

Turning Lemons Into Lemonade

As publishers work to keep remaining advertisers happy, the debate over “how much is too much?” gets dicey.

In any publishing downturn, one of the best defenses is adding labor-intensive customized services, such as heavily tweaked reprints or elaborate custom publishing projects. Clearly, the Twiggy-like folios of the last few years have provided a fertile field for just such projects.

But like any desperate, scared and wounded animal, publishers today are overreaching, and run the risk of destroying the value of these techniques—methods which might otherwise protect production positions throughout the publication.

Custom publishing (CP) projects are the opposite of automation, in that they are supremely personnel intensive. Outsourcing is not only more expensive than internal content creation and production, but different approaches and technology issues can actually increase the production burden.

But publishers are killing the custom goose laying golden “special advertising section” eggs. As advertisers became scarce, stingy and demanding over the last two years, publishers came under unprecedented pressure to cave in to any demand, no matter how outrageous, to keep the sale. The irony is, publishers who give in to such demands aren’t doing themselves or their clients any favors.

The situation is not unlike an experienced trial attorney whose client asks him to dress in a clown costume, to show the court how ridiculous the other side’s position is. Or a physician whose patient wants a drug he heard about, not knowing the drug won’t help his situation. Clients, whether they are medical patients, plaintiffs or advertisers, don’t always understand what will help their branding efforts.

I’ve been a practicing journalist for 23 years, and focused on custom publishing for

the last six. Done right, custom publishing is a remarkably effective way to boost incremental revenue. It can also prove strategic in bringing new advertisers to the core brand. But well done custom publishing has at its heart the same fundamentals as good editorial: a relentless focus on information that will intrigue, educate and fascinate readers.

Custom publishing only works if it delivers readers. Publishers capitulating to unorthodox advertiser demands undermine that goal. I’m resisting the urge to label those advertiser demands “psychotic” and “drug-induced,” although some demands I’ve seen in the last six months fit those bills.

≡ CREDIBILITY MEANS PROFITABILITY

For example, one business publication has a policy that forbids advertisers being quoted on their products or a competitor’s. If an advertiser is quoted, they position them as an expert discussing general trends. Instead of a restriction, marketing-savvy ad buyers should see this as a gift from God. Being positioned as an expert is exponentially more credible and persuasive with readers than hawking a product.

But the publisher recently allowed a last-minute advertiser to discuss their products at length in print, in the most over-the-top marketing language imaginable. This was ill-advised, because it treated a last-minute advertiser better than earlier advertisers who play by the rules. It also turns off readers, obliterating the value advertisers are after. It dilutes the custom publisher’s brand, cheapening the product other advertisers bought.

When dot-coms were booming and publications were fat, the biggest problem publishers faced was holding onto editorial



talent being wooed with stock options. In those days, honoring the mantra “Keep Readers Happy And Ads Will Happen (Assuming Circulation Chose The Right Readers)” was easy.

In today’s market, it’s tempting to relax the rules, but the impulse must be resisted. Preserving your CP brand, and keeping readers mesmerized, is the best way to make clients come back for more. You want them to say, “I got great feedback and leads from that piece we did.” Only then will you have created true advertiser value.

Be careful about how you label custom publishing. The American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) has guidelines for special advertising sections. But ASME’s rules are naive, because they don’t differentiate project types. To readers, a single-sponsored package with an advertiser who has full content control (a true “advertorial”) is different from multi-sponsored sections where advertisers don’t control the copy, and where content is editorially legitimate.

The multi-sponsored package needs a label to indicate it’s not produced by the publication’s journalists. In the absence of further explanation, readers assume “special advertising section” means “tainted material” from a sponsor’s p.r. department. That disclaimer is enough to make readers turn the page.

A label must have a universally understood meaning or it’s worthless. Publishers are allowing these terms, and their willingness to compromise their brands for advertisers, to undercut otherwise quality products. In a recession, that’s the last thing a publisher can afford to do. □

Canon Adds Workflow To High-End POD System

Partnership with T/R Systems brings integrated production and workflow management features to high-volume color system.

Canon USA is going with the flow. The company is now offering integrated workflow software with its CLC3900 color production system.

The software, T/R's MicroPress X Series, integrates with Canon's CLC3900 high-volume printer. The CLC3900 is a 150,000 page per month, 39 ppm printer with 800 x 400 dpi resolution.

It joins a growing list of Canon print-on-demand (POD) systems that support the MicroPress workflow, including seven ImageRunner models and the CLC5000.

The MicroPress software, now at version 6.2, supports job scheduling, automatic splitting of B&W and color job pages, and improved performance over previous versions, according to T/R Systems officials.

They also promise RIP speed that's faster than earlier MicroPress software, calibration curve improvements and

process spot color matching.

For workflow flexibility, MicroPress allows documents to be edited after they've been ripped, and then printed without re-ripping the document, says Martha Gerhan, director of marketing for T/R Systems in Norcross, Ga. This reduces steps in the process, simplifying workflow and speeding production. Web-based editing is also supported, she says.

Pairing Canon's CLC3900 with the MicroPress software results in a POD solution that's ideal for central reprographic departments, service bureaus and print-for-pay environments, Gerhan says.

It also provides Canon with a POD offering that bridges the gap between high-volume centralized printing and low-

SMARTER: T/R Systems' MicroPress brings workflow improvements to Canon's CLC3900.

volume workgroup printing, she says.

Adding the software requires a connectivity kit, available from Canon dealers. The CLC3900 Connectivity Kit for MicroPress retails for \$17,500, and is available now.

- Jeff Angus



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