

Professional publications: introducing the design and print production process

Reading your publications is one of the main ways your stakeholders interact with your organisation, so it's vital they make a good impression. Many of the publications you produce over the course of a year are absolutely fine as basic Word documents, for example, but it can be worth investing more time and effort in a few of your key pieces of literature: those you use to demonstrate your impact in order to secure funding, for example, and those you use to raise awareness of your services or recruit volunteers. Producing professional looking publications will ensure people think of you as a professional outfit – one they are happy to support and be associated with, and one they would trust to help them.

These guidance notes are designed to break the design and print production process down into its different elements, help you schedule the work so you can get it done efficiently, and provide a few hints and tips along the way. In brief, the process is as follows:

- 1) Find out how much you have available to spend.
- 2) Be clear on what you want the publication to achieve.
- 3) Think about how best to do that.
- 4) Request quotes and get your 'ideal' publication costed up.
- 5) Can you afford it? You might need to compromise.
- 6) Gather the content, write and edit the publication.
- 7) Work with a designer, either in-house or externally.
- 8) Get it off to print!

Budget

The very first thing to consider is how much you can afford to spend. This will affect everything else, from whether you design it in-house or use an external designer, to your print specification.

Planning your publication

Before you can make any decisions about what you want your publication to look like, you need to step back and think about why you're producing it. Who is it aimed at? What information does it need to get across? What do you want the reader to think or do? Only when you're clear on your objectives can you begin to think about how they are best achieved. A leaflet aimed at clients, for example, would need to be very different to an impact report for key funders.

Some decisions will determine the tone of your writing and the design of your publication. Others, though, will directly affect the cost: colour or black and white; A4, A5 or more unusual dimensions; number of pages; number of copies; paper quality.

Useful things to know

It's true to say that at this pre-quote stage you don't know what you can and can't get for the money you have available, so here is some useful information that will help you plan with some degree of realism.

Colour

Using a second colour in addition to black will brighten up your report, but it does add to printing costs. Your options are:

- 1 colour – essentially black and white, as black counts as a colour
- 2 colour – black plus a single shade of a single colour
- 3 colour – black plus two single shades of two single colours
- 4 colour – CMYK: 4 colours which, combined, can produce any and every colour shade

'Pantone' colours are essentially very specific recipes for CMYK colour mixes to ensure exact colour matching. These will often be required if you need to produce something in 'corporate colours'.

Dimensions

Using non-standard sizes can make your publication stand out from others, but it can also add to the print cost. It all comes down to the size of the paper stock in relation to the size of the printing press, and how much wastage is entailed. There are no hard and fast rules so it's always worth a discussion with your printer.

Number of pages

If your publication has multiple pages, you will almost certainly have it stapled in the centre. For an A4 publication, this means printing on to A3 paper that is then folded in half (for an A5 leaflet, it will be printed on A4). This is a standard process but it does mean that the number of pages you have must be a multiple of four – each A3 sheet gives you four sides of A4. So if, for example, you decide 12 pages are not enough, the next size up is 16 pages. If you have the text to fill 13 pages it might be better to cut it down slightly rather than find extra content to fill a further three pages.

Number of copies

Short print runs work out relatively expensive per copy because they bear the full burden of the set up costs. However, this does mean that the difference in cost between printing, say, 300 and 500 copies is fairly minimal.

Paper

Paper weight is measured in gsm: the higher the number, the heavier and better quality the paper. If you have a tight budget you will probably want to go for 115-130gsm for the inside pages. Anything below this is too light and there will be show-through, making the text difficult to read. Use a slightly heavier weight for the cover if you can afford it (e.g. 200gsm) to make your publication look and feel more significant. Posters should be no lighter than 150gsm as they need to be durable.

Most organisations print their publications on matt art paper which has a smooth finish but is non-reflective. Ask printers for paper samples and get quotes for costs using different kinds of paper, including recycled or environmentally friendly paper (FSC).

Getting quotes and making decisions

Once you know what your 'ideal' publication looks like you're in a position to get it costed up. At this stage you might need to compromise on certain things, but your starting point has to be the publication that you think will best meet your objectives.

Putting together a print quote request

Always be sure to cover the following elements:

- size: A5, A4 or A3 etc.
- number of pages (sides)
- number of colours used inside and on the cover
- paper: specify the weight and the finish
- folding/ binding: centre stapling, spiral bound, concertina etc
- print run: number of copies
- delivery deadline – quick jobs cost more.

