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What do you wish you knew about the stationery design business?
Find answers in this little handbook.

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Printing



The 3 most common stationery printing techniques: Digital Offset & Letterpress

Digital Printing

This process uses CMYK color and is the most agile way to print anything personalized or small quantity jobs. Really small, like 10 or 20 cards. There are plenty of lovely papers from which to choose and the turnaround time is typically just a few days. The compromise with digital is a slightly lesser quality, so slight that the average person wouldn't even see it. But we designers might. And if you wanted to print 5,000 cards digital printing would not be as economical as offset.

Digital printing is ideal for personalized stationery.



Offset Printing

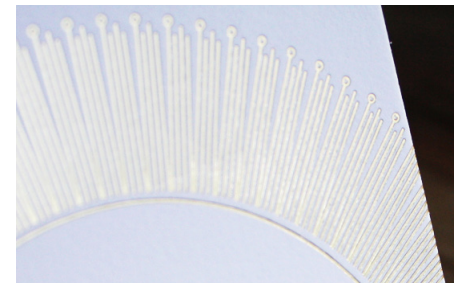
Offset printing can use CMYK, Pantone inks or a mix of both. Offset lithography is a process used for printing on a flat surface, using printing plates. An image is transferred to a printing plate, which can be made of a variety of materials such as metal or paper. The plate is then rolled onto a rubber cylinder applying the inked area, and in turn the rubber cylinder (or "blanket") applies the image to the paper. The system is "offset" because the plate does not come in direct contact with the paper, which preserves the quality of the plate. Got all that?

Creating plates adds to turnaround time and cost. The upside is the option to use Pantone inks for consistent color every time and on a large quantity run, the extra cost is balanced out by the ability to print many sheets with great accuracy.

Letterpress

I think most designers will agree that Letterpress is the creme de la creme of printing options. Letterpress is the oldest form of printing. In this method, a surface with raised letters or graphics is inked and pressed to the surface of the printing substrate to reproduce an image in reverse. So not only can you see it, you can feel it. Yum.

Naturally, it's more expensive to produce letterpress stationery and it takes a few days longer due to the necessity of dies and a more hands-on process. The upside is it's just so dang gorgeous.



Foil

Foil is another commonly used and super trendy option right now. This process includes a strong metallic ink that can stand on its own or be combined with 4 color printing, either digital or offset. If you like shiny stuff, foil is for you. It is pretty reasonably priced but only makes sense if your quantity justifies the added cost. It's available through StationeryHQ.com under Custom Projects. It's perfect for holiday cards, wedding suites and event invites. Foil also comes in flat black or flat white for a more subtle and totally unique effect.



Color

Let's start with what you see on your screen.

Apple™ monitors tend to be lighter overall than what you'll see on PC monitors. So if you're on a Mac and sending digital proofs to someone on a PC, they are likely seeing a darker version. Your only tool for dealing with this is knowledge. Optimize your monitor settings and talk your client through it if they say "it looks dark."

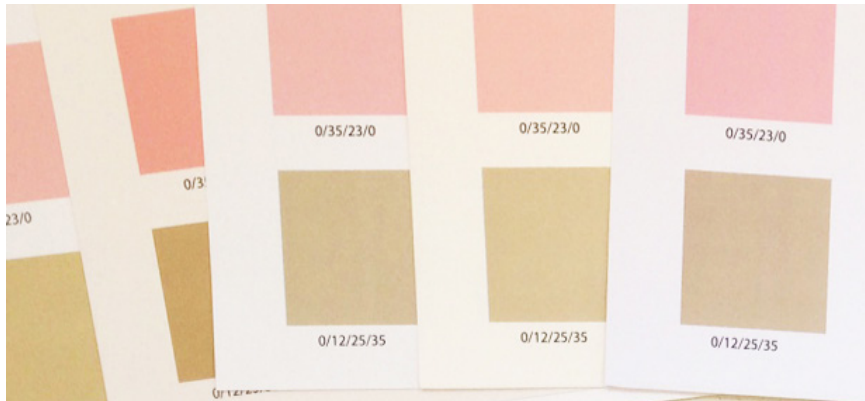
RGB will ALWAYS look more intense and pure than printed CMYK. It has to do with RGB colors coming from light and CMYK colors coming from surface material. PMS colors are most predictable but can still be affected by the warm or cool tone of the paper you choose.

Color:
RGB
CMYK
PMS
WITH?

Here's what we know about color in print:

Paper can be considered a color. If you choose a natural or ivory stock, you are adding up to 10% yellow to your color mix. For the truest color, pick the brightest white stock. Our brightest whites are the #120 uncoated, Savoy (warm tone) and Felt (warm tone).

Uncoated papers will soak up more ink than coated or gloss stocks, giving them a less vibrant appearance. So if you want really bright color on uncoated paper, you gotta saturate it - give it more ink than you think you need.



