

**For the Busy Owner/Executive**

**17 Surefire  
Ways to Save  
Money on Printing**

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# **17 Surefire Ways to Save Money on Printing**

**Prior to selling in 2003, my wife owned a successful print brokerage business for nearly 20 years. One day, I got her to sit down and divulge two decades of money saving secrets ideas so I could share them with you. Here's what she told me:**

## **1. Always get at least 3 bids...**

The variation in printing quotes for the same job can be astonishing. In some cases it can be 25%-30% or more. Why? Because different shops have particular types of work they can do more efficiently. Those with certain types of equipment can do your type of job with less labor. For example, some printers specialize in business cards, while others see them as a necessary evil and upcharge for them. Still others are "high quality" printers that charge premium prices as part of their overall pricing strategy. (You may not need super high quality for a particular job, so why pay for it?) Still others may have more than enough work in the pipeline and use price to manage the amount of workflow. What this means to you is if you don't take the time to get multiple bids, you'll probably pay far more than you need to.

One note here... Avoid asking shops to bid if you really have no intention of giving them the job. After a while, they'll see you coming and consider you a time waster. There's nothing wrong with getting a competitive bid once in a while to check on your current supplier, but remember, it takes time and energy to work up a quote.

## **2. Use "house" papers...**

Paper can be a huge variable in the cost of your print job. House papers are those that the print shop normally stocks for the bulk of their jobs as opposed to special orders that will almost always increase the cost of the run. This is true even if you opt for a less expensive stock... because the printer isn't buying enough to get much of a price break on it. (Unless you have a HUGE print run, and then it might just pay off.)

The two main components of printing costs are labor and paper. Anything that causes the printer to vary their everyday procedures will usually cost you extra. Premium "call out" papers look great, but can significantly increase the cost of your job. Ask yourself if they are really necessary. Remember, substance will outsell overdone style almost every time.

Always ask for paper samples as part of the quote to make sure that what you are getting is what you're expecting!

### **3. Consider shopping online...**

The internet can be a great tool for finding super deals on printing. A quick Google or Yahoo search will turn up a number of possibilities. There are a number of highly reputable printers that sell online. Unfortunately, there are also some who may not be. Proceed with caution as the number of problems you're sure to have with any job will surely increase in proportion to the distance that their shop is from your office. When working with a new printer, start them off with a small job that is not time sensitive to begin the relationship with less risk.

Also ask if your job will be ganged with others or printed as a custom run. Gang printing involves printing a number of different customers' jobs on the same piece of paper at the same time and then cutting the finished pieces apart. If you need to have control over the exact color that your job prints, avoid gang printing.

Finally, keep in mind that shipping costs might eat up any expected savings if the printer is halfway across the country or planet!

### **4. Use your printer's design services...**

Talk to your printer before designing the piece as they may be able to help you with in-house design services. Unless you are expert in desktop publishing and pre-press work, the services of a graphic designer should be part of your budget. Many printers have deals with local designers who can save you money as part of a package deal.

On the subject of do-it-yourself preparation of files for pre-press, it is important to get it right the first time. Mess up the pre-press and you'll face missed press times and additional re-proofing charges. Enlisting a qualified graphic designer to help out with getting your job ready to print can be an excellent cost saving idea.

### **5. Heavy ink coverage costs more money...**

Pieces designed with what are known in the trade as "large solids" can increase your costs. Large solids are expansive areas of unbroken ink coverage on a piece as opposed to white space or light text coverage. Depending on the size of the area (approximately 25% or more of the surface of the page) and the intensity of the color specified, it may require that a printed piece be "double hit". This essentially means that it has to be run through the printing process twice. Again, since labor is a key component of printing costs, this will often end up costing you more. Some printers have equipment that can minimize this issue, while others will literally have to run it through the printing plates two times.

Another cost of large solids can be the need to upgrade to heavier or more opaque paper stock to avoid bleed through of color from the other side of the page.

## **6. Look for association prices or affiliation discounts...**

Most of us belong to at least one chamber of commerce, trade association or professional society. In some cases, discounts on products and services are available from printers who may also belong to the same group. We recently obtained a discount as a result of our membership in a trade association that had negotiated a good price with a member printer on a special mailing project.

Examine a copy of the membership roster of any organizations you belong to and then inquire if they offer a discount to fellow members. You may be pleasantly surprised!

