

Best Practices of VDP

By Frank McPherson

Variable data printing techniques are successfully being used in a wide range of applications, from transactional documents like bills and policies, to promotional materials like direct mail, point-of-purchase materials, and sales collateral, to office communications and publishing projects like books, magazines, and newspapers.

But as marketers have learned, just using variable information isn't a sure path to success. There is a set of best practices that can make the difference between documents that simply make use of personalized information and those that are truly effective and achieve ROI.

Let's take a look at those best practices.

1. Determine relevant business objectives and metrics.

Without knowing exactly what your objectives are, you cannot design an effective variable data piece. Knowing your target — leads? unit sales? gross revenue? margins? reducing production costs? — helps you select the right data and use it properly. You also need to determine which factors motivate your target group and how the competitive environment effects them.

Once these have been determined, you need to know how you are going to measure your results. Are you going to use response rates? response time? incremental sales? incremental margins? improved customer retention?

2. Select an audience and offering that are well-matched.

This means looking at whether the target group is qualified to accept the offer you want to make and making sure you can obtain the necessary data — whether internally (with an in-house database) or externally (with a list purchase or rental) — to make that offer.

It also means that your data must be properly prepared for maximum effectiveness. Make sure your data is clean (garbage in, garbage out) and determine whether it needs to be converted to a simpler format for production purposes.

3. Use effective layout and design techniques.

Like any other project, good design can make the difference between success and failure. Projects that are too cluttered, that cannot hold the reader's attention, or that have ineffective use of personalization will accomplish little. A common marketing and design mistake is to "shoe-horn" data into a predetermined design. Instead, the data should always drive the design — not the other way around.

More about these issues in the next column.

4. Build tracking and results measurements into the project.

One of the factors that has helped to propel acceptance of variable data, even during these tough economic times, is its ability to provide clear evidence of ROI. Without this, variable data is often seen as being too expensive per piece. But beyond justifying the price, another reason to build in tracking and results measurement is so that you can use the information to better target your VDP projects in the future. If you know what doesn't work, you can avoid it. If you know what does work, you can build on it. This helps improve response rates in the future.

Here are some approaches to tracking and results measurement:

- The target information (bar codes) can be imprinted on the mailer so that when the piece is swiped at the store level, the information is fed back into the system.
- VDP allows for mixing different discount levels in the same print run while still sorting all the pieces by postal code to achieve postal savings. Different price points can be tested in a single mailing simultaneously, thus accelerating the marketers' knowledge curve.
- Demographic information can be featured via text or images so that responses to different offerings can be correlated with demographics, further speeding the marketers' knowledge curve.

5. Use appropriate production methods.

Variable data requires a carefully streamlined workflow in order to be cost-effective. This means the ability to bring together data (both internal and external databases and lists) and design (image and text) through their various applications (Excel, Access vs. Quark or other layout program), then into the variable data construction engine (script, merge, RIP). This must happen quickly and efficiently, ultimately feeding into a digital printing engine powerful enough and fast enough to handle production volumes.

Using appropriate production methods also means using the right paper stocks that will run properly through the press and ensuring that all of the print production features are properly chosen. For example, most digital presses cannot produce spot colors, varnishes, or metallics, so the piece must be designed accordingly.

6. Choose your printer carefully.

Just because a shop has a digital press doesn't mean it can handle variable data print jobs. All variable data printing *do* require a digital press, but not all digital printers are capable of producing variable data print jobs.

Digital printing is a technology that is able to produce variable data print, but the ability to produce these types of jobs successfully and achieve client ROI

requires the proper workflow, infrastructure, skill sets, and marketing expertise. Personalization for the sake of personalization does not bring results. If you want a successful variable data campaign, you need to work with a printer that has significant experience in these applications and that has implemented the best practices discussed here.