The same color mixes on different stocks. Pretty big difference, right?



CMYK digital printing is not perfect. You won't get the same result on different days like you might if you used Pantone colors (which are the equivalent of a can of paint). There are only about a million variables that affect digital printing.

For the best results, I have printed my own color swatches (which I update by trend or season) on multiple stocks so I have a good idea of the difference between my screen and my print jobs. I use the DIY product option on StationeryHQ.com so I can fit lots of decent sized color swatches.

If you are designing a stationery suite, try using complementary colors or adding texture into your system to break it up. Matchy-matchy is getting kind of old school and then you won't be so stressed when your coral invite looks 1% lighter than your coral RSVP card.

Color Trends

Palettes seem to be shifting faster than ever in design. And while there are always a few standouts that are promoted through fashion, graphic and home design, right now anything goes.

Pantone™ has a color of the year that has become influential in the last few years and they are an excellent source for recommended color combinations, mixes and how to get the color you are after in your stationery design.

Your color choices will typically reflect the seasons or the events for which you are designing. Be bold and take some chances, color is great place to make your design sense stand out from the crowd. Creating a palette each season and using it throughout your work will help build a collection, the consistency will make your brand more recognizable.

Making Bank

be
bold

Selling Your Designs

There are many ways to make a living through stationery design.

- Direct to clients for weddings/events
- Host a commerce site with your own designs
- Join an open market site like Cafe Press
- Open an etsy store
- Sell directly to retailers
- Sell through online resellers
- Partner with an agent

All of these options require effort or investment, which is true for any business.

Here are some additional tidbits about each option:

Work Directly with Clients

If you are in an area where events are treated with great importance and clients are willing to spend money on custom stationery, this can be a great option. You can build a brand and count on referrals for expanding your business.

Having great processes for client relations, design and production fulfillment are crucial to success, particularly if you want to grow your business.

This can be lucrative and rewarding but limited to your availability. Your income and the amount of time you spend working will mirror each other. Hiring additional staff to help you fill orders will allow growth but will also require time, personnel and money management. If you enjoy that part of the business this might work for you. If you just want to do design, growing a direct-to-client business will be tough.

Build a Website

This is so much easier to do now with plenty of great 3rd party website building options so you don't have to invest huge dollars in programming. Some are easier to use than others. Some charge a monthly fee to use the platform and host, some charge up front. Plenty have commerce options so your customers can pay for their order automatically. Be sure to read reviews and try some tutorials before you commit to a platform.

The upside of building your own site is the ability to control the content and not have to share the stage. You keep all of your profit and can scale your product offerings at your own pace. When you market to your site, you have the customer's full attention.

The downside is that it takes time, content and research to build a good site. And you have to know how to market yourself through social media and online campaigns. You also need to have good processes and production in place before your site gets wildly popular and the orders start flowing.

Join an Open Marketplace

Open an etsy store

"Etsy is a marketplace where people around the world connect to buy and sell unique goods. Our mission is to re-imagine commerce in ways that build a more fulfilling and lasting world."

Not a bad mission, right? I love etsy, love to shop for gifts there and almost always accidentally buy something for myself. I know artists who make a living with their etsy store. They are committed and spend a lot of time marketing their products.

Some basic info about selling through etsy:

- \$0.20 to list a product for 4 months, 3.5% commission to etsy for each sale
- you market yourself
- use their site as your store, you don't need to build your own site
- you are competing with many other great designers here so you may send people to your link just to have them wander off and buy someone else's design
- you print and ship your products

CafePress

The big idea here is similar, the primary difference being that CafePress does all of the production of the products. This means you are limited to what they offer and their pricing structure. They have a wide variety of offerings and the print quality varies.

Things to know:

- variable royalty rate, you would need to dig deep to get an exact fix on this but it looks like between 5 - 10% (they have multiple programs for sellers)
- you can use their site as your store and use their production capabilities
- customers will sift through many designs to get to yours

Limited Rights to Online Stationers

This market has blown up over the last ten years. The good news is that it's become common for average people to order custom stationery online. The other bonus is that once you have designed, submitted, revised and sent in final files, your work is done and you get paid perpetually for the life of the design on a particular site. The reseller takes care of the marketing, production and delivery so you can just design.

The bad news is that so many designers are participating in this market that it's gotten tough to build a brand or get enough submissions accepted to make a good living. And many royalties-based companies pay quarterly so the design you post in January won't start paying until about mid-May, after the quarter closes and reporting is complete.

Royalty rates vary from about 5 - 8%. Exclusivity varies as well, some sites want to be the exclusive reseller of your design, some are okay with non-exclusive designs. Others want to carry your brand (not just your designs) exclusively.

From a creative perspective, designing for online resellers requires a willingness to receive art direction and provide for the categories that are requested. If you want to build a business, let them guide you, they want to sell your work. Even if it makes you want to pull your hair out.

