

Giving a Color OK: How to Prepare and What to Do

Robert Jose
Director / Print Media
AGFA Corporation

After weeks of planning and after investing a great deal of money, many buyers approach color OKs in a haphazard manner and without much preparation. By doing this they give up some of the control they could have had over the job and leave the printer to guide the results. In most cases, printers try to satisfy a buyer's requests, but buyers must be able to communicate their thoughts and feelings to printers to help them do the best work they can.

The key word is communicate. In order to communicate effectively, you as a buyer need to prepare your thoughts in advance. There are several things you can do when giving a color OK that will make your life a lot easier and will help your printer give you the best results possible.

Before you go to give the color OK

- If you haven't worked with the printer before, take a plant tour before they print for you. This will give you an opportunity to ask questions that will develop communication and help build a strong relationship.
- When it's time to OK your print job, dig into your files and read through the steps that were taken while the proofs and films were being produced for the job. This will refamiliarize you with the job. Things to look for in the files: Did you ask for changes? Was different type specified?
- If the printer is working with proofs that show corrections made in the film after the final proofs were pulled, be sure to take along anything that indicates those changes such as notes or marked up proofs.

The basics

- Make your color requests while viewing the printing under 5000-Kelvin standard lighting. Do not compromise on this. No other light source is acceptable.
- The sheets should have standard color bars (like GATF's) in line with any area that shows live printing.

- Based on the color guidance information you will have already given the printer, you should be shown a proper press imposition form laid out as it will run on press.
- Ask the printer if a reflection densitometer was used to measure the hue or color error of the inks, press dot gain, and ink trap. If it wasn't, you aren't ready to do the color OK.
- Register of multiple colors should be exact. A minor shift in mechanical register can shift the color balance of many tones. If you're told, "Let's get the color now. We'll come back and get the register," you're working with the wrong printer.

Looking at the sheets

- Consider the overall color balance. If there are multiple pages, does any one color stick out as being too heavy or too light? The press operator may be able to make a quick, overall correction that can save steps down the line when you get to individual pages.
- Check to see that corrections marked on the proof have been made.
- Make sure all the type is printing.
- Examine the ink coverage of the type. Is it uniform? Is it too heavy in one area, too light in another?
- Looking more closely at the color match, focus on the key areas such as the company's logo in an ad, close-up flesh tones on a model, food, and furniture. In most cases the background will be the lowest priority.
- Keep in mind the psychological value of colors. Strong reds for roses and apples have a positive value. The same reds have a negative value when associated with chocolate, whiskey, and furniture because they are seen as making those products look cheap.

Communicating your ideas to the press operator

- Don't tell the press operator what to do to the press – he/she's the expert. Instead, point out specific areas on the sheet that you like or dislike.
- If pages are in-line, you may need to set priorities because of the conflict in balancing color between the pages. Communicate these priorities to the printer so he/she can give you the best mechanical compromise possible. Compromise may sound like a dirty word, but there is no such thing as a perfect match. There are only good or bad compromises with the variables involved.
- While pointing to a specific area you find objectionable, ask questions such as, "Is there anything you can do about this?"

- Avoid artsy descriptions like “It’s too cold,” or “It lacks punch.” You know what these phrases mean to you, but they may mean something completely different to the press operator.
- If the printed sheet is different than the proof but you like the sheet better, tell the press operator. This will help him/her to better understand your desires when working on other jobs for you. Once the printer knows your preferences, coming to color can be done more quickly and colors can be better maintained.
- If your job is printing on a press that gives a flat sheet delivery, ask the printer to give you a ruled up sheet while you’re still in the pressroom. Use this sheet to see if final trims, bleeds, pagination, and general appearance of positions are acceptable. If the final product is a folded signature, ask for a trimmed-out copy for the same reason. It’s better to catch problems at this point, rather than finding them after the job is off press.
- When you’re happy with the printing, ask for ten copies to be pulled off the press. If they’re acceptable, write “OK to print” with your initials on two and give them to the printer to use as a guide. Keep the rest for your records.
- Thank the press operator for his/her help, and let the plant management know how the OK was handled so future OKs run as or more smoothly.

Some special considerations on web presses

- Before start-up, establish the maximum number of impressions allowed before an OK is issued and what is to be done if that number is exceeded.
- On web presses you need to speed up the OK process. Since web presses need to run faster to establish color balance, paper waste is a critical issue.
- Most web press crews start saving the product before the color OK is issued, so act quickly to get uniform color balance.

Summary

Giving a color OK requires a marriage of minds. You don’t have to tell printers how to print; they know how to do that. But you do need to tell them your preferences. Once this communication develops, jobs print more consistently and with less makeready. You’ll be confident that your printer will produce what you want. All this takes time. This buyer/printer relationship is a courtship of ideas that leads to a marriage of minds and a life together of shared communication.

Giving a color OK is not a science. It’s a collaboration between you and the printer to get the best possible results and value for your printing dollars. Many people are intimidated by the noise, confusion, and stress of calling the shots. But remember, your printer is your partner – communicate with him/her and see how much better your printing will be.