

Paper Principles

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Sabine Lenz, a graphic designer by trade, founded Paper Specs six years ago. It is an independent company that provides a comprehensive paper database, covering stock of every description and from every source, worldwide. It is a resource to help designers and printers find the papers that best match the requirements for any project and to improve their overall knowledge, education, and understanding of all issues pertaining to paper. The company is not affiliated with any paper mills or merchants and does not sell paper. Contact Lenz at Sabine@paperspecs.com or visit www.paperspecs.com.



We've also done numerous webinars on the green aspect. [We are planning one] about greenwashing in general. A lot of companies have jumped on the green bandwagon and are making claims that sound wonderful, but don't really mean much when it comes down to it.

Q: How can printers make sure that their environmental policies won't be construed as greenwashing?

A: I think that's where the certification comes in. I'd like to say you have to be certified—and I know there is a cost involved—but it shows the end user that you are serious and you know what you are talking about. So the certification really helps to establish the printer as such and to say, "We are certified and we know this is important. We don't just say we clean our presses this way or we're using that ink, but we have the proof that this is actually happening on our end."

Q: Once a printer is certified, how can they best communicate to their customers what that means?

A: Education is very high on my priority list there. The more educated the client, the easier it is to work with them. I would recommend that you don't just say, "We're FSC certified." People know about this, but from our webinars and from the questions we receive from our readers and members, it's one of those terms that everyone has heard, but nobody is really sure what it means. If they can educate their clients more on the specifics of what it actually means to be part of the chain of custody, and really give them the sense that this is really something serious, this is certifiable, this is proven. The more educated the client, the easier it is for the printer in the end. Some of the printers here in California do it by newsletters and seminars, whichever way they can get the message across. Don't assume that people know what it is.

Q: What is Paper Specs?

A: The idea was originally just to be a paper database as a resource for designers, print buyers, and printers so they would know what is available at any given point. The database is really simple to use. You can search for nearly everything, starting by color and finish, and then go into the weights and the calibers. Our members say they hear about papers through us that they didn't even know about before because nobody has the time to find out what is out there. We currently feature about 2,500 papers from about 70 mills. For any paper print professional, it's basically impossible to keep up to date, and that's where we come in.

Q: Have you noticed more requests for green paper selections?

A: Absolutely, there's no question about it. I do [website] tours with new members every few weeks just to show them how the database works. I have a chance to talk to that group of people and see what their feedback is, what do they look for—and the majority definitely is looking for some kind of a green aspect, whether it be recycled, FSC, SFI, you name it. It is either being driven by them or by their clients, or by the company's corporate policy.

Q: Are a lot of printers using Paper Specs?

A: We have a lot of printers using our tool, which I think is very smart from their end. Everybody, including me in my design days, is leaning on the printer for advice, so we expect them to know more than we do. The more educated the printer or the print rep the better. About 10% of our members are printers, but more and more are signing up because it's very easy for them to find the information.

We also offer what we call our comparison tool. Just the other day, somebody says, "I have this client and they're looking for a comparison sheet to a specific brand, how do I best find it?" So, we used the comparison tool and they select one paper and say this is my important criteria. Then we show them all the papers that match the criteria that are important to their client, based on this one sheet.

Q: What types of criteria can you measure with the comparison tool?

A: You've seen that a lot of mills or merchants have brought out these comparison sheet charts. They say this sheet matches this, and this, and this. One suggestion from our members was, "We want some of these charts." We realized that not every mill is making those charts available, and if they make them available no two mills base their chart on the same criteria.

What we do is very simple. They search for a specific paper, then they click to compare and it pops up with nine criteria. It's anything from coated, brightness, price level, paper grade, recycled content, if it's suitable for digital, weight. Then the members can select which ones are more important to them. Then we show which papers match the criteria. People really get excited about it. Sometimes a paper has been discontinued or the printer doesn't carry a specific sheet. So, from a printer's point of view, they can say, "My client is looking for McCoy, but I don't carry McCoy. What is out there that comes close?" And it shows the exact data so they can show how it differs from what the client wanted.

Q: What are some of the alternative substrates that are available for production printing, and what types of applications would they be suitable for?

A: There are a lot of alternative fibers out there, but some made it and some didn't. We have some fun papers out there. There's a German mill that has brought out a paper that is made with hops and beer coasters. There's kenaf, there's a paper that has garlic in it, and coffee, and bananas, and you name it. And obviously, there are your synthetic papers. There's no limit to what people come up with.

The latest that we've seen on the market is mineral paper. They've been made in Asia for a number of years already, but they've come to the American market. These are papers that are made from calcium carbonate, so they are basically stone. They are called stone papers or mineral papers. This is quite fun. They feel somewhere between the synthetic sheets and the regular paper. They have a very smooth finish, usually water resistant, and little tearing. They hold up very well to printing. I think the beauty of them is that because of their surface, they use less ink than traditional paper. They have this really creamy and smooth feeling. It's very interesting.

Q: How critical is paper selection to the end result of a printing project?

A: I am a designer by trade, so I personally can vouch for the incredible difference a paper can make. I'm always sad when I see a situation where people say, "Okay, we're using these three sheets." There are thousands of papers out there, but they use the same ones over and over because they're used to it. But from a printer's point of view, just be open to new papers and don't dismiss them because they can make a huge difference.

Paper sets the tone. The end user, before they even look at the paper, they pick it up and they feel it. It sets a certain expectation and a tone for the design. And the more the printer can help the designer or print buyer make their paper choice fit their design, the greater the help they are. We all know that printers are going beyond just printing these days, so I can only encourage printers to be open to different papers and really listen to what the designer or print buyer wants to achieve for the sheet and then match the best paper to that.

Q: How should printers address the issue of having to stock all these different paper choices?

A: I can totally understand that because there's such a variety out there. Availability is very high on everybody's concern. Mills usually supply within one to three days, depending on where the printer is located. There are a lot of mills that even make smaller quantities available now. Obviously, you get a better price if you buy larger quantities. But that's where education comes in. The printer has to sit down with the client and say, "We can get this to enhance your design and it's going to cost you X. Or we can use what I have on the floor." But give the designer the choice to say this is worth it or not.

Q: So perhaps the specialty papers are something they would only suggest for very special projects?

A: Yes, but again, when I talk to mills they say, "We have it sitting here on the floor. You can buy a carton and it's really not a big deal." We get a lot of emails from members and readers who say, "I was told I need a minimum of three cartons and I only need 500 business cards." Then we get in touch with the mill and the mill says, "Hang on; they can buy one carton if they want to." So I understand that printers usually prefer working with certain merchants and have a good relationship with them, but it's supply and demand. If they talk to their merchant and say, "This is what my client wants." Just let the merchant know, as well, that they are open to other papers and don't want to be stuck with the same selection every time.

Especially in this day and age, when we are so bombarded with direct mail, you need to stand out. And a lot of times, simply using a different sheet can make the design stand out. It sets a different tone and people say, "Somebody special effort to do this." I see it over and over again, when you have a special sheet people start rubbing the paper. They aren't even aware that they're doing it, but there's a certain touch to it. There are so many wonderful papers out there that can help create that special feel. That's where the specialty papers come in and can make such a huge difference. ■