Most online stationery stores that carry designer brands have a link for designers to contact them or submit designs. It can some time to break in but once you are an established seller it's easier to get more designs published.

Sell Directly to Brick and Mortar Retailers

This is the most traditional way to get your work in front of customers. You have to be willing and able to sell yourself and your goods. Some designers go to their local shops and some go to tradeshow, like the National Stationery Show to get in front of a large number of buyers in one place at one time. Having a booth at the show costs anywhere from a few thousand dollars to many thousands, depending on how large and elaborate your booth is and how far you have to travel to be at the show. Buyers from large chains go to the show looking for new designs and brands, it's your best bet for getting large orders and future distribution.

Hire an Agent

Agents have established relationships with manufacturers so they can get your work in front of people that you may not have access to. Agents will sell your designs to stationers but also to gift and home decor manufacturers. Agents typically receive 35% of your royalties and require a one to three year exclusive agreement. Their offerings for branding and marketing vary. It takes three to five years to build enough ongoing royalty deals to make a living through an agent. It's important to find an agent who is not already representing another artist who has a style similar to yours.

Creatively, you can design whatever your heart desires but the manufacturers will request particular themes or looks as well. Some will art direct heavily and others will either take it or leave it.

Preparing a collection for an agent takes some time. Your agent will have a preference for the way you set up your artwork. To interest an agent you should have at least a dozen collections ready with 4 - 6 complimentary graphics that could be built into a set of cards. Many designers are traveling between fashion, stationery and home decor these days. It's a great way to make more money with the same art and build your brand.

About Design

What Sells?

We can start by acknowledging that there is a place in the world for almost every design you can conceptualize. Even if it's fugly.

That said, there are some designs that sell better than others:

- Trendy design that you see everywhere. By the time the audience loves it, you are already sick of it. Suck it up and remember you are a trendsetter.
- Themes. Animals, florals, nautical, western, circus, etc. You get the picture, people like images that are nostalgic or resonate with them.
- Original illustrations. A look that is unique to you and hard to imitate (but not fugly) will increase your value to your resellers.
- Patterns with monograms. Monograms seem to be a timeless design element, they are always in fashion and work well with a bold pattern.
- Bold colors and design sell better online than white space. The audience's first glimpse is of a thumbnail on a (usually) white background. Take a screenshot of the site on which you hope to place your design. Then shrink your design down to teeny tiny and place it on that page and see how it holds up. This view will make or break your sales.

Finding Inspiration

It makes sense to look at the places you hope will carry your work when trying to figure out what to design next. You'll get a sense of what the reseller looks for. But don't stop there, go to a museum. Or a playground. Or a bookstore. Pretty much anywhere but your desk or in front of your computer.

Music is a great way to get inspired too. Put on something that makes your heart soar and you'll unleash your happy creative brain and probably work faster too. Or brainstorm with someone who doesn't think like you, the collaboration will inspire brand new ideas.

And definitely join a designer group, whether it's through LinkedIn or your community. Being a part of a "Tribe" will push you to greater heights and give you support when you need it.

What's Trending?

Knowing where to look to find the design of the future is key. Sometimes it comes from the past. Fashion is usually at the forefront of hot trends, so if you see it on the runways, you can guess that it will show up on Stationery in a couple of years.

Looking at what is really hot on the market now and finding a way to modify that style is a way to stay ahead of the curve. For example, chevrons were everywhere we looked for awhile. Then altered chevrons, with either a texture or a hand-drawn appearance were all the rage. And the Bird Craze morphed into the Owl Obsession. You get the idea.

Retailers like to sell what's on-trend because buyers are comfortable with things that are familiar. The more they see it, the more they think they need it. A willingness to whip out a trendy design for your resellers will improve your bottom line, even if it doesn't unleash your inner-artiste.

Other Cool Stuff You Might Want to Know

For How-to type articles, features about some of the awesome designs that we are producing and what our people wear to ugly sweater parties, go to our blog at

<http://blog.stationeryhq.com/>

And for up-to-the-minute announcements about new products, shipping delays, pricing updates and new blog posts, like our facebook page. We even post informal surveys there so if you have an opinion, it's a great place to share it.

<https://www.facebook.com/StationeryHQ>

bye

This little handbook was developed by the peeps at StationeryHQ.com. We are a printing and technology company, the same one that helped launch TinyPrints and changed the face of the online personalized stationery industry. We figured we probably had some pretty cool information that we could share with you to help expand or catapult your stationery business. Our production ninjas provided some nuggets about printing, paper, and color.

Our Creative Director has been a stationery designer for the last ten years with lines selling through most of the big sites as well as traditional greeting card manufacturers so she chimed in with fun facts about design, trends and different ways to sell your goods in this market. Enjoy!

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