

# Let's make a printing deal

Try these tips from the pros before signing your next print contract

BY VINCENT DEFranco

**S**hopping for a magazine printer? We spoke with several publishers and production managers across the country and their advice on evaluating and negotiating with printers could save you time, grief and money. Here are some of the tips they had to offer.

## Formalize the RFP process

"The number one priority should be producing a written document that details exactly what it is you are looking for," states Greg Antonacci, production manager for Toronto-based Family Communications. Making sure all prospective vendors get, and respond to, the same request is essential in a custom manufacturing business like magazine printing, where apples-to-apples comparisons are often tricky. Antonacci suggests delivering the document to the vendors at the same time and giving them the opportunity to ask questions. He makes sure that he shares one printer's questions/responses with all the other printers. "If you're unclear in your RFP [request for proposal] document, you could find yourself in a situation where the printers are all answering different questions, because they've interpreted the request differently," he says.

## Rewrite the quote

Continuously frustrated by hard-to-compare print quotes, Sharon Ward, publications manager, Atlantic Progress Publishing in Halifax, came up with her own unique solution. "After I have analysed a printer's submission, I re-write it and send it back to them," she explains. "I send it back in my own words, based on my own understanding of their prices, and ask the printer if I am correct in my interpretation." Ward points out that this exercise is not based on a lack of trust, but rather a recognition that a complex proposal request could be easily misinterpreted depending on the reader. By having the printer confirm "Ward's" quote, the possibility of future disagreements arising is greatly reduced.

## Evaluate between the lines

A thorough magazine print RFP clearly states what the publishers are looking for in terms of proposed run lengths, required paper stock, and deadline and scheduling parameters. However, almost as important as what information you ask for is how you expect that information to be returned to you, says Ruth Kelly, publisher and edi-

tor-in-chief of *Alberta Venture* in Edmonton.

"I find that if businesses do not respond to an RFP in the format which I have requested, that could be a sign of bad things to come," believes Kelly.

For example, an RFP might require the printer to fill out a grid that shows its price based six possible page count/cover combinations in 10 different run lengths. "If they come back and say this is what it costs for each 8-page form, this is how much for a 16-pager, this is what the stitching costs per thousand, it puts the onus on me to spend my time to figure out how much it will ultimately cost."

Delivering the right information in the right format in a timely manner is essential for the printer. "Remember," warns Kelly, "this is how they are responding to you when they are on bended knee and want your business, so this is as good as it gets—it's not likely to get better once the signature's on the dotted line!"

## Evaluate service

Although it is difficult to negotiate the service levels you'll get from your printer, you can ask a few questions which might be indicative of how

## Ask for publishing and non-publishing references to get an idea of how the printer handles different production challenges

the relationship "fit" might be. Kelly suggests these questions could include: Will I have a dedicated CSR? Does the printer have a toll-free number? Does it offer 24/7 service? Is the sales rep willing to provide her or his home number?

Kelly also strongly recommends plant tours of all printers in contention for the contract. She advises publishers not to just accept that the printer has updated equipment simply because it's described in an RFP document, but to get on the plant floor and see for themselves. Also, look at the staff's demeanor and ask yourself if they take pride in the work they do. If a printer will be using an outsourcing company such as a trade bindery, Kelly will take the time to visit that plant as well. Finally, Kelly insists on thorough reference checks, and always asks for publishing and non-publishing clients, in order to get a better idea of how the printer handles dif-

ferent production challenges.

## Ask "What else"?

Depending on how significant your annual print spend is to the printer's overall business, you may be in a position to get certain concessions over and above discounts or rebates. Many publishers have been able to negotiate things like the lease or purchase of new scanners, proofing equipment, or software upgrades in their multi-year contracts. If these items can ultimately help the printer improve the overall workflow and save them time and money in the long term, it might be beneficial for them to make an upfront investment which they will recoup over time.

