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Print Awards ... Beauty Contest or Industry IQ Test?

Thursday, 08 April 2004

By Print21

The recent awards night was a brilliantly staged multi-media extravaganza, the general organisation of which is to be congratulated. There's no doubt about its technical excellence, and about the venue, and its importance as a rainmaking get-together for the various industry tribal groupings who flock from all corners of the continent, much like the aborigines did each year in the Snowy Mountains to sup upon Bogong moths.

Why, then did I come away with a slight sensation of being somehow ... unfulfilled? It certainly wasn't the menu or the wines, which flowed copiously throughout the evening. It was more to do with the unrelenting focus on that most elusive quality...QUALITY, to the detriment of almost everything else. It was as though we, as an industry, are the proverbial dog chasing the wrong bus.

What is this single-minded obsession with *quality* trying to prove? It's not as if as an industry we have a reputation for bad quality. The awards, or at least the winning entries, seemed to be saying: if you get out your magnifying-glass, densitometer and mass-photospectrometer, I can prove that my dot-gain is smaller than yours.

However, I was under the impression that with modern press-button technology so readily available throughout the industry, every printer worth his salt is perfectly capable of producing *commercial quality* work, to award-winning standards. To then try and pick a winner, with so many variables confusing the decision process, seems merely like an exercise in self-indulgence. To be honest, anyone can produce a *winner* these days if they devote enough time to fuss over the job.

We as an industry are keen to promote our craft-based origins, when it suits us. On the other hand, we're very quick to acquire the latest computerised technology, which virtually takes the discretion (to print good or bad quality) out of the hands of the operator and into the *brain* of the machine. It's also part of the new reality, as we learn how to run our businesses with fewer and fewer bodies. These *bodies* used to be called *craftsmen* who would justifiably be proud to have produced true quality work.

This body-shedding process, hastened by the imminent arrival of the new JDF work-flow process-controls, will ultimately lead to the *lights-out* factory – untainted by human intervention. What then will be our attitude to awards? My robot produces better quality than your robot?

Another complication in this fixated pursuit of *quality* is the creeping onset of digital print. It raises the hoary old cliché of *threat or opportunity?* to which we all reply, the latter. If that were the case, why are digital categories so under-represented in the awards program? Ironically, in our industry-wide quest for value-adding opportunities, the greatest opportunities exist not within offset, but within the digital realm where it is possible to offer so many more features and customised touches than it is in the traditional world of conventional print.

Why don't we recognise this in the awards? Is there some unconscious resistance towards digital print, as somehow *mickey mouse* technology?

The sad point being: the print awards, in promoting an emphasis on quality, are not really promoting an issue that is of significance to the clientele of today. I'm not saying customers don't demand *quality*, they simply expect it as part of the process.

To me, and it is a subjective thing, the current print awards are like trying to *judge* or buy a car by looking at it

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sitting on the showroom floor. This is the *cosmetic* – even superficial – aspect of our industry. Putting colour on paper in a pleasing manner. It's not getting to the core of how our industry should be presenting itself to the media-savvy, print-buying world *out there*.

They want to know about innovation, cost-savings, storage and distribution facilities, remote-proofing, more finishing options being incorporated in-line, more personalisation options, quicker delivery – on-demand – of smaller and smaller quantities. These are the contemporary issues demanded by clients and confronting us as an industry. Not this quaint, outmoded concept of who can actually print a job in register!

There is a current awareness that certain segments of our industry are taking a battering from *cheap* imports – and it will get worse. What better venue to promote export initiatives (for example), than at the print awards? What better venue than to promote innovation?

I'm not saying we shouldn't hold the function, and enjoy an event designed to showcase and promote our industry. I am suggesting we should change the menu slightly. Preferably not Bogong moths.

W. James Cryer

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The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
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