

# Customized covers

*What you need to know about variable data printing*

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## What is it?

It's called variable data printing (VDP). It allows you to customize text, images and graphics on individual pages in your print run. It's been around (and heavily hyped) in the printing industry for about 15 years, but only recently have magazine publishers opted to use it.

## What can it do?

VDP is a prominent tool in customized direct-marketing efforts, meaning circulators have been employing it for years.

In magazine publishing, the technology has most often been used to "personalize" covers. In December 2006, the American printing trade magazine *Graphic Arts Monthly* teamed with Xerox to develop covers featuring subscribers' first names as stars against a night sky, with their companies' names appearing on rocket ships.

*Wired*, also with Xerox, sent a copy of the July 2007 issue to 5,000 subscribers who had uploaded photos onto *Wired.com* with their face as cover art. The Canadian *Time* offered a similar package to 1,000 subscribers in September.

With its December 2007 issue, Rogers Publishing-owned *Canadian Printer* partnered with Kodak and took things a step further. "With the theme of 'Prescriptions for 2008,' we selected pill bottles and the prescription pad as the central image," explained *CP* editor Doug Picklyk in the magazine. "To make the cover speak to you, we organized a photo shoot with one foreground (pill bottles and pad) and 12 background set ups, each representing different industry sectors identified among our readership."

The final product, sent to 12,000 readers, featured eight variable elements, including subscriber names, wording tied to the size of company, messages dictated by job title and messages "linked to industry hype."

The December 2007 issue also featured a customized back page ad from Kodak that identified customers by name and listed a personalized URL for the reader to visit.

## What's the process?

It begins with the database. You may already have one (your circulation list) or you may need to build one (like *Wired* and *Time* did with photos from subscribers).

In-house layouts are next. Adobe InDesign and QuarkXpress are both compatible with VDP at Xerox and Kodak. Some elements will remain static (the pill bottle in the *CP* case) and some ele-

ments will vary (like the names).

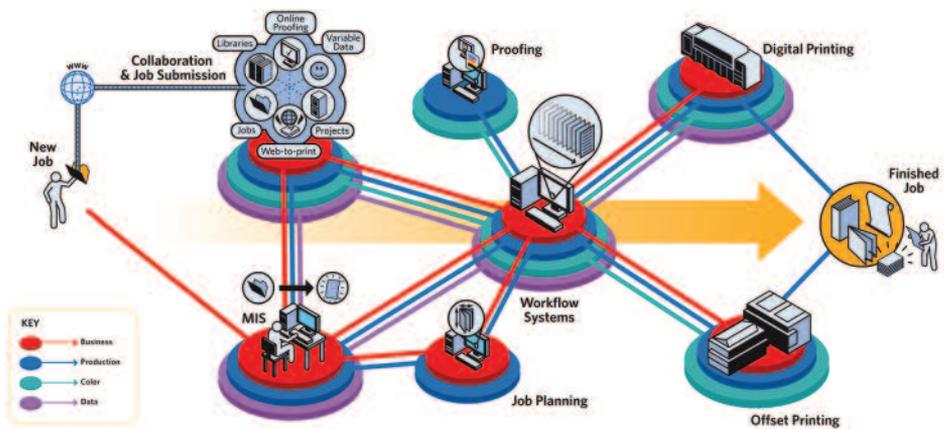
The layouts, along with text and data files, go to your VDP supplier. Software programs integrate the data and prepare the job for printing.

Printing of the customized pages is done on a specialized digital printing press. Kodak uses something called the NexPress 2100; Xerox's machine is known as the iGen 110 Digital Production Press; HP's digital presses are the Indigo 5000 and 5500.

Your customized job then goes to the bindery, where it's matched to the rest of the magazine.

Direct-marketers have been using VDP for a long time. If you're a circulator, testing is relatively easy. Send out a batch of personalized sub offers, as well as a bunch of non-personalized sub offers. If you generate more subs from the personalized batch (and the revenue you take in is greater than printing costs), it was worth it.

A publisher could theoretically print five, or ten, or twenty different covers (something big American mags such as *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone* and *GQ* have occasionally done) and see which one sells best (or hope there are a lot of collectors



This chart, courtesy of Kodak, outlines the basic production process for a variable data printing job. Publishers have mainly used the technology to "personalize" covers. Other VDP suppliers include Xerox, Hewlett-Packard and Fuji.

## What's the cost?

Like the pages themselves, it's variable.

Kodak says the average cost is about 25-30 cents per page, though that can rise as high as \$10 per sheet depending on the job's complexity. Unless you partner with your supplier and offer ad space (like in all the examples cited above), VDP will cost more than your average print job.

It will also cost you time. *CP*'s customized job took five days for 12,000 sheets, a vast increase over the usual couple of hours it takes to print that many sheets on an offset press, publisher Susan Ritcey says.

## What's the point?

On a broad scale, customized covers allow you to build brand awareness and enhance reader-loyalty. A subscriber who gets a personalized cover with his photo and name on it might be more inclined to renew his subscription. This isn't really measurable. In most cases, it's just a novelty.

out there). Of course, newsstand marketing is more art than science; there are too many variables for this experiment to offer hard evidence.

If you want to make money, VDP works best when you've got a reliable database of information on subscribers and a good working relationship with advertisers. The basic idea: Partner with an advertiser who is interested in making a more direct connection with readers. Using information in your database, allow the advertiser to customize her message to individual or groups of subscribers.

Your advertiser is going to want to see some R on this I. By printing an individualized Web address, the advertiser can easily find out who responded to the ad. Worst outcome: Your reader gets creeped out by the Orwellian overtones of the advertising promotion and cancels her subscription for good. Best outcome: You start charging a lot more for those customized ads and turn a hefty profit. **M**