

Whither Goest?

Standards and the Future of Our Industry

BY LARRY WARTER

This, as usual, is the standards article, with an update on the state of industry standards. But, since there hasn't been a lot of activity in the last two months, this is more of a think piece on the role of standards and our industry in general.

First a quick update. The major activity has centered around the GRACoL G7 gray balance system and the efforts at all levels to reconcile it with classic density/dot gain (TVI). As reported last issue, work is underway at ISO to introduce a normalized CTP curve to go with the family of legacy positive and negative plate curves already in ISO 12647-2. This is expected to pass and will then sanction the latest CGATS characterization data sets (TR 006 for commercial printing, TR 003 for grade 3 publication paper and TR 005 for grade five publication paper), which are based on the G7 NPDC curve, as being fully compliant with the standard. After that it will be up to the industry to determine how they want to proceed and which will be the ultimate process control system.

Rationalizing Density, TVI & Gray Balance

Maybe more important, work is also underway to better rationalize the two processes. The GRACoL committee has joined forces with the BRIDG'S guys to publish two versions of a joint treatise on how to use density, TVI and gray balance together to best print color managed files. After all, under optimum conditions, the two systems should produce the same results (proper density and TVI should produce the right gray balance), and the only real difference is what to do on press if all three cannot be optimized at the same time. The GRACoL version is the shorter

more technical one, and the BRIDG'S version will be more of a primer for printers and their pressmen who want to understand the basics of the process. The GRACoL version has already been placed on the IDEAlliance web site for public comment, and the BRIDG'S version will be published by the end of the first quarter. It is hoped that these two efforts will resolve many of the questions that the industry has about the process. Then we can begin to actually apply color management to the printing process and finish the quest of many of us to change the printing business from a slowly dying craft to a more dynamic exacting process.

Does Anyone Really Care?

Having said that, the standards part of this effort is on hold till the next ISO meeting and the publication of these two brochures. Instead of speculating about the future of this effort, let me address an even more important question. Does anyone really care? What leads me to ask this question is that I was at a conference in January entitled the Braintrust where many of the speakers who grace the podiums of our industry's various conferences get together and yell at each other for three days trying to, if not resolve, at least understand all the relative issues that plague our industry at that particular moment in time. We do this in order to not give mixed signals to the rest of the industry during the rest of the year. It's fun and it mostly works.

This year, as usual, we covered the range of issues from soup to nuts—or maybe SWOP to metadata. And, as always comes up, we addressed the issue of



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standardizing our industry. What came out this year was that the closer we get to standardization, the less anyone seems to want it. We had representatives from printers, trade shops, publishers and agency/designers and they all echoed the same themes: the industry is becoming more and more of a commodity; there are fewer and fewer experienced people at all levels on the food chain; there are no real customer expectations for quality (the most often sighted example was the bank of TV's in stores or even on airplanes where the image has grossly different color on adjacent TV's and no one seems to care); and finally, everyone with "real" experience is bailing out in disgust. I'm not sure if all of these are true (this group is old enough to be talking about retirement even if everything were going great), but everyone at the conference seemed to believe them. And, I'm sure everyone in our industry has had this

same type of discussion at one time or another, so that makes them effectively true.

What Does All This Mean?

What, if anything does all this mean? Well, there are many factors in this analysis and it is very hard to separate them. First, and most important, is "what is quality?" That is something that our industry has never been able to define. Like any other aesthetic business we can't define what makes a picture look good. We can't even describe the general aspects of a good picture. For example, contrast and sharpness are usually good except in cosmetic ads that constitute some of the highest quality printing. So, if our customers are trying to put value on quality, they first have to define what they expect. Since they can't, they may simply just beg the issue and give the appearance of not caring about quality or actually even wanting a "commodity"

oriented marketplace. Maybe lack of quality is simply a matter of a lack of a definition—not a lack of caring. This was reinforced this week at the IPA Business Development conference when I tried to raise the issue with people. Everyone seemed to feel strongly about the need for quality, but they wanted to talk about the other things that they could control. Everyone seemed to be looking for someone else or something else to take over the quality responsibility, but there were not a lot of ideas on that subject.

