

KEEPING CONTROL OF YOUR PRINT

Rail companies spend millions of pounds a year on printed materials in a complex, behind-the-scenes operation.

Print management specialist

Phil Hurley says keeping a tight control on the process can help slash costs

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Two hundred thousand timetables need to be designed, printed and distributed to 170 stations nationwide four weeks prior to issue – or a train company could be facing a fine. One hundred 'emergency work' posters must be printed and delivered to just a handful of stations within hours of an incident. A tourist information office wants 2,000 colour leaflets promoting a new travel package, but they need to be kept in stock until required. These are just some of the print and distribution challenges that face rail franchises today.

With the spectre of penalties for non-compliance always looming (the fine for late arrival of timetables can run into thousands of pounds and could even result in the loss of a franchise) coupled with the need to keep costs down, rail companies now more than ever need to take tight control of their printed material.

It's not just about getting a good price from a printer, it's about on-time, accurate and traceable delivery, slick stock control plus management of digital assets and brand images.

Often organisations have little or no idea of their total spend on print because it's an activity spread across many departments. A company-wide print audit can reveal some striking spending anomalies simply because each department is working in isolation and doing its own thing. Even the most basic audit will probably uncover potential savings of up to 20 per cent.

A good description of the possibilities for making cost savings is the term 'arbitraging', a word the financial markets use when a continual focus on trends and opportunities provides the scope to purchase a product or

Colour consistency is vital for protecting brand image and corporate identity.

service at lower-than-market price. In effect, buying 'distressed' manufacturing time is a process that needs skill and the ability to react quickly. The print industry consists of a vast number of companies ranging in size, each with its own specialisation, mix of machinery, ability to respond and business profile. At any given time, some print suppliers will have a full order book, and others will be in desperate need of work to fill capacity. Arbitraging means understanding who can do the work, and who will offer the best price and delivery. If a company buys its own printing, it needs purchasing planning that enables it to seize these opportunities. If it outsources print





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the rail industry, enabling total traceability of the paper trail. Take, for example, timetables, which must arrive at stations four weeks in advance of public availability. The SRA makes regular random checks to see that this is being achieved. With the latest software, proof of delivery is available online, with the consignment note pictured showing who signed for it and at what time.

Similarly, with these management information systems, data on stock-status is available in real time, indicating how much printed material is in the warehouse, where deliveries have been made, whether a further distribution needs to take place and so on. There are also facilities for automatic email alerts when stock levels reach agreed minimum levels. Regular stock reports are also produced and analysed, enabling managers to gain an accurate picture of the whole print supply chain.

As in most industries, the computer software to handle this has become highly specialised and requires substantial investment. In most cases, it isn't worth a company investing the money simply to manage its print output – no matter how large.

Another important factor to consider is the management of assets like brand identities and images. If a special tone of red, green – or skybluepink for that matter – is part of your logo then it needs to be reproduced consistently across all printed items.

These days, it's not a question of relying on the eye. There is specific equipment designed to check for colour consistency scientifically throughout printed media to ensure your brand image and corporate identity is protected.

Appointing a single source to manage the complete print supply chain makes sense because you gain more control and traceability plus transparency of costing right from the outset. By grouping orders together, print management specialists can generate big savings on print as well as reducing the costs and hassle of managing it.

The author is account director with Solibull-based ettrinsic, a leading print management company.

buying, it needs a relationship with its provider that ensures it gets the advantage of short-term changes and market conditions.

Printing is a specialised field and, with advances in technology, the choices as to which process will suit which particular job become more critical. The bottom line is that there are many different ways to produce a finished print item and it needs an expert to work out the best route in order to get the highest quality at the keenest price. Technical knowledge – and, in particular, breadth of technical knowledge – is essential in order to buy print effectively.

By the very nature of the rail industry, everything has to be turned around in the tightest of timescales. Anyone who has ever been involved in rail print will know there are always last-minute changes with everyone

working right up to the wire.

Throughout the whole process, it means chasing, chasing, chasing – designers, printers, distribution houses – to ensure everything comes together to meet the deadline.

If resource is not available in-house, then employing the services of a print management company is one option. As well as superior buying power, professional print management firms provide the latest online transaction processing and customer relations management systems that provide access to real-time information on stock ordering, storage and delivery. They also offer large-scale pick and pack and distribution facilities.

The ability to provide a whole raft of online management information is a key service for