

Standards & the Creative Community

Creatives today not only embrace standards but also see them as an integral part of their workflow.

BY ROY ZUCCA

Standards and the Creative Community—I know there are many graphic arts professionals out there who would laugh at that title. They would argue that it is a lost cause trying to convince creatives that standards or specifications like SWOP, GRACOL, SNAP or PDF/X should be used to facilitate and ensure the best result for their work. They would say creatives simply don't care about that stuff!

On the contrary, I believe that creatives not only embrace standards today, but also think it is a “no-brainer” that they should be using standards as an integral part of their workflow. Collectively they know that all of us couldn't move forward in a competitive and shifting neutral media environment without graphic arts standards. They fully understand that they need to integrate standards for a smooth and efficient print workflow. I believe that the 2007 creative professional community “gets it.” To me, it's that straightforward and that simple.

You may well ask what is the reasoning behind my thinking that the creative community of today is very much in favor of and accepting of the use of standards. A very good question and to best answer it I believe it is vital that we should first take a fresh look at who makes up the professional creative community of 2007. Then take a glance back at what I consider to be the three most significant milestones in the last 30 plus years that helped shape this conclusion.

Defining the Creative Community

Who is the creative community of 2007? I think it is essential to recognize that the creative community

today is definitely not the same one that many of us knew as recently as 10 or 15 years ago. We are looking at a sector of the graphic arts that is definitely shifting and changing quite rapidly. An updated definition of who makes up the new creative community might read something like this: “A broad spectrum of design professionals who come from a multiplicity of disciplines.”

A counterpoint might be that not all creatives are influencing or even associated with anything in the print arena, but again I must respectfully disagree. Consider how all encompassing today's professional creative community has become and how it has reached into areas that many of us were not even aware of as recently as just five years ago.

For instance, this past January in New York City, the Digital Ad Lab (DAL), completed an outstanding two-part series that was presented by two top professional photographers who discussed optimization and best practices in digital photography. A good portion of their presentation was centered on standards, file formats, color management and how it all has an impact on the final printed product. Now I ask you, 10 years ago would graphic arts professionals have seriously entertained the thought of attending a presentation from professional photographers lecturing about color management and SWOP?

Also, at the same DAL presentation, the composition of the attending audience was not just made up of prepress professionals and production folks; the audience also included art directors, designers, studio personnel, publishers, design firms, art buyers, photographers, and IT professionals and



digital tech support companies that work with professional photographers and creatives. I would suggest that we might consider this rather diverse group the “New Creative Community.”

Examining the Creative Community’s Impact

OK, if this so called “New Creative Community” is out there, do they have any real impact on the graphic arts community? Let me submit the following information for your deliberation. New York labor statistics credit the design industry with more than 175,000 design-related jobs, which accounts for a combined payroll of \$4.9 billion of which \$900 million is derived from firms of fewer than 20

people. And to add to that community there are also approximately 18,000 design students in the New York metropolitan area who come in under the radar and should also be considered as part of the creative community.

Those are some very significant numbers, but the figures that I feel have the greatest impact for all of us in the graphic arts community are the following from 2005: “92 percent of creatives specify, recommend, approve, or buy print,” and “\$26 billion dollars of print is bought in the United States by creatives annually.”

I’m sure for some folks those statistics could very well be startling and maybe even sobering. With that

STANDARDS



From the beginning, industry leaders felt SWOP could be a major asset to ad agencies and art directors. SWOP paved the way for today's standards and specifications like the SWOP/GRACoL press form.

said, I expect the “New Creative Community” not only is a key role player in today's print workflow, but also will be even more of a force in the future.

Reviewing Key Industry Milestones

While those views and numbers are fresh in your thoughts, let's pause and observe those three significant milestones that I mentioned at the very start of the article.

The Advent of SWOP

In my experience the first key milestone that had the greatest impact was the advent of SWOP. I must admit that I was an early “standards” believer way back in the late 1970s when I was working at Young & Rubicam New York and first started to work as an ad agency volunteer on SWOP specification. The concept of SWOP was avant-garde at that time and not an easy sell to everyone in the graphic arts community.

I had the good fortune to meet and work with Joel Rubin (former owner of Phototype, Pennsauken, New Jersey) who was the driving force behind SWOP. He was patient enough to take the time to carefully explain to me why he viewed specifications to be imperative as the majority of the magazine printing industry was moving to offset printing. Joel made a strong case for consistency from start to finish in the

print workflow and how it had the potential to solve a host of problems we faced in the magazine ad reproduction area at that time. I will never forget one very key fact that Joel touched on—how SWOP could be a major asset to ad agencies and their art directors. One of SWOP's goals would be to give the ad agency the opportunity to create and produce an ad that would have predictable printing results in a variety of offset printed magazines, providing that everyone in the workflow adhered to SWOP.

