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Thursday, 01 February 2007

By Print21

There was a time when the printing process was exclusively about the craft. Skilled operators were tasked with preventing ghosting, adjusting ink densities on the plate and the all-important nailing down of the ink/water balance. To achieve good print quality you had to be a really good printer. But with rapid advancements in press technology and an increased focus on automation, this is not necessarily the case anymore.

Developments like computer-to-plate, sophisticated colour management and press automation has meant that the printing process is increasingly untouched by human hands. Does quality matter anymore, or is it merely a matter of firing up on-press spectrop-hotometers, pushing a button and walking away? Couple this with a shift in the market that has seen the focus move away from quality and towards getting the lowest price in the quickest possible timeframe. 'Commercially acceptable' quality is increasingly becoming a catchcry and, in many cases, a highly specialised 'craft' approach is not necessary with customers recognising quality only by default—when it is lacking.

Is quality enough?

This new paradigm has presented the industry with many challenges, not least of which is the question; what distinguishes one printing company from another? If the majority of printing is produced for commercially acceptable quality and the quality of most printing is indistinguishable from the rest, how can the industry reward its best?

The British Printing Industry Federation has recognised and responded to this shift in industry values with the BPIF Excellence Awards. The annual event recognises all-round business performance, rather than simply the quality of the printing, and the companies singled out for accolades are those that have grown profitably through innovation and diversification and have demonstrated financial stability. In NSW, Printing Industries has followed suit with the PrintNSW Excellence Awards, now in its third year, which also seeks to put the spotlight on the business performance and innovation of its competitors.

In the opening address at last year's event; Robert Fuller, general manager of Printing Industries NSW, claimed the awards are about recognising companies that are traversing the current challenges of the industry with confidence and competence. "The format is unique to NSW, but the focus on business excellence will definitely evolve to become more of a national fixture," he said.

Commodity print can include quality

James Cryer, director of JDA Print Recruitment (pictured) is someone never afraid to broadcast his opinions on the state of the industry. He believes the approach of the BPIF and *Printing Industries* in NSW should be adopted by other states, as well as the highest level of print achievement in Australia—the National Print Awards. He points to problems in the traditional 'craft' approach of print production with its 'one-size-fits-all' approach to quality.

"As a printer slaves away on a job in the same fashion that an artist delicately chips away at a sculpture, pursuing quality at the expense of everything else, he runs the risk of over-engineering," says Cryer. "You do not need the overkill of a ten-colour long perforator for every single job, but that is the way things have traditionally been done in the industry for many years."

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Cryer argues the whole 'quality' issue is a great big bogeyman that has distracted the industry for the past few decades. "Quality should be a relative concept, rather than an absolute, and tailored according to requirements. For instance, a print job for a school fete shouldn't have the same approach to quality as a high-end annual report for a corporate client."



The danger here is that it could lead a printer down a slippery slope of second guessing a client's expectations for a job, but Cryer insists the industry needs to walk away from the idea of quality for quality's sake. He maintains that the market is demanding other options such as personalisation and on-demand print, and the awards structure needs to reflect this. The PrintNSW Excellence Awards are pegged as a step in the right direction, but Cryer argues the whole country should be following the BPIF example.

"It tends to de-emphasise this single-minded emphasis on quality and broadens perceptions to see that there are other drivers and demands in the marketplace," he says. "If you spend too long a time on quality then the price we pay is taking our eye off the other 'qualities' that are equally, if not more important, to customers. For instance, if the product is three days late to market then the quality of the job doesn't really matter."

The judge speaks out

While NSW may have jumped the fence to a new format that emphasises business performance over quality, the other states have remained with the traditional Printing Industries Craftsmanship Awards (PICA) format, not to mention the National Print Awards. So, should the NPA and PICA awards be following suit with a similar format? Should business excellence be recognised and elevated above quality?

According to Rod Urquhart, chairman of the National Print Awards, (pictured) the answer is a definite "NO!" Urquhart is CEO of CRC Smartprint, a research organisation at Monash University that specialises in discovering and developing new technologies in print production, and his driven dedication to quality lies in direct opposition to Cryer's pragmatic approach. When it comes to the National Print Awards, Urquhart insists that if it's not broke don't fix it.



"The results speak for themselves," he says. "The Awards will be 24-years-old next year and are part of a long association of the industry with quality. We have watched the competition grow stronger and stronger, and in some categories we get a couple of hundred entries that are so good the judges have to paw over them extensively to narrow down the winners. On some occasions we've had to assign dead heats or hand out a number of silver and bronze awards because the quality is just so good."

Urquhart also insists the organisers' approach to the Awards is a progressive one, moving with the times and evolving alongside the industry itself. For instance, the award for the best 'one colour' print job no longer exists as that type of work is seldomly performed anymore, while on the other hand digital print is taking up an increasingly bigger footprint. "As the industry grows, the National Print Awards grow with it," he says.

One king—quality

Amidst cries of 'commercially acceptable' and 'fit for purpose' production, Urquhart stands firm beside his belief that quality should still reign supreme in the production process. From his perspective, a National Print Award allows printers to hold their head high as the best of their type in Australia. Recognising business excellence is a valid exercise, but Urquhart believes being awarded for "making lots of money," should be entirely separate to achieving excellence in print.

"We are clearly not headed in that direction," says Urquhart. "The National Print Awards are there to recognise print excellence, that is what it has done and that is what it will continue to do in the future."

Neither does Urquhart give any credence to the claim that the market does not recognise good quality print anymore. "Indeed there are sections of the market that would be quite happy with 'commercially acceptable' print, but if a business is trying to sell a premium product, or is in tight competition with other print suppliers, then its quality had better be good. Business performance may be important, but to elevate it too much ignores the fact that a supplier won't stay in business very long unless they are delivering a top-quality product.

"While speed to market is important, if you are selling print then at the end of the day, the customer cannot physically see whether the service was snappy or not. When I go into a newsagent and buy a magazine, I have no idea of how quickly it was delivered or whether it was produced at a cheap cost to the publisher. All I know is, 'if it looks good, I'll buy it'. What they hold in their hands is the most important, that's the bottom line."

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>

So, here is the opinion of the judges. What's yours? Does the salvation of the industry lie in an increasing focus on business efficiency or should it hold the line for high quality product, no matter what?

Email your opinion to editor@print21online.com

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