

GPO CONTINUES THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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While there is no doubt that the digital revolution has been sweeping through the printing industry, a number of long time GPO vendors felt that federal government customers would be slow to adopt digital prepress technologies. In the last year, we have found that this is not the case. The number of digital files being submitted as government furnished material (GFM) has increased more than 10 fold in the last two years. The Atlanta GPO office reports that at the end of 1997, approximately 50% of the "copy" it received from its agency customers was on magnetic media.

The GPO has reacted to this rapid transition by establishing Digital Division, headed by Scott Stovall. While that department does an outstanding job, it is not staffed to handle the volume of digital file and digital printing questions that it will receive. In order to keep up with the service demands of its customers, GPO will undoubtedly have to increase its capabilities in the Digital Division.

In addition to establishing its Digital Division, GPO has been promoting the use of digital files and questioning the necessity for negatives on its typical 1-color text jobs. Earlier this year GPO issued Circular Letter 420 to all of its agency customers. That instruction advises customers not to request negatives unless they have some specific need for them, as requesting negatives raises the cost of a job, and hinders competition from suppliers who use either direct to plate offset printing or digital printing. The digital printing industry, led by Xerox, has been particularly concerned about the effect that requiring negatives to be produced on every job will have on the volume of outsourced printing. Their concern is based upon the fact that direct-to-plate or digital print production of 50 copies of a 380 page book (no negs produced) may be less expensive than printing when negatives are required to be made and furnished as a deliverable on the contract. As a result, agencies are able to successfully argue that it is cheaper and quicker for them to buy equipment to produce the work in-house. Since there are more private sector printing companies than government in-house print shops, Xerox and other suppliers of digital printing equipment would like to see the work outsourced, in order to support equipment in the private sector. Although GPO has been supportive of digital prepress technologies, including direct to plate processes and digital printing, its transition has been slow. There are still a large number of contracts, which, for reasons totally unknown to anyone at the agency or GPO, require a complete set of negs to be returned with the printed product. Our informal review found that a number of the agencies simply throw the negs away, and provide GPO with a new digital file when they want the product reprinted. This type of waste and additional cost can provide ammunition for those who would like the GPO to disappear.

Earlier this year, the Council formed a group to study this issue. After meeting with the GPO on several occasions, the group concluded that negatives should not be required unless there is a specific request from the agency. Instead, vendors who use negs would give them to the GPO or the agency as instructed, while those who went direct to plate or used digital printing processes would furnish a digital deliverable in the form requested by the agency. This recommendation has yet to be adopted by the GPO. The reason seems to be that the GPO is waiting for its agency customers to tell it that they do not want or need negatives on most of their jobs; while the agency customers are waiting for the GPO to tell them that they will not be receiving negatives on jobs unless they specifically request them. Until this problem is resolved, it is difficult for GPO vendors to analyze or even consider purchasing new direct to plate or digital printing equipment. Perhaps a resolution will come soon though, because GPO's own plant is using Docutechs for high page count short run jobs and is getting rid of negatives and going direct-to-plate on its offset web presses! GPO CONTINUES THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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