Confidence in Color Quality Provides a Competitive Advantage

Today's digital technologies automate the key processes in color management to deliver quality that qualifies print shops for most any job. **By Derrick Doi**

What quick printer doesn't count high-quality color as a key value they deliver to customers? But peel back the onion. Color quality standards vary widely from shop to shop and customer to customer. Picky art directors may ask for proof after color proof, while less discerning customers rave about color quality as delivered.

One truth shines through: print providers who can deliver color quality that satisfies the most demanding customers qualify for more work. Often that work is lucrative—from large corporations concerned about precisely and repeatedly hitting their corporate colors, from franchises needing consistent color from different technologies and in different locations, and from photographers seeking faithful color reproduction.

A decade ago, achieving such color control required skilled craftspeople spending countless hours tuning the presses and eyeballing cascades of press sheets to make the necessary on-press adjustments.

Many shops still use these processes. But today's digital color presses can automate these processes, saving operator time and reducing make-ready waste. The result: lower costs and higher quality color to please even the most demanding clientele.

Automating Color Management

Among digital presses, only Xerox automates all three major steps in the color management process. Those are: calibration, or tuning the press; profiling, or matching targets such as the GRACoL industry standard; and hitting spot colors.

These processes can be time consuming, shutting down presses and removing staff from client work for portions of nearly every day. Yet each is essential to achieving accurate color and must be performed regularly to maintain tight tolerances that can shift during press operation due to external factors, such as temperature, humidity, job mix, and page volume.

Most experts recommend checking press cali-

Inspecting a print piece.

bration before each eight-hour shift, and refreshing output destination profiles every two to eight weeks. Each process takes 15 to 30 minutes—longer with more sophisticated systems—so downtime can add up fast.

The right automated color management can dramatically reduce staff involvement, lessening the impact on operations. Another advantage: automation helps ensure that color management routines take place and won't be skipped because the shop is too busy or the operators haven't developed the necessary skills.

All Xerox cut-sheet digital presses—including the entry-level Xerox 770 Digital Color Press—offer on-board color management that automates both calibration and custom destination profiling, using one of two technologies:

• Xerox ACQS (automated color quality system), introduced in 2007, uses an in-line spectrophotometer—the same tool used for measuring color in offset profiling—to automatically assess color quality and make any necessary adjustments.

• The Xerox full-width array, introduced last year, provides the same color management, plus advanced automated image quality adjustments, such as front-to-back registration.

Xerox presses also automate spot color creation, automatically modifying the CMYK recipe for each spot color to enable on-the-fly optimization of Pantone colors.

Be Confident With Color

But color can't be managed with technology alone. According to Dale Allen, worldwide product marketing manager, Xerox Corporation, "We look at a balance of technology, consulting, business development, partner solutions, and customization resources to provide the right level of color management across the broad spectrum of work environments. We want to help print providers and their customers to be bold, inspired, and confident when they create print pieces."

Allen spearheads a new initiative, Xerox Confident Color, which aims to help print providers take the uncertainty out of color management, enabling repeatable, consistent color to be achieved quickly and easily. For example, a solution for matching color across multiple Xerox presses, developed originally as a custom solution, is now available as a Xerox offering, Match Assure. For managing color across an enterprise of multiple presses that use different technologies, Xerox may also recommend systems from one of its business innovation partners, such as CGS/ORIS. And for instituting effective processes, Xerox consultants offer color management training, ranging up to the industry's gold standard, G7 certification training.

Automated color management doesn't eliminate all of the work involved in color management. But it does make low-tolerance color management a practical offering for most print shops, helping them retain customers and qualify for a share of potentially lucrative color-sensitive work. And in today's challenging market, that's got to be good news.

Derrick Doi is vice president, Quick and Franchise Print Segment, Xerox Corporation. Contact him at Derrick.Doi@xerox.com.