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Bodoni 70pt   Coronet 70pt   Helvetica 70pt

How can we get the most from a designer or printer?

BY JOHANNA GOLDFELD

Curators, marketing directors and even administrators are frequently asked to communicate design and production needs. But often, designers and printers don't guide museum professionals with the necessary vocabulary and technical questions to address key components before a project even begins. Here are some guidelines to help you be proactive in interactions with all of your graphics vendors and to achieve your vision—even if you don't yet know what it is.

What conversation should I have with my designer before beginning a project?

You and your designer should schedule a preliminary design meeting to discuss your preferences. Familiarize yourself with the different families of fonts such as serif, sans serif, slab serif and script so that you can express your preferences. Hate blue? Love bright yellow? This is the time to let the designer know. Color can be challenging to describe in words, so referring to swatches from the Pantone color system or another form of hard copy is helpful. Bring examples of what you like and don't like. And talk about how large you'd like the text to be. Which leads us to the next question....

What is the true meaning of point size?

Point size is a graphic design term familiar to nearly everyone, from the high school student trying to extend the length of a paper to the museum visitor squinting at text panels. But when talking about desired letter size, it's preferable to look at actual examples (and, if for an exhibition, look at a mockup in the gallery space) rather than speak in terms of points. Point size is the measurement of the distance from the uppermost point of a letter (ascender), to the lowest point of a letter (descender), plus a small space above

and below. Font sizes can have an identical number of points yet still differ drastically (see illustration above). Why? In the days of metal typesetting, type size was determined by the height of the piece of metal (called a "slug") that held each character. All three of the examples illustrated above would have required the same size "slug" to hold each letter in the alphabet.

How should we fabricate our signage?

This is an important conversation to have with your designer or printer. In addition to graphic design, finding creative approaches to production that will

best suit an institution's long-term needs can be a large part of my work with my clients. Digital printing technology has advanced so much in the past few years. As a result, printing methods that once seemed out of reach can actually save you money and enhance the look of your institution or event. People often think that a print mounted to foam core is the least expensive option. But when you print and mount a graphic, you also incur the cost of the substrate, the adhesive and the hand skills for mounting and trimming. This adds up to more than the incidental costs you might incur with alternative methods such as vinyl lettering, printed fabric or the initial purchase of a banner stand.

Should we print this job offset or digital?

In offset printing, a plate is created of the design, which is then transferred to a printing surface. The creation of this plate is quite expensive. So it's only worth using this technique if you are printing large quantities. Digital inkjet printing works similarly to your printer at home, so it's hands down the better solution for small quantities like exhibition signage. Talk to your printer or designer about the break-even point in pricing between the two options.

Both offset and digital printing methods use a four-color process, which is a combination of cyan, magenta, yellow and black (CMYK). In offset printing, however, the printer can add a spot color that is printed with its own ink. A spot color is used when an exact match of a Pantone color is necessary (perhaps for a brand), and it offers the options of neons and metallic inks.

If we're printing digitally, how do we match our signage to our walls or upholstery?

Digital printing relies on the four-color CMYK combination. Printers work in different ways, so it's important for you or your designer to ask the best way to match a color. Usually you can provide them with any kind of swatch—a Pantone color, paint color or even upholstery swatch—and they can adjust the CMYK settings to match your color. If exact color matters, a hard copy proof (rather than a PDF) is very important, as colors in a PDF can vary depending on screen settings.

We just painted our walls. How can we affix panels and exhibition labels so we don't cover them with adhesive residue?

At the risk of divulging precious trade secrets, blue painter's tape is my absolute favorite exhibition installation tool. It sticks securely and comes off the wall without leaving residue. What more could a museum ask for? To hang a lightweight exhibition panel or label, place a strip of blue tape on the wall as a protector. Then use your heavy-duty double-sided adhesive of choice (Velcro is a good option) to adhere the panel to the blue tape. Most manufacturers guarantee that painter's tape can be left on paint or wood surfaces for up to 14 days without leaving residue. I've successfully used it in gallery surfaces including fabric, cardboard and stone for up to one year. Always do a test first.

For large pieces, ask your printer to route out a channel in the back of your signage. Put two nails in the wall and *voila*!—you're done.

Talk to your printer about other hanging hardware to attach to your signage. Cleats or picture wire can make hanging signage a snap. ≪

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