



IS THE WEB PRESS THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR YOUR PROJECT?

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“Web printing is definitely comparable to the best of sheetfed. If your run is long enough, web printing may offer you both exceptional results and significant economy.”

PRINTING TODAY

Understanding the Web Press, and Using it to Your Advantage

Some jobs clearly call for a web press. Others are better suited for sheetfed. Many fall into a gray area. What criteria should you use in determining how and where to run your job? In this article we review the basics of high-quality commercial web printing.

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Q. Let's start with the basics. What determines the best use of a web?

A. Well, ultimately, cost and turnaround time are the biggest determining factors. For longer runs a web press clearly becomes the most economical way to print. Web printing is also fast. A web runs at high speeds and can print more pages at the same time. The result is often shorter turnaround times, which are frequently crucial. But there are other factors as well, like type of paper and even design and layout. Lighter papers are generally better on a web — *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines are examples of jobs involving light paper and long runs. By contrast, heavier cover stock is usually best on sheetfed presses.

Our web press, for example, will print up to 80# cover stock, whereas our sheetfed presses can handle up to 40 pt. board. Because web printing uses considerably more make-ready paper than with a sheetfed, the lighter the job stock being used for a web project, the lower the cost of the wasted make-ready paper. So a project that is very cost effective using 60# gloss, #2 grade text on a web may not be cost effective when using 80#, #1 or premium grade stock.

Q. Is there a general rule as to what papers are suitable for printing on a web?

A. Sure, although it's really a range. Webs have varying specifications. Our web, for example, will handle a wide range of papers from 27# text on the low end, up to 80# or 100# cover stock. But as a general rule, the very lightest and the very heaviest stock are usually not the best choices to run on a web.

Q. Back to the subject of run length...

A. Yes, that's generally critical. While there are exceptions, as a rule, runs of 20,000 or more sheets — if printed on both sides that means 50,000 impressions — make using the web the most economical choice. Our average web run length is around 150,000 to 200,000, some much longer. But it's important to remember the exceptions. If you are printing a multiple-page catalog with numerous press forms, for example, a run of only 10,000 might be the economical break-point.

Q. How does the number of forms change the economics?

A. It's because of the make-ready paper waste. You often print — and waste — in the area of 13,000 sheets before the press output is adjusted and approved by the client.

At that point the press is already pretty much set up. Subsequent forms require fewer make-ready sheets, or “cutoffs,” so time and materials efficiency go up. It’s easier to visualize if you imagine a job with a single form and a print-run of 10,000 sheets. The make-ready waste could be more than the final run. But with multiple forms, paper waste becomes a much smaller percentage of the total job requirement. Paper is expensive, so waste has a significant effect on cost.

Q. Are there other factors that might make a short-run web job more economical?

A. Sure. If you’re folding and can do inline folding right on the press that will bring down your cost and shorten turnaround time. Our web can fold inline with up to 80# text. Avoiding a separate binder operation can really lower costs and shorten manufacturing times; it’s an important consideration and it can make a shorter run economical. But, again, the general rule is that web printing offers an economic advantage for projects with runs of about 50,000 impressions or more.

Q. What other factors determine whether to go web or sheetfed?

A. The maximum number of colors a web can print is a hard and fast absolute. Most webs run four colors on both sides of the paper roll, many high-end commercial web presses print six colors on each side, a few run eight – those are the limits. Remember, the press is fed paper from a roll; when it comes off the press the signatures are cut. Unlike a sheetfed press, there’s no running it through a second time to add more colors.

Q. Are there practical color limits on a sheetfed?

A. Sheetfed presses run up to ten colors per pass. But you can do multiple passes. We had a consumer product catalog once containing numerous color swatches. We did 52 colors on that job employing multiple passes.

Q. How about the issue of quality? Many people still see sheetfed as the only press for high-impact color reproduction.

A. If you’re asking whether webs are producing high-quality color today, the answer is yes, absolutely. Our web, for example, will produce up to a 300-lpi line screen and holds register precisely. Webs in general today yield exceptional gloss and ink density. It’s because of these qualities that we’re printing premium color catalogs, brochures, annual reports, and magazine inserts on our web – jobs for major national companies where precise color reproduction is crucial to selling high-end consumer products.

Q. Are you saying there are no longer any real differences between web and sheetfed output?

A. No, there are differences. For one thing, webs use a heatset drying process and heatset inks are different. They result in a somewhat different “look.” Color tends to be more intense on the web, and the ink is glossier, which is often desirable. Sometimes you can even eliminate the need for a varnish. So, while there are differences, web printing is definitely comparable to the best of sheetfed. As a rule the best advice in deciding which way to go is to be clear on the look you want to achieve, then discuss your objectives with your printer. If your run is long enough, web printing may offer you both exceptional results and significant economy, too.