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New life for the old print awards – news commentary by James Cryer

Thursday, 22 June 2006

By Print21

Our industry's National Print Awards have moved on from the days when 'die-cut presentation folders' were all the rage. Or when 'postcards' were considered an exciting marketing medium. Or, for crying out loud, when 'one-colour printing' would actually raise an eyebrow. We should upgrade the classifications to reflect modern realities.

We are regularly reminded that we are part of the multi-media revolution and that we are innovative *print solutions providers* – no longer just printers. And yet, it is possible to win all of the first eleven categories – fully one third of the entire awards categories – by merely submitting a well-produced, conventionally printed offset job.

No innovation required here! (James Cryer pictured)

Within 'sheet-fed offset' there is scope to reflect the advent of the new 10- and 12-colour long presses, whose sheer length enables the introduction of special effects, coatings and finishes, all in-line.

What about the growing use of *perfectors*? Do we not wish to encourage their proliferation? Does not their cost-reducing ability make print a more competitive medium? Isn't this what should be encouraged, as an industry, in the war against alternative media?

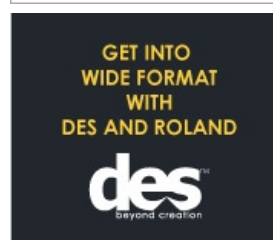
What about **direct mail**? In many ways this has been the great value-adding proposition our industry has been searching for. So easy to bolt-on to existing technology, but so able to expand the service-offering. Print-and-mail has become a profitable path for many printers, who have sought to differentiate themselves from their one-trick brethren. But where is the recognition of this strategic string to our bow? Hidden away in 'multi-piece productions and campaigns (including direct mail)'.

Turning to web offset, no mention is made of heat- or cold-set so we assume the first three out of four categories are heat-set – the sexy end of the scale. In fact, heat-set magazine production is one of the most exciting, innovative sectors of the printing industry, with far more scope than the sheet-fed sector, for **value-adding accessories** such as scratch-and-smell, tip-ins, coupons, sachets, complex folding specifications and special-effect covers (fluoro and metallic inks, etc) Ironically, the covers would likely be printed sheet-fed, so which category do they fall into, web or sheet?

The point is, it is possible when producing a magazine to achieve an 'award-winning' result with nothing to do with print quality. But this point is not brought out in the awards, which show glossy pics of sofas or low-fat pasta, but give no hint at the underlying innovativeness that may lurk within.

Web production of magazines is a perfect example of how, by only rewarding print quality alone, it misses the point – it fails to recognize the other bells-and-whistles, which we as an industry should be striving to give our customers.

This reminds us, that what we call 'print' is really a team effort, comprising many different processes. As with



coupons and sachets tipped-in to a glossy magazine (which apparently are not rewarded), what about some recognition for our **binding and finishing** colleagues – those unsung heroes at the back-room end of the production process?

Many a printer has basked in the glory of a complex bound or finished job, where again, print 'quality' didn't raise its head. We officially reward 'embellishment' – why not recognize other forms of innovative, novel or difficult bindery, which helped satisfy a client's unique requirements?

The message is clear: if you want to win a gong, statistically you've got a better chance by sticking with convention, than by being innovative!

The number of **innovation** categories could be expanded to encourage greater effort in this area. Sadly, we weren't given even a brief description of what lead the judges to award the prizes in these categories, so we can't determine what the unique qualities were. (Strangely, in one case, the same entrant seems to have won a second and a third prize for the same entry – how does that work?)

Related to innovation is **marketing**, a vital sign of an industry's success. One assumes that this attribute should be recognized – which it is, with the 'Self Promotion' category. Again, it seems a pity to have only one category, when this could be expanded to encourage more printing companies to embark on the self-promotional bandwagon. It would be easy to have categories based on number of employees, so as to encourage smaller companies with smaller budgets. (Again, strangely, there appears to be one winner of the gold prize, where the client is different to the entrant – how can that be 'self' promotion?)

The point is, that time marches on and any reading of the current awards list seems to be a time-travel back to the '50s or '60s when general jobbing work was the big thing. Now that technology has changed and market demands have moved on – we should re-calibrate the awards accordingly.

In fact, the scope is wide-open for some lateral thinking: why not even recognize such things as –

- the shortest (commercially-viable) print run produced on (say) a 5-colour offset press
- innovations in prepress, eg, use of stochastic-screening, etc
- best application of colour-management
- best example of an on-line ordering system.

With the dramatic changes our industry is going through it's appropriate that the awards program encourages innovative and pro-active strategies – not just more of the same.

In an attempt to start the ball rolling here are my suggestions for an awards program that more accurately reflects the contemporary nature of modern print, as it evolves to meet and satisfy current market needs.

OFFSET – Sheet-fed

- 1 – Commercial (1-4 colour) – not bound,
- 2 – Commercial (1-4 colour) – bound (any method),
- 3 – Card stock (4 colour process) – eg, showcards, calendars, posters, mobiles, etc,
- 4 – Stationery (1-4 colour) – must include business cards, letterheads and envelopes,
- 5 – Commercial (10-12 colour) – perfected or straight, any form of binding,

Offset – Books

- 6 – Mono or 2 colour,
- 7 – 4 or more colours.

Annual reports

- 8 – Sheet- or Web-fed – preferably including several stocks and processes.

Limited editions

- 9 – Any process or combination.

Multi-part/multi-process

- 10 – Other than Direct Mail,
- 11 – Direct Mail.

Transactional printing

- 12 – Including multi-colour/personalization, etc.

Security printing

- 13 – 4 or more colours/processes – on plastic stock,
- 14 – Other – eg, stamps, banknotes, etc.

Finishing

- 15 – Special or unusual bindery processes,
- 16 – Embellishment.

Packaging

- 17 – Flexible Packaging (wide-web) – on film or other synthetic substrate,
- 18 – Labels – Flexo,
- 19 – Labels – Other than Flexo – eg, produced on "combination" presses,
- 20 – Cartons/POS – on fibreboard/folding carton stock,
- 21 – Screen-printing.

Offset – Web-fed

- 22 – Heat-set (coated stock) – finished on-press
- 23 – Heat-set (coated-stock) – finished off-line
- 24 – Cold-set (uncoated stock)

Marketing or technical innovation

- 25 – Technical Innovation,
- 26 – Specialty Printing,
- 27A – Self-Promotion (any process) – Printing Company under 20 staff,
- 27B – Self-Promotion (any process) – Printing Company over 20 staff.

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://ft.co/d5oamorf2X>

Digital printing

- 28 – High-quality Colour (virtual offset) – 4 colours or more,
- 29 – Book production – finished on-press,
- 30 – Personalisation – most creative application, eg, direct mail/transactional print,
- 31 – Innovative use of Digital Print – eg, new business development,
- 32 – Ink-jet (wide-format) – on vinyl or other synthetic substrate.

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