## **7. Avoid impossible deadlines...**

Printers often have what are called “break-in charges”. Most run their shops on a tight schedule, scheduling both machines and labor for optimum efficiency. Upsetting that schedule costs them money and it is likely that cost will be passed along to you if they do accept the job. Having longer lead times will enable you to be in a better negotiating position.

## **8. Try not to take physical delivery of direct mail pieces...**

In some states and provinces, you’ll pay sales; transaction or value added taxes on printing, because it is not for resale. However, in others you can legally avoid these taxes by having your printer ship the printed direct mail pieces directly to your mail house rather than taking delivery of them yourself. Check with your tax professional about applicable laws in your area.

## **9. Stay loyal...**

When my wife was in the printing business she used to say “There are some customers who’d pull a job for a nickel!” In other words, they will shop based on price and price alone. But, there is a potential flaw in that way of thinking. Price does not always represent one’s total cost. One variable is shipping. Does the printer offer free delivery? Are they in a distant city, requiring additional freight charges? Do they offer discounts for early payment of invoices?

On the other hand, are they well-organized or do they regularly miss promised delivery dates, causing you to spend overtime dollars in your organization? Do they

bill you incorrectly, resulting in wasted administrative time? These are all important things to consider.

Some printers will give you favored status if you do a certain amount of business with them each year. Bottom Line: Switching around a lot may save a bit in the short run, but cost more in the longer term. Also ask yourself... which printer is more likely to stand behind their work?

### **10. Are you running a web job on a sheet fed press?**

Again, a lot of it comes down to time and materials. Web presses use large, wide rolls of paper to allow for multiple copies of the same printed piece to be cut apart after printing. Sheet fed presses typically print one sheet at a time. Some smaller ones can't handle a sheet size bigger than 11" x 17". What this means is for large runs, web presses may be more efficient than sheet fed. Be sure to ask about the type of press your job will be run on. Again, more labor time means more cost to you.

### **11. Order cost effective quantities...**

Here's an old saying... 500 is the worst quantity in printing! I've actually seen quotes for 500 and 1000 printed pieces where the 500 cost more than the 1000! A large portion of the costs associated with a print job are set-up expenses. These remain relatively constant no matter how many you print. This includes items such as entering the order, setting up the press, making the plates etc. Take this fact into consideration as you place orders, especially for items that you use a lot.

### **12. Spec it and check it... twice if not more!**

A lot of print jobs go wrong before they ever get to the printer. Use using written specifications in the form of purchase orders that have a common format for your print jobs. List each area that needs to have clear set of instructions such as *Quantity*, *Paper Stock*, *Ink Color*, etc. (One way to do this is to write your PO's in the same format as your printer quotes their prices. That way you're less likely to miss something.) If you do have your own form, be sure that it is used each time, and that one person in your organization is the "designated print buyer." Consistency is the key to smooth sailing in the world of print buying.

Proofread Once, Print Twice... Proofread Twice, Print Once! Proofreading is another issue that can cost you big. Years ago, a restaurant chain in Texas typeset the wrong phone number on a market-wide newspaper insert. It wasn't just wrong; it was someone's home phone number... A very upset person's home phone number! After

an hour or so of calls, that person decided to “accept” the carryout orders to ease their own frustrations and to have a little fun at the restaurant’s expense.

Reading is not the same as proofreading. Reading a piece aloud is good, but handing it to a third person who has a knack for proofreading is even better. *Have someone else actually call the phone number to see if it is correct.* Have them log into any listed websites. Proof numbers, key information and important addresses character by character--- backwards--- to insure that your eyes don’t see what’s not there!

### **13. Keep the first run conservative in size...**

The most expensive printing job is the one you throw away! This is especially true for complex new jobs like business forms. Such working documents not only have to be correctly laid out and proofed properly, but they have to perform on the job. Consider the frozen seafood warehouse company that ordered some new printed box labels. They kept their initial order relatively small to be sure that they would go through their dot matrix printers without jamming. When the self adhesive labels were delivered, they worked perfectly in the firm’s office printers. But to everyone’s surprise, they wouldn’t stick to the boxes in their refrigerated warehouse because the adhesive hardened and failed at subzero temperatures. Since the company was required to hold all frozen food items at ten degrees below zero that was a big issue! Luckily, they had kept their first run relatively small.

### **14. Try to stick with standard sizes, folds and die patterns.**

Some years ago, I was in a die cutting shop where the owner had a display wall dedicated to unworkable printed pieces. Jobs that called for folds, die cuts or embossing that just weren’t possible with standard industry tools. Granted, he’d collected them over a period of 20-odd years, but each one had a story behind it that he was willing to tell... a story of useless pieces that had to be hauled out to the recycle bin.

