

# This time it's personal

Malcolm Auld on the development of online printing and the digital revolution.



## JANUARY 2006

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mad.  
Malcolm Auld Direct

### When the Apple

Macintosh first made its foray into the business world, one of the unexpected side effects was the emergence of the new breed of graphic design expert.

Thanks to the brilliant Mac technology, everyone who could use a Mac instantly became a graphic designer or art director. A quick page creation, cut and paste some text and images, and there you had it – some of the worst literature ever designed in the name of marketing communications. Sadly this practice continues unabated today.

Art studios abound inside marketing and public relations departments in the corporate and government world – mostly with the aim of saving money on production of printed literature, as against aiming to create literature that effectively communicates.

One of the reasons for the ordinary quality of such literature is that the best designers and art directors don't gravitate towards corporate art studios



## December 2006

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Season's Greetings

– they tend to work in specialist design companies, architecture, publishing and advertising agencies.

And many people who are directing the creation of work within internal studios have no design skills; they're just the boss and they get what they want – or, as some say, they get the work they deserve.

I'm opening this article with reflection on this part of the industry because there is again going to be an irreversible

increase in the use of internally designed communications due to technology. Though with much better results than those achieved to date.


The technology that will drive the growth in internal design and production is the rapidly growing area of online printing.

There are a number of different interpretations of online printing. For the sake of this article, it is any printing where the artwork is either created on a website, or uploaded to a website

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and then printed and delivered to the customer by courier, or mailed to a supplied list.

Much of what is created under the label of online printing is done so using templates supplied on the site. If you have a post-box in Australia you will be familiar with the numerous printers who constantly advertise their online ordering services for stationery, brochures and more using templates on their website.

The factors affecting the growing use of the web for creating print jobs are varied. And while each on its own isn't hugely significant, together they highlight a fast-growing trend in marketing communications. They include:

- the growth in short-run colour print jobs using variable data
- the growth in DIY printing using templates on websites
- the acceptance and high use of digital cameras
- the ease of use of digital images and data
- the ability to create individually personalised pdfs for distribution by email or to print
- SMEs with improved quality databases
- growth in use of email to communicate with customers, and
- desire by marketers to talk directly with customers rather than via mass media.

The areas where the use of digital print is most prevalent include: the creation of direct mail – postcards and brochures, simple A3 and A4 leaflets, personalised merchandise and html email newsletters.

The production of direct mail is an area in which there is a radical change occurring in the way marketers print their messages.

Recently I chaired an Australian Direct Marketing Association (ADMA) event called Data Day, at which a number of the speakers demonstrated how they are now using data to reduce the size of their print runs for direct mail, even though they are not necessarily reducing their overall direct mail print volumes over, say, a 12-month period.

Put simply, marketers with good quality data are printing smaller, more personalised quantities, using variable data to reach specific individuals with relevant messages. The shorter print runs allow the marketers to measure results faster and to mail more frequently, but in smaller volumes per mailing.

The same trend has also been occurring in the US for the last few years. In the US, the majority of colour print jobs are fast becoming small runs of fewer than 5000 units – one piece of research suggests 78 percent of colour print runs fall into this category.

This is because marketers are able to segment their lists more finely thanks to better quality data, and can mail more often to smaller numbers per campaign.

At Data Day, the RACQ and the NRMA presented case studies. The RACQ is ahead of the NRMA in restructuring its communications activity and has moved to an entirely different way of communicating, with excellent results. And the NRMA is following close behind.

Instead of mailing members say four times per year (printing hundreds of thousands of pieces at a time), they are mailing smaller quantities (a few thousand pieces) dozens of times per year. The results are paying for themselves with easier to manage jobs, higher response rates and lower costs.

They are doing this for a couple of reasons. First it allows more targeted and personalised communications and second there are cost benefits. In many cases the mailings are designed to fit templates, thus eliminating the traditional costs associated with setting up a mail campaign.

But the trend doesn't stop at short print runs. The fastest growing segment of the print industry is the use of colour digital print technology and variable data printing, accessed via websites.

You can visit any number of printers' websites and upload your images into templates for mailpacks, postcards, brochures, business cards, stationery, mouse mats and more. Printers now provide web-based services as a standard part of doing business, as the ordering system is part of their internal workflow systems and streamlines process, as well as cuts costs.

You proof your image online (a danger we won't explore in this article) and then with a couple of clicks confirm your order. The digital printer does the rest – printing and delivering your job, either directly to a destination or lodged with a postal service.

The impact on the design and advertising industry will be significant. While initially the designers will be used to develop templates, they will not be used to design each individual campaign, as the templates will be used for as long as possible by marketers. And why not?

All the marketer has to do is upload images and text, manipulate the content to fit the template and hit the order button.

SMEs have been early adopters of this type of technology. They use digital cameras to create images – a real estate agent, for example, takes photos of a house they list for sale – and then load the images and content into a template such as an 'Open House' brochure (A4 printed colour both sides). The brochure is then printed on an internal colour printer for immediate use – the job doesn't even get printed through a print shop.

Retail businesses, such as restaurants and franchisees use this technology to produce short-run literature and update it regularly. SMEs are far more flexible than larger organisations and so tend to trial technology earlier, as they are always looking for ways to cut costs or improve services.

Another element enticing DIY design is the new creative font

