

# What Printers Need to Learn

## About Working With “Creatives”

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by Dan Brill

**I**n the old days, before desktop technologies came along, printers worked in their own separate analog world of film and plates and presses. But all-digital workflows, open standards and the omnipresent Internet is forcing the printing trade to adjust their thinking—and the biggest adjustment of all may be getting used to the idea that the designer is an integral part of the process.

I have no idea when or who came up with the term “creatives” to describe designers, graphic artists, publishers, advertising agencies and other content producers, but I know that it is appearing with greater and greater frequency in reports, surveys and dialogues that I read. It tempts me to ask whether we “creatives” should therefore be referring to those in prepress and printing as “productives”—but I fear that may sidetrack me into a discussion of oxymorons, and that’s not really what this article is about.

Last year a study on the graphics industry released by the U.S. research firm TrendWatch ([www.trendwatch.com](http://www.trendwatch.com)) reported that 87% of all graphic designers and 84% of all ad agencies bought printing on behalf of clients (which, I hasten to add, is not to say that 87% or 84% of all printing is controlled by these groups).

This probably comes as no surprise to the creative community, yet many printers continue to operate on the old model, where customers were expected to hand off their jobs and then leave them alone to get the job done (and pay accordingly). To quote TrendWatch, “printers are well known for not thinking that designers understand their craft, (but) the reality today is that designers are calling more and more of the media shots”.

But if creatives are controlling such a large proportion of print work, wouldn’t you think that printers would want to cater to their wants and needs? Wouldn’t you think that printers would be looking for better ways to incorporate creatives into the print production workflow?

Wouldn’t you think that the “digital workflow” should be built to explicitly include the people who are supplying the files?

The TrendWatch survey also said that 52% of designers and 44% of publishers expected to invest in color printers last year. What does that say?

It says that creatives expect to be able to see what their final print output will look like *before* it gets to the printer.

So why aren’t more printers working with creatives to help them better manage color in-house instead of complaining about the crappy proofs they’re expected to match? For that matter, how many printers offer customers on-line estimating, or job tracking, or soft proofing capabilities, or an efficient method of making last minute changes?

As TrendWatch says, “Creatives need to trust the printers they use.” But until printers acknowledge the fact that *creatives are part of the workflow*, that trust will be hard to establish.

### THE WORKFLOW MODEL TO COME

In early February, I had the privilege of being invited to attend the second annual Agfa Apogee Users Conference in West Palm Beach, Florida. Whether we look back to 1985 when Agfa latched onto the PostScript wave or follow through to 1997 and the adoption of PDF as the foundation for its prepress workflow, this Belgian company has always been forward-thinking.

As with almost any gathering of print folks these days, the buzzword at the Apogee Users Conference was “workflow”. Agfa’s Apogee system suffered through a somewhat painful teething stage in its early iterations before emerging as one of the leaders in comprehensive PDF workflows. At the conference, we were

treated to a look at what the future Apogee workflow interface and functionality will offer, and, without divulging confidential details, I can say that I was very impressed with the way Agfa has approached the design of Apogee “X”—it will have a style, appearance and click-and-drag ease of use that any Mac user would appreciate instantly.

But what I found most curious was the fact that throughout these presentations there was absolutely no mention of what, from the perspective of “creatives”, could be the most revolutionary product Agfa is working on.

Some of you may recall from GX September/October, in a report on GraphExpo, my mention of a software/server product called *Delano*, which was first announced by Agfa at Drupa last May (full details on *Delano* at [www.agfadelano.com](http://www.agfadelano.com)). *Delano* was conceived by a design and software development firm in Antwerp called Image Building ([www.imagebuilding.be](http://www.imagebuilding.be)), which presented the idea to Agfa. Agfa took an immediate interest in this software concept and recruited Quebecor World to develop and test it.

There are three distinguishing aspects to *Delano*. First, it is a standalone web-based system which can be integrated with any workflow; second, it amalgamates the functions which make up the design, print procurement, job management and prepress production workflows; third, and in my opinion the key distinction, it integrates the customer or designer into the print production workflow in a bidirectional sense—that is to say, it provides “creatives” with a means to communicate with the prepress service provider, send and receive files, check and query job progress, make last minute changes(!), and in general, take an active role in the final production process.

