

Tips for Printing Marketing Materials

While *designing* high-quality marketing materials can be a challenge, an equally daunting step is having your materials *printed*. Programs essentially have three options for printing their materials: doing it in-house using a laser or inkjet printer, having copies made at a photocopy shop (e.g., Kwik Kopy or Kinko's), or sending their files to a commercial printer.

All options have their pros and cons. In-house printing can be much cheaper than hiring a commercial printer for short runs, while also enabling you to print your materials on an as-needed basis (as opposed to paying for a large print run and having to store the results). However, your own laser printer or inkjet is unlikely to produce the high-quality results that a commercial printer can provide. And while hiring an outside printer can give you the results you are looking for, it does add cost (and sometimes headaches) to a marketing campaign. The photocopy shop can be a less expensive option than a commercial printer—but probably cannot match the quality—and can handle print runs that would overwhelm an in-house printer (and can provide binding and folding services).

This tip sheet explores some simple tips that can help you make good choices when it comes to printing your marketing materials.

In-house, photocopy shop, or commercial printing: Which to use?

It's almost always best to use a commercial printer for large quantities (probably 200 copies or more), and for products that require a high-quality, professional look, are printed on something other than 8.5 x 11-inch paper, or that have more than one color and/or photographs. Always get at least three bids from different printers to make sure you are getting a fair price.

For short-run items that require color and/or high-quality photos or graphics, buying an inkjet printer may be a cheaper alternative to a commercial printer, depending on the number of copies you need. But inkjet printers, although inexpensive to buy, use expensive ink. You can always use your inkjet printer to create a "master" on good quality paper (see paper stock tips below) to be reproduced at a photocopy shop. It may be tempting to make multiple copies directly from your inkjet printer, but that may not be your best option. Not all inkjets will duplex—automatically print on two sides of a sheet of paper—and they sometimes generate enough heat during long print runs that the ink will melt and smear on two-sided print jobs.

Ultimately, you may find that a combination of printing and photocopying will work best for some print jobs: for example, you may choose to print a fancy, full-color training binder cover on your inkjet printer (or have it printed commercially) while using photocopies for the rest of the binder inserts.

A good alternative to an inkjet is a color laser printer. These are becoming increasingly affordable and are good at printing two-sided without the ink smearing, at least on short print runs. But the toner cartridges can be very expensive (although they do last considerably longer than liquid ink cartridges). Again, remember to check before buying to make sure the printer can duplex; this is especially valuable for materials like newsletters or brochures. (You can always print on one side, then re-stack the paper in the printer's paper tray and print on the back, but paper jams are almost inevitable.)

If you're going to be printing large-size items, such as posters advertising your program or events, you can buy a large-format printer, but they can be considerably more expensive than printers designed for letter- or legal-sized paper. You're better off getting these made at a photocopy shop that prints directly from disk. Talk to the shop staff first to see what kind of software they'll require you to use—most desktop publishing software, for example, can accommodate poster 48" x 48", but word processing software probably won't.

A word about digital printing: Commercial printers (and photocopy shops) are increasingly going to digital printing—printing a job directly from a disk, skipping the intermediate stage of making plates for a press (a process known as "offset" printing). Ask if your commercial printer can do digital printing and if there are reduced costs for printing digitally.

Ask lots of questions when using a commercial printer. Printers are usually very accommodating in helping you decide what design works best for your needs (or is the most cost effective). They can help you determine what size and quality of paper to use (paper that works for a newsletter might be all wrong for a brochure), provide advice on how to best fold items like brochures, how to best use colors and inks, appropriate types of binding for different materials, what kind of software works best for certain materials, and so on. It's their job to help you get you the results you want, so choose a printer with good customer service and the ability to work with your software options and desktop-publishing skill level.

Choosing paper: What kind works best?

For brochures, use 60 lb. non-glossy paper with a 90 or higher "whiteness" rating. Other paper weights may serve as well or better, but try the paper first to make sure it works; using a heavier paper for a brochure, for example, may "crack" along the folds. (Note: If you're going to be making photocopies of a "master," a make the original on this kind of paper—it will result in better copies. If using a commercial printer or photocopy shop, their staff can help you make an appropriate selection. If possible, get sample sheets and print your job on several kinds of paper to see which produces the best look.

Avoid paper with preprinted colors and designs—they're expensive and rarely work well.

Lightly colored paper is okay for some things—for example, fliers or even newsletters (but only if the design does not contain color). But avoid dark colored paper: it will not photocopy well and will ruin the design of anything that uses color ink.

Use the best quality you can afford for stationary. If possible, buy matching envelopes.

How do we best use photos?

Invest in a digital camera (or borrow one). Prices have come down dramatically in the last few years and even the cheapest ones can produce excellent results. If possible, experiment with printing your pictures on a variety of papers and different printers to see which give you the results you are looking for.

If your materials are well designed, and if your images are compelling, you'll rarely need to use a full-color photograph. Sure, they can look nice, but color can add *a lot* of expense to a print run, and a black and white image can be just as powerful as color (see the Basics of Graphic Design file in this toolkit for more tips on using photos). Black and white or shades of gray images ("grayscale") are also easier to use in relation to the other colors in your design. And remember, you can always use color images where color doesn't add to the cost, such as on Web sites or PowerPoint presentations.

High-end photo manipulation software, like Photoshop, can be expensive and tricky to use. It also does far more than you'll need to get a simple photo ready for use. Most new computers come with less expensive, lower-end software that will work just fine if all you need to do is resize a photo, convert it to grayscale, or change the resolution. So explore your cheap options!