The fact that a printing specification was recognizing everyone in the process, including the originator, was a groundbreaking concept for the time. When I started to speak to creatives about SWOP there were plenty of skeptics right from the outset. After all, in many creatives' view those printers and prepress people were their adversaries, always trying to curtail any possibility of achieving great color in their ads. To say it was an uphill sell is the understatement of the decade. It took the collective graphic arts community years of numerous seminars, meetings, conferences and even some one-on-one talks attempting to bring the creatives into the fold. There were many creatives who came with a very open mind and contributed greatly while others came kicking and screaming. But we all persevered and, in retrospect, SWOP has indeed had an enormous impact on everyone involved in the process. It opened graphic arts professionals' eyes—and I mean everyone in the process—to truly see and comprehend the total picture from the very start to the delivered magazine. It emphasized that we are all stakeholders in the workflow. That is a huge legacy for all of us today and, in fact, I believe it is so important that I include the history of SWOP as part of my curriculum for all of my Parsons students who are working toward a degree in design.

The Impact of Desktop Publishing

For the next milestone let's fast forward to the beginning of desktop publishing in the late 1980s and take a look at what I perceive to be the second major effect on the creative community. You could also classify this period as a paradigm shift for everyone in the graphic arts workflow. At this juncture, creatives or content creators certainly felt empowered. As one of my creative director friends said, “For the first time we were given the keys to the car!”

This period ushered in the age of digital technology that gave creatives the capability to not only

create, but also to build a complete finished page digitally, place art work and photography, and set all of the type and then deliver that final page for print—all directly from the desktop.

If you wanted to isolate one period in this era that became the tipping point for creatives to recognize that standards would take on an important role in this new digital age, I suspect it would have to be the necessity to set type at the same level of sophistication that was achieved by professional typesetters. Creative people quickly recognized they were now faced with the new responsibilities of purchasing, building and maintaining a font library, ensuring that naming conventions for fonts were being adhered to, fonts were all licensed correctly and dealing with a host of other important typographic issues that needed very close scrutiny and monitoring.

Yes, it was a whole new world for creatives and for many it was a steep learning curve, but along with their digital education came an awareness of what an important role standards would now play in their professional lives. There was no turning back as the desktop publishing was shifting into overdrive.

The Launch of Acrobat

Moving ahead to the early 1990s, I see the third major effect to be the launch of Acrobat. It is the vehicle that accelerated the shift to a total digital workflow. I clearly remember sitting in an invited meeting for the introduction of Acrobat to the New York graphic arts industry. I was very impressed, but not as much as my studio director who said to me after we left the meeting, “Mark my words, what we just saw in that meeting is going to change how we all work in the creative area. This will be bigger than Postscript. Acrobat will be a boon for creatives in the next 5 to 10 years.”

Admittedly this is paraphrasing because the exact words have probably slipped from my memory in the last 14 years, but the essence of what he said was right on the money. As PDF started to take hold in the late 1990s, I became very aware that everyone in the entire print workflow from publishing, printing, prepress, and production to finishing and, yes, creative was considering using PDF as part of their workflow, as well as some creative professionals I know in smaller studio environments who rapidly implemented PDF as their workflow.

Then PDF/X became the standard for the print advertising field replacing TIFF/IT P1, and other

variations of PDF started to populate other corners of the print arena. I remember jumping on board the PDF bandwagon in 1999 and recommended PDF to my agency heads as the format of choice for our internal graphics workflow. I felt it could easily be used for our local internal workflow and also aid us with national and international clients who required a more flexible and faster approach to migrating ideas and ads especially in a new global economy. I believe at this stage the PDF juggernaut was moving faster than many of us would have ever anticipated. And who was the driving force that helped accelerate this move to the new standard of PDF? Creatives!

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As a side note I would also like to add that during the early part of this decade at Parsons the New School for Design we introduced PDF as part of our production workflow for all of our design students in the Communication Design & Technology Department. The students easily transitioned to moving files to instructors and submitting work to printers following simple guidelines that we established for them. The switch to a total PDF workflow for our aspiring creatives was incredibly easy and without question it collectively made their lives, as well as ours and the printers we employ, much easier.

As they say, the rest is now history.

I strongly believe that the three milestones I just outlined are the fundamental influences determining why today’s “New Creative Community” and creative professionals use standards without hesitation. For creatives, standards are another tool that works right alongside the basic applications they use every day to achieve the best possible printed result.

I hope this brief look into our past, combined with a critical look at our present, will help shape our understanding of the “New Creative Community” and how creatives will continue to assume a larger role in the graphic arts of the future. 