

Writing Points: How To Make The Most Of Your Print Project

Once the print run has started, it's too late. Opening your first box of 5,000 documents and spotting a mistake is no fun – and costly to correct. But most people with experience of arranging printing can remember a time when they discovered a glaring error that they couldn't believe they'd missed in the draft they'd given the printer.

It's not surprising, given that printing is often done to tight deadlines – but if the documents aren't right, you've wasted time and money AND you've got a problem on your hands.

Some problems are more subtle. When you look at the writing, it's all correct. But is it doing its job properly? Have you persuaded your readers to take any action, or is the document already on its way to the recycling sack?

A lot is at stake when you get material printed. The credibility of your company and your relationship with customers and potential customers can be damaged. If information is wrong, you'll lose sales, and if you fail to get your message across, your time and money has been wasted.

In this article, you'll find out about the most common errors and how to avoid them, and you'll also discover key points about making the money you spend on printing work harder for you.

What NOT To Do

Make language mistakes

Royal Mail research shows that 74% of customers don't trust businesses that use poor spelling and grammar, and 30% would not do business with companies that made these mistakes.

Proof-reading is critical. There are two main times when you need to proof-read. The first is before you send your final draft to the printer. Check absolutely every detail. Proof-read at least twice – first for content and sense (read aloud), and second for spelling, grammar and punctuation (read it backwards, so that you aren't distracted by the content).

Don't rely on your computer's spell-checker - get another human being to check it too. If you're not confident about your spelling and grammar, find someone who is – colleague, friend, family, or professional copywriter/editor. If you spot your own errors on the proof copy from the printer, you will almost certainly be looking at extra cost to make the changes and produce a new proof.

The second time is when you get the proof copy back. Don't assume that it will be identical to the version you gave the printer. All sorts of strange things can happen (remember, computers are involved). A good printer will look out for these, but it's your document and you need to look closely. Once you sign the proof off, you're confirming that you are satisfied with it – and if you spot a problem with the finalised versions that was showing in the proof copy, you'll have no grounds for complaint.

Miss out important information

It seems obvious, but it's surprisingly common for flyers and other printed material to lack factual details. Whether you're stressed out or excited by the thought of having to come up with paragraphs of sales text, it's all too easy to leave out the basic information, intending to add it in at the end. And then forget. So, check that you have included everything the reader needs to know. Contact details: phone, e-mail, website, address if relevant, what the reader should do next if they are interested. If you're advertising an event – date, time, location, price. Remember what, where, when, who, how. Put it all into your first draft, and make sure it stays there.

Ignore the need for a final proof

When you're in a rush, and you're confident that what you sent through was fine, it's tempting to tell the printer to just get on with the job. Some printers will insist on a final proof sign off, but others won't. Whether it's a business card or a glossy annual report, get the proof and make the time to check it properly.

Produce business cards that don't tell people what you do

Just because you know what your business is all about doesn't mean everyone else does. It's important that your business cards make it clear to everyone what you do. Don't assume that just because you've talked to someone they will remember you later - particularly if the conversation was part of a heavy networking session.

Don't rely on a catchy strapline such as 'building performance' or 'making change happen'. Come up with a simple statement that really tells people what you're all about, and your card has got far more chance of being kept and used.

Test it only on people already involved

Because you and your colleagues are so closely involved with your business, it's often hard to see how others will perceive your printed material. Once you've got something that you're happy with, ask people outside the business for their comments. Does it work for them? And explain that you really need them to be honest!

If you're planning a big mailing, or an ongoing promotion, consider doing several different versions of the document, and tracking the success of each. You can then decide which version you continue with in the future. Even small variations in, for example, the text of a direct mail letter, can make a big difference to success rates.

Forget to update information

Often, you will have documents that you send regularly for re-print. It's all too easy just to ask for the same again – then find that a detail is out of date. Make sure that you proof every document, whether new or old.

Write ineffective copy

Whatever your document, you're paying to have it printed because you want to get a message across. Unless that message is communicated clearly, concisely, and effectively, you've wasted your money. To do this involves much more than just being able to write correct English.

How To Get Your Message Across

Your message matters, or you wouldn't be spending time and money on design and print. But it's the words that will make people take action. You need skilled design to make your letter or flyer look good and to attract attention, but you need good words to keep people reading.

Persuasive writing is a skill, and it's essential to the success of all flyers, letters and other marketing material. It's not something we tend to learn at school – and it takes time. Think carefully about whether you have the time and the skill to create copy that is well-written, professional and persuasive – and that will make your printing and design costs worthwhile. There is absolutely no point paying to produce material that isn't well-written – it just won't work.

You could well find that the best way forward is to use a professional copywriter. A good copywriter will ask questions and research the market, and you'll find that they quickly grasp what's needed – and what's important to your customers. They will give you a chance to comment on the first draft, and should be happy to make amendments to take account of your comments.

Copywriting fees vary, but are roughly comparable to those for graphic design. Ask for a price for the job rather than per hour, so you know what to expect. Some copywriters will also take over the management of the project for you, saving you time by liaising with the designer and the printer.

**If it's worth investing in design and print, it's worth investing in the words.
You can be then confident that the design and words will work together effectively
to achieve your objective.**

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