Once you have your print specifications you can approach printers for quotes. Do this in writing, and ask for written quotes in return in case any confusion arises later on. Try to obtain at least three quotes. They will vary, but there should not be a huge difference. If one seems astonishingly cheap, it is wise to check there are no added extras.

Putting together a design quote request

Always be sure to cover the following elements:

- audience and purpose
- size: A5, A4 or A3 etc.
- number of pages (sides)
- creative concept (supplied or required)
- use of graphics (supplied or required)
- use of photography (supplied or required)
- design deadline.

As above, try to obtain three quotes in writing. There are less options for compromising on design than print in a way that reduces the cost; it's generally a case of making a decision between outsourcing it and doing it in-house. If you do have the budget to outsource, though, printers often have in-house design studios that tend to be cheaper than specialised design agencies. The latter are most appropriate for high-end publications that require a lot of conceptual work and graphic design. If, for cost reasons, you have to do your publication in-house, you'll need someone with an eye for design and access to a relevant software package such as Adobe InDesign.

Content

Editing

One person should take responsibility for pulling the content together and editing the document. This means working out what copy will go where and possibly commissioning others to write pieces if a longer document requires it. Give your contributors a word count to write to and an outline of the issues you would like them to cover, bearing in mind the style and theme of the publication as a whole, and set a copy deadline that allows for some slippage. Remember, editing is not just about checking spelling, it's about ensuring a publication projects the image you want it to.

You will pay for an external designer's to make amends, so ensure your 'final' copy really is final before you pass it over to the designer.

'Boilerplate' information

Standard things to include in most publications are your:

- logo, ensuring it adheres to brand guidelines
- vision/ mission/ aims/ principles
- registered charity number
- contact details (try to avoid naming specific people as this dates a publication unnecessarily if they move on).

Design

Whether you're designing the publication in-house or working with someone external, it's important to have an understanding of the basic principles of design. Simplicity and clarity are key; make it easy for your reader to navigate their way through text with clear headings, short paragraphs and plenty of white space.

Most software opens up so many new possibilities in terms of fonts, lines, graphics, boxes and shading that there is a temptation to use every feature. Try to resist this, as it can make your publication look cluttered and detract from what you are trying to say.

Using graphics

While there is no doubt that the odd illustration or graphic can brighten up a page weighed down with text, it is worth remembering the following:

- Unless you have original artwork, the reproduction quality of a drawing is likely to be poor.
- Humour is subjective. What you consider to be a riotously funny cartoon may not have the same effect on others.
- While your publication should be lively, you do want it to be taken seriously.
- Clipart images look very dated, so avoid using them.

Using photographs

Good photos can bring a page to life. Bad photos have the opposite effect, so bear in mind the following:

- Photos of people work best. Use close-ups or crop them so you get more of the person and less of the background.

- Use only technically good pictures – discard anything out of focus, too dark or over-exposed.
- Think carefully about captions. Photos should be informative and captions make the picture a story in itself.
- If you take pictures on a digital camera, set it so that your images are 300 dpi (this is the number of dots per inch). This will ensure that your photos are clear and sharp when printed. Photos at 72 dpi are fine for websites but not high enough resolution for print.

Using colour

Colour can make a big difference to the accessibility of a publication:

- Colour works best in details such as lines or bullet points rather than text, although headings or introductions can work in colour, providing it is a dark one and therefore legible.
- Reversed out copy should be avoided unless it is white out of a solid dark background.

The cover

This is the first thing potential readers will see and, if it's dull, possibly the only thing they will see. A cover needs to make people want to read what is inside and if it doesn't, then your hard work will have been wasted. The cover design should encompass, visually, all of the messages you want to send to your audience.

Amends

If you are working with an external designer, you will get a proof back from them once they have done the initial lay out. It's important to keep a record of all the amends you request so you can check they have been made.

Printing

Lead times

When you have chosen a printer you should book in your print job a few weeks in advance so they can fit it into their schedule. Allow about 10 working days for printing and delivery, though this does ultimately depend on the size of the job and you should check with your printer.

Artwork

This is the original that you give to the printer, so it must be excellent quality. Make sure you see a proof of what they are going to print and sign it off. The onus is on you to check everything. Mistakes and omissions can be costly.

