more efficient. Even if you are the "customer" in this scenario, it doesn't mean that you're always right! You can start by being as organized as possible when requesting the quote, and not making them go back and re-quote several times because you weren't on the ball. Moreover, why not inquire how far in advance, in an ideal world, they schedule press times? And if it looks like you might be late with a file submission, take the time to give them a heads up so they can make appropriate contingency plans. Make yourself a model customer, and you may find that certain wheels get greased along the way...

Once you've collected your quotes, and run the numbers, you'll probably find a range in prices. If the one you really want to work with is also the most expensive, don't despair. Remember that printers want your business, and may be willing to negotiate a discounted rate to bring you on board. This is just another reason to bring your "A"-game to the initial reach out, as you never get a second chance to make a first impression. A printer will be more inclined to discount their rate for a prospective client that they really want to work with, as opposed to a disorganized, poor communicator. And don't be shy to strategically share the results of your quote collection, as this provides a printer with valuable competitive intelligence. If you give a little, you may be more likely to get your best quote matched (or nearly so) by the printer with whom you actually want to work.

Happy hunting!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Stedman is CEO & Publisher of *EcoParent Inc.* He holds a PhD from UofT, his research focused on the intersections of experimental theatre and contemporary ethical philosophy. He lives in Peterborough, Ontario, with his son, who was (and is) the inspiration behind this crazy publishing endeavour.