If you are contemplating a printed piece that will be folded, die cut or embossed, work with the vendor before the piece is printed. Take a mockup to them to determine if custom work is needed or not. Try to stay with standard dies for presentation folders etc. to avoid having to “reinvent the wheel.” The more off standard the job is, the more likely something will go wrong. Ask for a “die-line” (a full size line drawing or electronic template of their house dies) before the art for the piece is created and work them into the design.

The Post Office is another place direct mailers can go wrong when we try to do “something different and creative”. If you are producing anything new or potentially non-standard in size and weight, show it to a postal representative for written approval prior to mailing. Verify the postage rate for the piece as oversize pieces

generally require a premium to mail. In worst case scenarios, I've seen a post office completely reject a piece for bulk mailing based on size and weight. Ouch! We once were so close to going overweight on a mailer during a very rainy week, I had to let the ink dry out for two extra days as to reduce the average weight of the pieces so I wouldn't have to pay extra postage! When checking a piece for weight, here are two tips... first weigh more than one mailer at a time at least 10, and preferably a lot more mockups with the exact same paper that the printer will use to determine average weight. Second, use a high quality electronic scale. That little spring loaded one in your office is just not accurate enough.

## **15. GET A PROOF!!!!**

Before you commit your job to a press run, you want to make sure it will print the way you expect. You need to know that the colors will be right, and that all the text and images are present in the correct location. You need a proof. There is nothing like a full size color proof to help eliminate costly errors and misunderstandings. It is cheap insurance against major meltdowns. Proofs take a variety of forms from inexpensive "blue lines" for content and position only to extensive full color proofs. Be sure to ask upfront about the types a printer will offer.

One shortcoming of most proofs is that they are close, but not 100% accurate in terms of color rendition. This is due to a number factors including the skill of the person preparing the proof, the type of substrate used and even the type of light under which you are viewing it. The best way to get exactly the color you want is to do a press check--- in other words be there when the first pieces come off the press and adjustments can be made on the spot! If a press check is not feasible you can request what's known in the trade as a "draw down." Draw downs consist of actually putting the specific inks on the actual paper you'll use to see what it will look like beforehand.

Some print houses offer only PDF proofs. You'll need to determine if that meets your needs. At a minimum, I'd have that PDF printed out on a high quality color printer to be sure it is close to what you want. For many people, typos and other problems are harder to spot on a computer screen than they are on paper. Remember that colors will often look quite different on computer screen than they will on the final printed piece!

## **16. Ask your printer about "Overs and Unders"**

Here is another potential budget buster that can catch you by surprise. Printer's quotes typically include the terms "overs" and "unders". This is part of the fine print that states that the printer has the right to ship either ten percent more or ten percent fewer printed pieces than what you ordered and adjust the invoice accordingly. 10% overs on a large job can add up to be a lot of money. It is understandable, because once the

press gets going on a large job, it's tough to print just exactly enough to cull out the bad ones and provide you with exactly the number you ordered. Same on the "unders" side... Once a job is printed, and a few of them were spoiled or were make ready pieces that can't be used, it wouldn't make sense to start up the press again for just a few pieces. This is especially true in a busy shop or in the case of special paper or envelope orders.

The problem arises when the customer, needs to have an exact number of envelopes... let's say for a specific mailing to a specific size list, made up of time sensitive material that cannot be used once the date in question has passed (for example, a concert program).

If this is a concern of yours, be sure to address it at the time you ask for a price quote. It will cost you a bit more to specify no "overs" and "unders", but at least you'll know what to expect.

## **17. Use a print broker...**

Using a print broker is like using a real estate agent; it costs you nothing as a buyer. The broker makes their money by dealing with "trade" printers who do not deal directly with the customer. The advantages to you are many... You have an expert print buyer on your side; it saves you the time and effort of getting quotes and it opens up a world of specialized resources to you that you'd not have had access to otherwise. You can get better prices if the broker is large enough to negotiate with print sources based on their (not your) annual volume.

Choose your broker carefully, as there are no barriers to entry. Select one who has been in business for at least 2 or 3 years. Some solo start-up brokers are insufficiently capitalized and may not be able to pay their sources after you've paid them. Or worse, they may ask you for a deposit and then fail to deliver the goods.

All in all however, finding a reputable broker is not difficult and well worth it!

**Well, there it is 17 ways to save money on printing. No go out and save yourself some serious money!**