



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

Printing Books in the Digital Age: An Interview with Tom Plain, King Printing

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Is Book Printing Necessary?

Book printing is often overlooked in the digital age but it has dramatically changed and that change affects many publishing decisions. Printing impacts profitability, the balance sheet, distribution systems, post- production storage, copyright, backlist, and most importantly authors. The evolution of digital has changed many facets of the book publishing industry but maybe most profoundly book printing. Thus, I thought you would be interested in the views of a printer about today's publishing world. Tom Plain, my interviewee, is the Vice President of Book Publishing Sales for King Printing, <http://www.kingprinting.com/>. (More about Tom at the end of the interview.)

Jack McHugh: Tell us about King Printing.

Tom Plain: We are book printers and manufacturers. We take the print ready PDFs and make books, catalogs, journals and other bound materials from them. We can mail or ship them anywhere in the world. Or we can co-manufacture with members of our global alliance.

JM: Can King produce coded books for electronic delivery?

TP: Not directly. If it were a title where the composition was done by our partner in Mumbai, they could do the eBook conversion. They specialize in textbooks.

JM: Do you see the digital press becoming more popular with small publishers and either enhancing or replacing POD?

TP: We are almost exclusively digital, so I hope so. We have dropped offset printing because we can do better with inkjet under 2500 copies. Inkjet is less expensive, more cost efficient for us.

JM: Any difference in quality of photos and artwork in digital vs. offset printing?

TP: Yes there are differences, mostly at the extremes of reproduction. If sheetfed offset is the best, sheetfed toner digital is just as good in most cases. I think most printers today use offset

and toner interchangeably depending upon run length. Inkjet is a different process altogether. It has been termed the "offset substitute". It is the new frontier of printing. As speeds and quality increase, it will be used in more and more applications. It is not the same as offset but in all but the most critical applications it works fine.

JM: How do you prefer to have a manuscript delivered: electronic files, hard copy, etc.?

TP: We do offer text scanning in house, but do not modify files in house. Often publishers have backlist books with no files. We can scan a previously printed book to create print-ready files for black text or four color text. We do not want to take MS Word or other "re-flowable" files. We prefer locked down files like a PDF or even hard copy.

JM: How do you compete with off- shore printers in the digital age?

TP: We are winning more and more as run lengths drop. It is my opinion that the advantage of printing offshore is diminishing, especially for reprints as there are too many variables for too many types of publishers, e.g., I don't think any of the college publishers go offshore for anything. I don't think many STEM publishers do either. One example I have is a customer who has us print short runs of professional books because it takes too long to get the books shipped from China. And their parent company owns a printing plant in China.

JM: What advice do you have for book publishers in this rapidly evolving digital environment?

TP: Consider all your options. Don't be bound by the old ways of publishing and printing. Many of the printing traditions handed down were the most efficient ways 25 or 50 years ago. That is why they were adopted. Today we have many more options. Use the following as a checklist for considering your options.

1. Would it be more cost effective to bind this book in another format? Adhesive case or paperback vs. Smyth sewn case? Printed case vs. stamped? Does it really need a dust jacket?
2. What is the most economical trim size? Each incremental increase in trim size reduces your page count about 27%. Could or should it be a single volume by increasing the trim size?
3. White paper vs. natural? Natural is always more expensive.
4. Do you want four color throughout vs. black text on natural with an insert? Color is not as expensive as it once was, especially for instructional material (that competes with e-formats).
5. Only print as many as you know you can sell right away. Don't tie up resources in inventory you will have to pay to store for years. You can always print more.

JM: What is the current trend in print books vs. eBooks?

TP: Both have their place but I am a firm champion for print when it comes to books. I think electronic delivery has a more important role to play in other media: e.g., blogs, newspapers, magazines, journals, and some reference materials. This is mostly personal preference, but there is a significant amount of reporting that people prefer to read long form and complex material on paper. Electronic is great for skimming as I do the news each morning. Electronic is great for disposable content. I think print is better for making the long argument or telling a complex story.

JM: Are eBooks more popular in trade publishing compared to STM and Educational?

TP: I think so, primarily because of the complexity of educational & STM books and the simplicity of trade books (via Kindle and other E-readers). Major inroads are being made by

various electronic learning initiatives, but I wouldn't call them eBooks; e.g., a Kindle or Kobo type product you can download onto an electronic device as opposed to a cloud- based program you access.

JM: What is your prediction for print vs. eBooks in the next five to ten years?

TP: More electronic, less print. But there will always be a need and a desire for print. In order to compete for some book niches, for example coffee-table books and other profusely illustrated books; more print should have color and use it as a competitive advantage over electronic. Digital inkjet printing makes that much more likely to be viable.

JM: Other thoughts?

TP: My comments about color notwithstanding, it is currently a buyers' market for black only printing. There is too much capacity in the book printing industry leftover from pre-electronic days. As more and more printers confront unsustainable business models and fail, prices will plateau. Many books don't need to be color and shouldn't be color. But there are many books where color is a great addition. Publishers will be confronted with it as more authors submit files with color charts, graphs, color coding, illustrations and photographs. It takes some skill to convert those images to black and white/grayscale. In some cases it is just easier and better to leave them in color.

About Tom Plain

Tom Plain is Vice President, Book Publishing Sales for King Printing, a digital book printer in Lowell, MA. Prior to that he served as a sales rep, sales manager and VP of sales for several nationally recognized book manufacturers. Before moving to Massachusetts in 1989, he was a Graphic Arts Director and in-plant printing manager for a religious publisher in Ohio.

A former board member and past president of Bookbuilders of Boston, Tom values the sense of community and purpose the organization offers, especially to newcomers. "We meet people we might otherwise have never known, who can and will help you learn about this business. And over time it becomes a way to give back to the people and industry where we have made our living."

Tom is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and the father of three grown children; he lives with his wife in Milford, MA. His current outside interests include simple cooking, old music, and kayaking.

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About John B. McHugh

John B. “Jack” McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary’s Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. Jack’s specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups. He serves as an advisor to the Friends of Kletzsch Park in Glendale, WI <http://goo.gl/6PhtU4>. Jack is the manager of two LinkedIn™ groups, Association and Nonprofit Publishing and The Self-Employment Forum.

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