

BEST PRACTICES

Publishing Production & Schedules

Getting a publication into print requires a team of trained professionals who know not only how to do the tasks, but also how to juggle the many responsibilities needed to get the job done. Here are some guidelines that can help you meet your deadlines, stay within your budget, and keep your sanity!



Publishing & Communication
Trainers • Consultants

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In an ideal world, when your company or agency needs a major print publication, the people responsible for completing this assignment probably are, and *should* be, trained professionals—writers, editors, proofreaders, graphic designers, desktop publishing specialists, production managers—who don’t bat an eye at juggling the many responsibilities required to successfully complete the project.

But in today’s world of down-sizing and do-it-yourself-itis, people untrained in publishing production are often pulled from their regular duties and suddenly designated a designer or desktop publisher.

Publishing a major report, book, brochure, newsletter, website and the like can be extremely satisfying, but there is an enormous amount of work involved. If both management and employees are inexperienced in the publishing process, it’s easy to underestimate the amount of time it takes to do the work, let alone the technical knowledge needed to do it correctly and efficiently. Not knowing what you’re up against contributes significantly to stress and pressure.

Set and Enforce Deadlines

No matter how much people may complain about deadlines, the simple truth is that deadlines are a critical element in the publication production world—through careful scheduling and enforcement of deadlines, work proceeds at a manageable and efficient pace.

Every task has a deadline, whether or not it’s actually stated or written down. Sometimes those in charge aren’t as accomplished at assigning deadlines as they should be, or maybe because the project is so long-term that no one’s bothered to spell out the deadline beyond “it needs to be finished by June.”

But whatever the reason, even when it’s not stated, **the overall project does have an absolute deadline, and in order to meet it, a responsible party needs to set—and enforce—a number of in-progress deadlines.**

Yes, enforce. What purpose does a deadline serve if it is ignored?

We recommend that someone be appointed the publication’s **czar** or **czarina** to make sure that team mem-

bers keep their tasks on deadline. It's best that the czar have not only good people skills and be able to gently but firmly enforce deadlines, but also be experienced and trained in publishing.

Remember that in the publishing process, people are counting on the previous segment to complete their portion of the job by the agreed-upon deadline.

If the desktop publishers receive the final edited copy a week late, their schedule has to be pushed forward by at least that amount of time, and in a rippling effect, all the deadlines down the line will have to change.

For example, the desktop publishers (note that desktop publishing can be done by either a desktop publisher or graphic designer) may have set a deadline to go to press based on their educated estimation of how long it will take them to craft the layout of an annual report. But if they receive the final edited copy from the writers and researchers a week late, their schedule has to be pushed forward by at least that amount of time, and in a rippling effect, all the deadlines down the line will have to change.

In addition, the impact this one missed deadline will effect all the other projects the department is working on, pushing forward their deadlines, too.

When you enforce and meet your deadlines, you minimize the chance of incurring extra "rush" charges at the print shop. Author's alterations, changes made to a blueline or other final proof from a printer or service bureau, are very costly, but the need for them can drop to a manageable level if the copy given to the desktop publishers is final and the proofreading cycles have not been shortchanged.

Sometimes, managers and executives can have very unrealistic ideas about how long an editing, design or production phase takes in the publishing world, and the deadlines they give those under their supervision reflects this. This has been especially true in the last 20 years with the advent of computer technology.

While page layout, drawing, and photo-editing software has been an undeniable boon to in-house publication production, it is *not* just a matter of pushing a mouse button so that presto, a fully-formed annual report appears. Unfortunately, Madison Avenue perpetuates this myth and false expectations—just spend a lot of money on a computer and software and you'll be an instant expert in "___" After all, doesn't the Pulitzer Prize come inside every box of word processing software?

Steps in the Production Process

The first step in any publishing project must be the **planning phase**. What is the scope and purpose of the publication? What is the most effective format? Will it also be published on the website? Once decisions such as these are addressed, a production schedule is usually created by starting at the end and working backwards. When is the publication needed? Plug that date into a calendar and then begin estimating the time needed to print it, design it, write it and edit it.

Who's involved in the planning process? Of course it depends on an organization's size and structure, but often the first to be involved are on the executive level as well as marketing and communications. Representatives of those who will be responsible for the research, writing, editing, design and layout need to be involved from the very start. One often-forgotten component of the planning process is consulting the commercial printer or the **Government Printing Office** (GPO) for federal agencies.

After the type and scope of document has been clearly defined, but before the desktop publisher begins layout, it's important to understand how the printer will reproduce it. Different presses have different production requirements and each printing company has its own way of doing things. In addition, the printer is the only entity capable of giving time estimates to print the project. How many (and what type) of inks a project uses, the paper specified, whether or not it will be die-cut or embossed, how it will be bound and finished—all these steps take time, and can have an impact on your design choices. It might be more important to be able to release a report quickly than to release it at a later date but in its own custom folder, for instance.

Because of the process followed by government agencies (preparing the file to industry standards, sending them to GPO, who issues the RFQ and chooses the printer) it is not practical for agency publishers to consult with a commercial printer during the planning process. Nonetheless, they can tap into the publishing and printing knowledge and experience of the GPO and get some rough estimates of the time various printing processes will take.

Research and writing can begin once preliminary decisions about the publication have been made. The amount of time needed for this phase naturally depends on the scope of the project. The deadlines set in this phase, and the following step, editing and proofreading, are perhaps the most-often ignored, to the detriment of the overall project and process. *It is imperative that the copy be complete and final before desktop publishing begins.* The only changes that should be made after desktop publishing begins should be minor typographical errors.