## Set a negotiation time limit

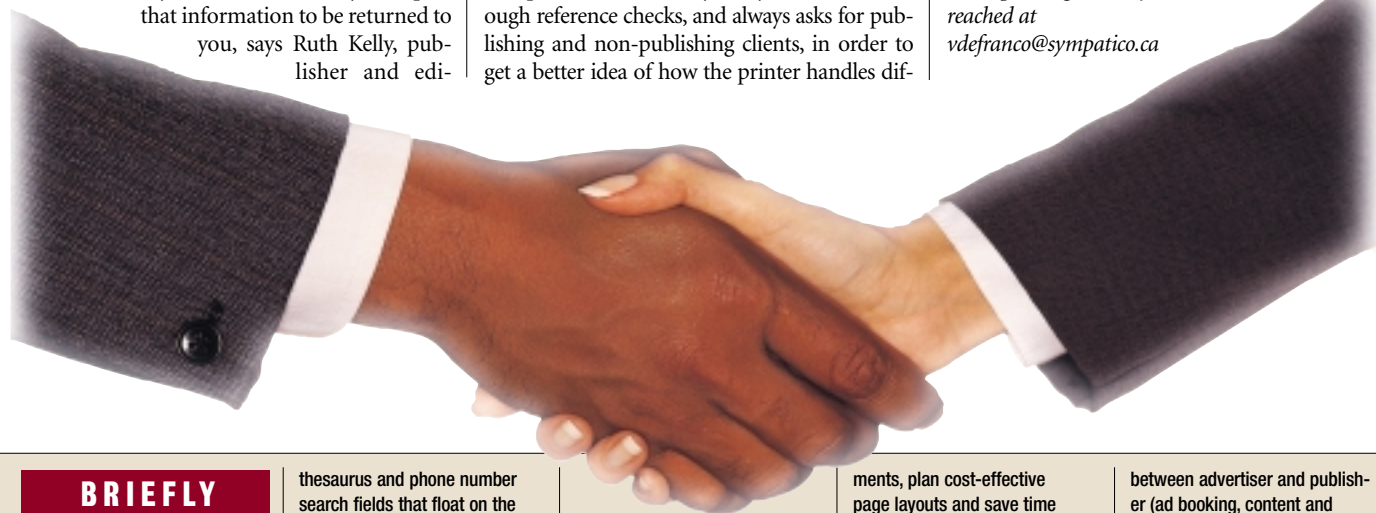
When receiving competitive quotes from printers, *Alberta Venture's* Kelly is upfront in communicating that she does not expect numerous rounds of negotiation and she insists they sharpen their pencils from the start. Although publishers can save money by constantly playing one printer's low quote against another, the process can be overly time consuming and draining. She suggests that the better way is to inform the suppliers when the final round of pricing is expected. If a printer's "final" quote is too high, she tells them they weren't competitive, and the printer isn't given another opportunity to resubmit. "After that, they'll often say, 'Oh, you wanted our best price?,' but at that point it's too late," explains Kelly.

## Look for contra opportunities

If your readership happens to be the same market as your printer's customer base, you could consider offering an ad in the magazine in exchange for a print credit, suggests Ward at Atlantic Progress. Back when film reigned supreme, Ward had such an arrangement with a service bureau, which was beneficial to both parties.

Family Communications' Antonacci provides some final words of wisdom to publishers in the thick of choosing their next printer: "Negotiation is not the process of finding cheapest price—it's the process of getting the best price from the people you actually want to do business with." **M**

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## BRIEFLY

### TIGER RELEASED

Apple unleashed Mac OS X Tiger (version 10.4) in late April. Tiger delivers over 200 new features that should benefit Mac users in publishing. Among the new utilities is the Automator, which allows non-techies to automate repetitive functions without needing programming skills. Dashboard includes hundreds of different "widgets," each with its own function, such as dictionary,

thesaurus and phone number search fields that float on the desktop. Spotlight is the hard drive's super-speedy search engine. It can find content in a file, including PDFs, as well as file names and metadata, with automatic indexing capabilities. Contact: [apple.com](http://apple.com).

### SIMPLIFYING AD PLACEMENT

Two magazine publishing software developers have joined forces in an effort to improve the logistics and profitability of magazine print ad placement.

Stamford, Conn.-based The Media Services Group, producers of Ad Manager, and Dataplan of Hamburg, Germany, producers of JournalDesigner, have agreed to build an interface for their two products that will streamline the workflow process between advertising insertion/billing and page imposition/flatplaning. The vendors claim this will make it easier for publishers to address position require-

ments, plan cost-effective page layouts and save time from insertion to imposition. Contact: 203-352-5310.

### COMPATIBLE AD STANDARDS

AdsML Consortium, which brings open standards for e-commerce to the ad industry, and CIP4—the International Cooperation for the Integration of Processes in Prepress, Press and Postpress—have agreed to coordinate standards for e-commerce and print advertising. AdsML's specifications will govern communication

between advertiser and publisher (ad booking, content and placement) until the ad enters the production workflow. Once the ad is placed in a CIP4 job-definition-format-enabled system, information regarding the proper reproduction of the ad will become part of the JDF data stream, helping to reduce errors in ad reproduction. JDF can also create electronic tearsheets that AdsML can send, along with invoices, back to the advertiser to streamline the billing process. Contact: [cip4.org](http://cip4.org), [adsml.org](http://adsml.org).