Agfa sees the “hub” of *Delano* as the prepress service or print-

er’s customer service representative (CSR); the CSR would control and monitor the flow of information and set the parameters for responsibilities and access.

Fuji Graphic Systems is taking a similar but somewhat different approach to Agfa’s with its soon-to-be-unveiled web-based job management and information system, *myfujifilm.com* ([www.myfujifilm.com](http://www.myfujifilm.com)), which was announced last June.

Fuji is designing *myfujifilm.com* as an Internet service for its customers (i.e printers and trade shops) which can be customized for an individual company’s needs. Like *Delano*, it includes tools for job tracking, file delivery, soft proofing, preflighting, digital asset management, and asset repurposing, as well as news and information on Fuji products and services.

But I would take both *Delano* and *myfujifilm.com* one step farther. My view is that what creatives really need is a way to finally gain full control over their jobs—all the way through to final output to film or plate. Who needs a CSR? Let the job management software be the CSR. Creatives want to get at their jobs at any time of the day or night—check status, make changes to page content, or even re-order pages, at any stage of prepress production—or pull the job out and move it elsewhere, if necessary.

Now, this is the kind of talk guaranteed to strike fear into the heart of every printer and film house. Give the customer final control? Not likely.

But like it or not, there’s a new order coming.

#### WHERE WILL OPEN STANDARDS LEAD US?

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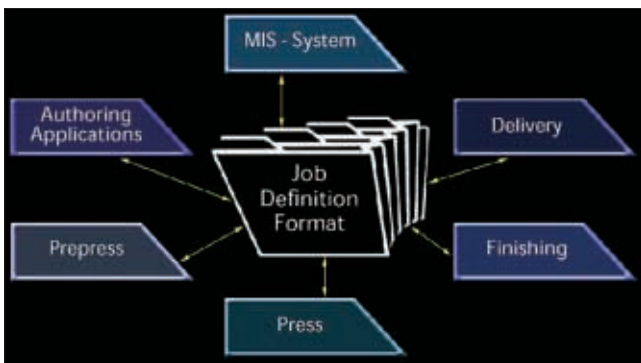


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Since the initial announcement, the responsibilities for creating an open JDF standard have been handed over to the International Cooperation for the Integration of Processes in Prepress, Press and Postpress (CIP<sub>4</sub>, formerly known as CIP<sub>3</sub>). CIP<sub>4</sub> now includes 63 vendor members.

JDF is not a data format of itself, but a “meta-data” format; it is written in XML, which is a versatile, extensible file format. It is the coffee grinder which processes the content, such as PDF and is made up of a series of steps, each of which is called a “node”.



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Because JDF is a collection of hierarchical nodes, constructed in a tree structure, it is easily divisible, collapsible, or extensible. Resources, such as application data, become inputs and outputs in these nodes. Every part of the workflow process can be described with progressively more detail by this node tree.

CIP<sub>4</sub> is currently working on specifications for JDF that incorporate earlier file format specs such as CIP<sub>3</sub>'s Print Production Format (PPF), which was primarily driven by press manufacturers like Heidelberg and Man Roland, and Adobe's Portable Job Ticket Format (PJTF), originally designed to be part of the PDF specifications. The intent of JDF is to create a universal standard for content creators, prepress service providers, printers and post-press services (binderies and finishers) which will enable all parties involved to communicate and transmit the details of a print job through digital workflows from creation to completion, using one standard set of descriptions, and regardless of application, system, platform, or language. The latest draft of the JDF specifications, dated February 5, 2001, is available from the CIP<sub>4</sub> website at [www.cip4.org/global/navigation\\_main.html](http://www.cip4.org/global/navigation_main.html).

One of the more interesting facets of the JDF specifications is the incorporation of “product intent” descriptives. This is essentially a means for content creators to “describe” their jobs without the need to know all the technical terms associated with production. For instance, JDF will need to have a way for a customer to tell a printer in plain English that he wants a flyer printed on both

sides in full color on a medium weight standard letter size stock, which can then be “translated” into the required print specification terminology. JDF will let creators access a “Content Repository” where they can edit, revise, or collect the parts of their jobs, as well as schedule reports and generate other information.

In the not-too-distant future, JDF will be used to create and maintain dynamic job descriptions, build production flows, even select the appropriate automated workflow for a given job and assign it to the correct machinery. It will be a tool for processing content for multiple purposes, such as for print and the Web; it will also link to MIS systems for job tracking, auditing and billing.

