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# Sewing up loose ends on binding

Sabine Lenz

Printers and designers often use different terminology to describe the same concept (e.g. vellum versus translucent and French folds versus pleated folds). It reminds me of the lyrics to that 1930s Louis Armstrong song ... "You say NEether and I say NYther. You like poTAYtos and I like poTAAtos."

But sometimes someone just gets it plain wrong. After all, a potato is never a cabbage no matter how you pronounce it. A recent situation here at PaperSpecs had us digging for potatoes in the cabbage patch, but also ended up providing some creative ideas any designer would love to have.

## Seasoned Pros Can Get it Wrong

The binding specification on the beautiful printed piece was listed as Japanese Stab Binding, but to me it looked a lot like saddle stitching. It was a submission to our PaperSpecs Gallery, and it had our team questioning.

I understood the doubt because it was done with thread and not a staple, but I knew this was NOT stab binding. To verify, I called Mike Roswell from Roswell Bookbinding (Phoenix, AZ).

"We mostly think of metal clips when we think of saddle stitching," explains Roswell, "but the term refers to a piece being bound on the "saddle," which can be done in various ways."

(Kudos to me!)

Naturally, our conversation turned to other "threaded" binding methods. There are some nice, beyond-the-ordinary options you can offer your clients.

## Saddle Stitching

A saddle stitch is appropriate for small booklets, and in general, for volumes with only a few pages. These pages are usually held together by staples that run through the gutter. Once the pages are aligned and in the right order, this type of binding is quite straightforward and very common.

But, saddle stitching can also be done using a needle and thread, as part of the process of binding them together into a larger book. The key is that the binding takes place in the spine (saddle) of the piece.

## Coptic Binding

Developed by Christians in Egypt, this binding method goes all the way back to the 2nd century AD.

One or more sections of a book are sewn through the folds and attached to the cover with chain-stitch linkings. (If

multiple sections, each section may also be stitched to the other sections as well.

This process can only be done manually so it will add a considerable price tag to your project.

## Japanese Stab Binding

This method refers to a sewing technique that has been used in recent centuries by Japanese, Korean and Chinese bookbinders.

The pages and covers of a book are gathered, but then instead of binding the book through its fold or spine, the stitches run along the side of the booklet and across the spine.

Four to six holes are drilled about one centimeter from the spine, and the book is stitched together with a heavy thread or cord. The stitch can be a simple, straightforward stab stitch or more intricate variations like Tortoise Shell and Hemp Leaf.

## The Cost of Sewing

Machine sewing is always the least expensive option.

"Saddle sewing or straightforward side sewing can be done on a machine," says Roswell, "but you do have thickness boundaries with sewing on a machine. We can only sew between 0.25 and 0.3125 of an inch thick on a machine." Anything beyond this has to be done manually.

Japanese Stab and Coptic binding can only be done by hand so it can be very costly depending on the style of hand sewing, the size of the book, and number of pages.

## Visuals please!

If you think there's a "terminology" problem or if the client's description sounds rather unusual, you'd better double check. Have samples at hand and clarify by asking, "Is this what you have in mind?" Nothing can be more frustrating than preparing a quote and finding out along the way that you both envisioned something completely different.

So keep your eyes and ears open when your clients muse about specific processes. You never know if they're talking potatoes and you're thinking cabbage.

**Sabine Lenz** is founder of PaperSpecs, which provides inspiring, objective, practical, up-to-date information about paper and printing technologies via easy-to-digest tips and tricks, entertaining back stories, and expert insights.