This is obviously not good! At both meetings, talk of quality rapidly deteriorated into horror stories of people and companies who didn't care or didn't understand about controlling the process. We do seem to know the downside of ignoring quality. A few examples included a printer who refused to use correct lighting and the correct paint for the surrounding area and blew a 25,000 pressrun due to a poor color OK. This particular job had a lot of neutrals in the piece and the finished job was very warm, almost a dark brown. However, under the printer's "viewing booth," the proof and the printed piece looked fine.

And then there's the case of the printer whose pressroom foreman kept the densitometer locked up in his desk because he didn't want anyone to use it for fear of it getting broken. The owner was under the belief that his company printed to the numbers but didn't have a clue as to what the numbers represented. They tried to visually match a job with a previously printed sheet and a proof but no colorbars on either. Once the job dried, it didn't match either the proof or the previously printed piece. They didn't know they had dryback, and they were running blind. Of course they had to reprint the job.

Finally, there once was a printer who went out of business due to testing "free" products, which eliminated any ability to do process control. At one point they had three different blankets, two different ink manufacturers and two different fountain solutions all on the same press. This company also had a consultant implementing color management. When the press varied, the consultant applied plate curves to the various jobs. When the printer went out of business, they had 44 different plate curves.

There were many more horror stories, but the point is clear. The sad part is that we all know these are more like examples than they are exceptions in our business. The number of printers who actually do process control is minimal. And we can all understand why. It's hard to take process control seriously

when it only guarantees consistency not quality. No customer ever OK'd a press sheet because the numbers were right if the picture didn't match their proof. The point is that this doesn't sound like an industry whose products are "commodities and quality is assumed." It sounds more like an industry where most of the practitioners are totally out of control and remain in business only because their customers don't know what to expect and accept what they get.

Even that might be OK if it placed us in the "what they don't know won't hurt them" category. It has been that way in our industry for a long time, but the times are changing. Printing isn't threatened, but it doesn't have the historic advantages it once did. There are now a lot of alternatives for our customers to get their message out and printing sure isn't the fastest or the cheapest. We have to be the best quality; and, where printing is successful, it is used to carry the accurate color message that TV or the Internet can't deliver.

What Do the Customers Want?

At the Business Development Conference large knowledgeable customers like P&G, Kraft Foods, and Dial were very clear that they thought that their involvement in press checks was a complete waste of money. They didn't have the expertise in house to interact productively with pressmen. They wanted to produce the content and have someone else take responsibility for the reproduction on press. They're in the business to get the message out; their suppliers are in the business of making sure that is done well.

And, these same people talked about value—not cost. I got the impression that good printing is still better than bad, and they are still willing to pay for the assurance of good printing. The problem is "assurance." While aesthetics can't be sold as a commodity, as noted above, it also cannot be guaranteed. That brings us back to consistency. What the customer really wants is cross media consistency. The press sheet matches the digital sheet (be it a proof or digital collateral material) and that matches the monitor (be it proof or maybe eventually TV/Internet collateral). The problem, as we have found at the standards level, is this goes way beyond process control (which generally is still not being properly done) up to visual image control, which is hard to contemplate much less to do.

What Can Be Done?

This is fun to yell about at the Braintrust, but what can be done? Obviously there are near term partial

answers and longer term goals. Near term, as you would expect from an article in the *IPA Bulletin*, is to expand the role of prepress. Prepress has always been responsible for quality, and that role should now be more formally expanded in both scope and direction.

First, prepress should become responsible for print buying. This was alluded to at the Business Development Conference, but more as an exception than a direction. I would (and have) propose that one of IPA stated directions be to move upstream and take over the print buyers role. Obviously, as noted above, the customers are ready; and, as more and more experienced people leave our industry, there should be a business model that most effectively utilizes the ones who are left. That's why prepress originally was separated from printing, and it only makes sense to continue to refine the model.