Before the actual publication's design and production process occurs, the **layout and templates need to be designed**. Generally management would want to see at least two or three **possible design choices or "comps"** before firming up how the project will ultimately look. Creating these prototypes and refining the final choice is the *only* design work that occurs this early in the process. Be certain to allot enough time to create fully-realized designs, particularly when it's necessary to offer multiple choices.

The steps outlined up to this point are where the most changes can, and should, take place. This is the time when the decisions are made, arguments settled, variations presented and decided upon, etc. From this point on it's important to be operating with definitive parameters and deadlines in mind.

Full design and desktop publishing production mode begins once the final copy is completed and approved and all pertinent publication questions and options have been answered. Anyone who is new to publishing needs to understand that extensive changes at this point, while not impossible to implement, are going to significantly impact time and costs.

For example, having a desktop publisher spend three days laying out a 36-page two-column report, and then deciding to reduce the copy to 24-pages worth in a three-column asymmetrical format will essentially force the desktop publisher to start over from scratch. The desktop publisher's three days of work has been wasted, and the deadline will be pushed ahead by three days or more. Making significant changes in this phase should absolutely be considered the exception rather than the rule, and only when the benefits of making the change outweigh the drawbacks.

How long does the design and production phase last? The answer is the same that's been stated elsewhere in this article, "depends on the scope of the project."

PubCom has a chart on its website for estimating the necessary amounts of time to complete design and desktop publishing tasks that can help you determine more accurate schedules and set realistic deadlines. Visit www.pubcom.com/resources.htm and select the section for desktop publishing tools to download a copy.

The **second round of proofing** can begin when pages or chapters are completed, even before the desktop publishing is finished. Remember that this phase exists to ensure typographical accuracy and to approve the graphics as well as the overall look and flow.

This is not the time for extensive editing and proofreading—these tasks should have already been done before desktop publishing began. Once changes have been noted, the project again is in the hands of the

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By Making Deadlines a Priority, Production Costs Cut Almost \$15,000

When Michelle Danner took over as managing editor at *Skin Diver*, missed deadlines and last-minute changes were the norm at the publication. "Before I started, there weren't any strict deadlines set up," she says. "I initiated a team attitude toward meeting deadlines."

The results have been significant: Danner's leadership led to a reduction in rush costs from 12 percent to less than 3 percent, and the magazine realized savings of nearly \$15,000 a month in production costs. But Danner is also proud of the change in attitude at the magazine and the improved work environment. "It's a more positive place to work. If you're rushing constantly and missing deadlines, it creates a lot of stress," she says.

And better organization has also improved the look of the magazine. "The art department has time to create, editorial has time to read and proof. Before, it was quickly rushed out the door," she says. "Now that we have deadlines we have the leisure to create better product."

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desktop publisher who makes the final corrections and submits the printout for its final in-house proofing.

These steps should be carefully documented.

Create a cover sheet so that appropriate names and dates can be recorded during the creation and proofing processes. It's important that those involved acknowledge their responsibility by signing off on the results—verbal okays have no place in publishing production.

Verbal okays have no place in publishing production. Be sure to document all changes and steps.

Once everything has been corrected and approved for the final time, then the publication's files have to be **preflighted and prepared for the printer**. To avoid costly output errors, the files must be complete and according to industry standards. Even if the job is being printed by an in-house operation, this step takes more time than most people think. Forgetting to package key elements such as graphic files or fonts could cause a

delay at the printer. This is a step that cannot be rushed and should be allotted its own dedicated time on the production schedule.

Printers will offer you an estimate of the time necessary to **print and complete** the job during the bid process, and these are generally an accurate guide if the files are provided properly. Government agencies can consult with their GPO representative to get a rough idea of the time necessary. The amount of time needed to print and complete the publication can vary widely, depending on the complexity of the job's requirements, the location of the printer and what's already on its production schedule, the distribution methods, and the condition of the desktop publishing files you give them.

Learn from Experience

The preceding points are simply the basics—as you

learn more about your organization's needs and the departments and individuals you're working with and depending on, you will be able to more accurately set and enforce production schedules.

Taking the time to understand and document each step in the process as you complete print projects will increase your confidence, and correspondingly lessen the publishing world's inevitable stress and pressure.

And remember that **publishing takes more than a computer and software**. It requires knowledge about communication, printing, graphic arts, Internet technologies, and cross media requirements. That type of knowledge doesn't come free with the software...it's acquired through years of experience. ■

AIGA's Summation of Steps Necessary in Publication Design

Before work officially begins, The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) suggests implementing the following: a communication strategy; assigning one company staff person as the decision maker and key contact for graphic design; a written contract covering project parameters and responsibilities; money matters such as estimates and billing; and a project timetable.

Since the communication strategy is the single-most important element guiding a project from its initial stages through final refinements, make sure that everyone involved understands what it says. Initial research should include an audit of your competitors' and your company's current communications.

The first stage of creative work includes concept development. Once the concept has been established, the refinement stage begins. Other creative work such as writing, illustration, or photography usually occurs simultaneously with the refinement process. At the end of the concept refinement stage a final comprehensive layout or mock-up is presented to the person who has final approval authority. He or she should be satisfied with everything that will go into the final product, including typography, photography, copywriting, paper and colors.

Desktop publishing allows copy to go directly from word processing to set type. **Correcting copy during the word processing stage, rather than later, saves time, money and headaches**. During production, one key contact should be asked to review and approve preliminary proofs at each stage of the project. This proofing process ensures accuracy at every step in the process and keeps things on budget and on schedule. During the production stage, the designer ensures the technical accuracy and overall quality of the final product.

(The preceding text was excerpted from "The Graphic Design Handbook for Business" ©1995 American Institute of Graphic Arts/Chicago Chapter