Digital Headquarters Imaging Centre

Understanding the paper chase

When the voice on the other end of the telephone at the printer's shop asks, "And what type of stock would you like?" You do a double-take, wondering whether you're suddenly talking to an executive chef, "Stock"? Or you wonder, "Is that beef or chicken?" And now, choosing the right paper for your brochure has become a cooking class.

How do you make the right paper choice? Well, let's look at some of paper's more common characteristics, which you've probably encountered when you picked up those packages of 500 sheet at the stationery store. Most times you'll see the specs next to the UPC label.

One important characteristic is the colour of the paper. For many of us, we'll probably use white most of our lives without even needing to know about Goldenrod, or Lift-off Lemon, or the Astrobrights.

White paper, as we know is a popular and conventional colour. However, in the world of paper colour, it's certainly different strokes for different folks depending on how you want the medium to convey the message. Colours run the gamut from severely painful hues to pleasing and softer shades to off whites that tone down glare, like a Dostoyevsky novel where a reader spends time.

You're also looking at the feel of the stock, which printers refer to as the surface. When the mills process paper, it is run through different rollers that determine the final texture. Thus paper can be smooth, glossy, more ink retentive, thin, more opaque, less bright.... Of course, the feel of paper helps shape the message that is being conveyed to the reader - the choice of a smooth, coated stock on an annual report, for example, can carry soothing and comforting connotations.

Brightness is another factor that goes into choice - this is a quantifiable measurement for the percentage of light that paper reflects. Most stocks reflect approx. 60 to 90 percent of incoming light. Readability is determined by brightness - too much can cause eyestrain; too little can have a blurring effect.

Then there's opacity, which we've all seen when the printing on both sides of of a sheet. The first side is visible through the second. Obviously, this affects readability - high opacity, or density, minimizes the visibility of printing through the pages.

Opacity is affected by a number of factors, such as the bulk and the eight of paper, the colour of stock, whether it's coated or not, the colour of ink, and so on.

Now here's one we're all familiar with - weight. We've all used 24 pound laser at least once in our lives, and we always encounter the (annoying?) flyers printed on 20 pound bond paper tucked under our windshield wipers in a parking lots.

We all know that business cards are printed on cardstock for durability, which ranges in weight from 80 to 120 pounds.

Here's the techie-stuff. Weight is calculated as the weight in pounds of one ream, which is 500 sheets. It gets complex from this point on, and it's mostly printers who have to understand this to order the right paper stocks for their customers.

A couple of basic thought - for high volume black and white documents, it's a good cost-effective bet to go with a 24 pound stock. For colour printing, the call is 24 pound laser as the starting point. For book covers and business cards you're looking at heavier, more durable, perhaps coated, cardstock.

And now, for a grain of truth. Grain describes the direction, or alignment, of a stock's component fibres. It can be either long grain or short grain. When fibres are patterned parallel to the length of a sheet, the paper is long grain. Fibres that run parallel to the width of a sheet make it short grain. Grain direction affects paper strength and flexibility, among other things.

Paper caliper is a measure of thickness. The measurement is done in thousands of an inch, and referred to as point size - one point is 0.001 inch i.e. 12 point is .012 of an inch thick.

Finally, there's size which describes physical dimension. Three common sizes in North America are "letter" 8.5 x 11 inches, "legal" 8.5 x 14 inches, and "poster" 11 x 17 inches. At DHQ, we offer these and 12 x 18 inches. Odd sizes are first printed on one of these sizes and then cut to the required specs.

In fact, we offer an entire range of paper stocks for both black and white and colour printing, and swatches are available for your perusal. If you're unsure about what stock to use, you're a phone call away from putting an end to your paper chase - just give us a call and we'll be glad to help.