Of course, the implementation of JDF requires not only JDF-enabled application software and workflow systems but also JDF-enabled machinery, including presses and bindery equipment. The “back end” of print production, in particular, has been insulated from the digital revolution, but even folders, stitchers and other bindery equipment will have to be redesigned to fully capitalize on the efficiencies of automated workflows.

What new emerging standards such as JDF and PDF represent to many dot-com and graphics vendors is the next *big* business opportunity. These companies are focusing their future marketing strategies on selling the “process” to customers.

Last June, a consortium of e-commerce vendors announced the formation of PrintTalk ([www.printtalk.org](http://www.printtalk.org)). Its objective is “to create, implement, and gain rapid and consistent adoption of a freely distributed open standard that will be used to directly communicate data between e-commerce applications and business management systems for the graphic arts industry”, based on the adoption of JDF and XML as core standards. (A conspicuous absentee from this group is PrintCafe, which is spearheaded by Creo. PrintCafe has chosen to use PCX to build its own connections for the subsystems of the various companies it has acquired.)

As open standards and “macrostandards” for the graphics industry are gradually defined and implemented, as products are developed that embrace these standards, as manufacturing machinery is retooled to incorporate them, as customers and creatives learn to use and rely on them—the line from creation to completion will grow shorter, straighter and simpler. Just as the de facto standard in the front end became PostScript, which allowed content producers to build a (nearly) predictable means of data exchange, so it is that JDF, PDF and XML will form the basis for moving standardized graphics data, including annotations in any medium, through a variety of print production processes.

Which brings us back to the workflow model for the future.

In a world where print workflows are predicated on accepted and carefully defined open standards specifically constructed to automate the process, who will exercise ultimate control over the machine?

And the answer is: Those who push the buttons.

And that's why printers will have to embrace the concept of partnering with creatives as equals—whether they like it or not.

## RULES TO LIVE AND WORK BY

I would imagine that we creatives all have our own lists of things which we wish printers would do, or do differently. Let me share a few of my favorites:

**Job quotes with more than one number.** How often do you ask to get the cost of a job and get back a quote with just one grand total? Is it asking too much to see a breakdown that shows how much prepress processing, proofing, plates and makereadies, press time, paper, and bindery will cost? And while we're on the subject, why is it that I can get three quotes from three different printers and wind up with the lowest price being half or less than the highest? I think it's time for the industry to eliminate its two-tiered system of "commercial" pricing versus "trade" pricing.

**No surprise "extra charges".** Sure, I understand when "we didn't realize that this job needed...(fill in the blank)." But aren't you suppose to know your business well enough to cover this with me *before* I give you the job? Don't you realize that I already based my charges to the client on the original quote? And another thing: don't go "fixing" my files—again and again—without discussing the problem with me. If there's something I should be doing differently, tell me. And, by the way, just because a fancy new expensive XYZ system just got installed doesn't mean that I should suddenly pay more.

**On-line accessibility 24/7.** Yes, I know that it will cost you

money to set up a proper website with e-mail, job tracking, a system for me to swap files in and out, soft proofing of final flats, etc. But that's called "service". And if I e-mail a question or additional information about my job, I expect an e-mail back right away. Don't make me call. But if I have to, don't make me leave voice-mail. If it wasn't important, I wouldn't be calling.

**Proofs supplied.** I like *my* proof, and I don't want to pay for yours. If you don't like it, and/or you can't match it, give me a press profile for your press that I can match on my printer. And it's always nice to see the proof at the press when we're printing.

**Reliable press check times.** Need I say more? If a press check is supposed to happen at four o'clock in the afternoon, I don't expect to sit on hold until four o'clock in the morning before the job is actually ready to print. Sure, s\*\*\* happens, and presses don't always behave. But I have a life, too.

There's no doubt about it—"creatives" have a real love-hate relationship with their printers. Two different cultures, two different sets of priorities, one common goal: to get the job printed right.

But creatives have a proven history of being able to learn; if they didn't, desktop would never have succeeded as it did.

Now it's time for printers to start learning—not just how to make new systems and machines perform, but how to work in a truly all-digital "creative" production process with—and for—the people who are bringing them the jobs. 🍷

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