Second, we have to better differentiate segments within our industry. Different marketplaces function very differently. Printing is used to communicate both information and imaging (to use an old Fuji slogan). The more a given marketplace is oriented toward

information, the more of a commodity market it will be, and, the more image oriented, the more it will place a value on quality. The same market value forces do not apply equally to newspapers, magazines, coffee table books and packaging, so we should stop lumping them together. The IPA has been involved with image oriented printing only for a long time. That is not bad. There is an old parable about how the railroad industry made the mistake of not understanding that it was in the transportation business and proceeded to lose significant market share. This has often been cited by pundits when commenting on the printing industry. The thing they don't mention is the fact that the railroad industry has continued to gain volume every year right up to the present. The printing industry may lose market share in a rapidly expanding marketplace, but we should be able to grow image oriented printing for the foreseeable future and IPA should be at the heart of the effort.

Longer term, we do have to address the trends. The standards community must continue to try to define "good." We need to finalize the definition of good

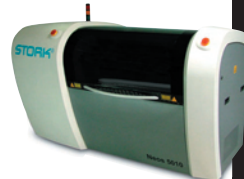
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STANDARDS


printing and how that relates to density, dot gain (TVI) and gray balance in ways that not only, are embraced by all, but also lead the way to defining “good imaging.” So, first look for the GRACoL/BRIDG’S brochures and get involved. And, then be prepared to take part in the definition of good imaging. We have long known at the standards level that all standards must allow both predictability and flexibility as needed. Imaging will be no different. We need to have the images predictably reproduced by an essentially transparent process in printing, and we need the ability to move flexibly cross media whenever the customer desires. It’s a tall order, but it can be done.

And, yes, experienced people will continue to bail out of the process. If we play our cards right in recruiting (such as through the efforts of events like the Industry Educational Summit held at Graph Expo last year) we will start to regain competent people again for our industry, but they will never again want to take the time to become experienced enough to control the process. Therefore, at the standards level we need to anticipate the day when the equipment actually starts to define “good.” But, even there the future looks better and better.

There will be data formats that make every picture self defining in terms of capture information, color content and viewing intent. There will be software that uses artificial intelligence to actually look at and

recognize many aspects of images and determine automatically what color those areas of the picture should be; and I’m not just talking about flesh tones and trees, but Caucasian flesh tones and maple trees!! It will also “look” at lighting color and direction and how they should be adjusted to best complement the picture, and, if that isn’t enough, it will automatically take all the information it has determined about the image both by itself and from the self defining files and it will automatically adjust the image to the best reproduction for any media from photography through all types of printing to the web itself.

And finally there will be systems that will use these other information systems as input and track image reproduction through the entire creative process so customers will be able to rest assured that their images are being reproduced the way they want them, on time and with no surprises. It will be happening everywhere, so reliably that most of us will forget that it is even happening. We’ll view a printed job the same way that we view a sunset. We won’t wonder about the workflow, we’ll just appreciate the result!

So, yes quality will be important as long as we raise our eyes and see how we can directly affect the output. It would be a shame if we collectively write off the printing industry before the standards efforts make it the reference medium for all other imaging in the future. 

EVERY BUSINESS SHOULD HAVE A PLAN.

*“IT CAUSED DESTRUCTION TO EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH.
HOUSES, BUILDINGS. SOME PEOPLE LOST EVERYTHING.*

*BUT WE WERE PREPARED FOR AN EMERGENCY LIKE THAT. WE KNEW
HOW TO REACH OUR EMPLOYEES, KNEW WHAT TO DO. WE HAD EMERGENCY
SUPPLIES ON HAND. AND AS A COMPANY, WE MADE IT THROUGH
HURRICANE CHARLEY BECAUSE WE HAD A PLAN.”*

CHARLES G. BROWN, President & CEO,
Charlotte State Bank, Port Charlotte, FL



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