

Bad Files Make Bad Folds

To keep customers from wrecking folding jobs, teach them how to build files right.

One of the most persistent and long-standing speed bumps in print production is file setup for folded materials. Lack of a standardized file submission process has led to “creative” and varying methods of file setup, leading to a cycle of redundant file-fixes, misunderstandings, and expensive mistakes. Printers, I’m sure you’ve seen it all. Some typical problems (and logical solutions) follow:

Problem: Designer submits file as two single-page Illustrator files—side one and side two.

Solution: Document should be two pages (if piece is two-sided) and built in a page layout software.

Problem: Designer builds file in Microsoft Word or Powerpoint, or other software that is not intended for page layout.

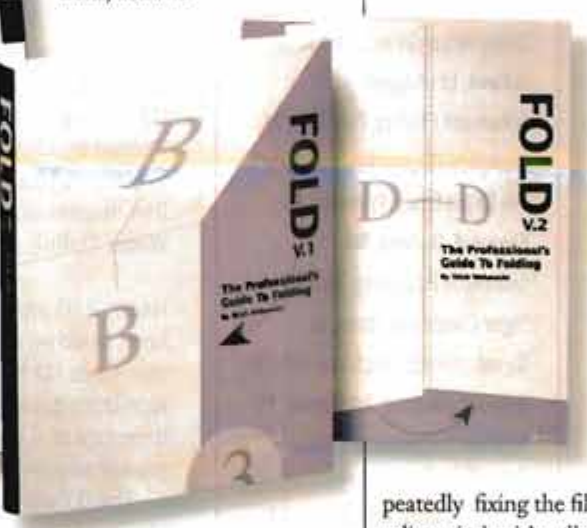
Solution: File should be built in a professional page layout software—preferably InDesign or QuarkXPress.

Looking at the list above, it may seem as though printers aren’t the problem. The designers are the ones making all of the mistakes, right? Well, you could look at it that way, but you’d be wrong. And here’s why. Your clients do not know how to build a proper file for a folded product—that much is true. But the fundamental error lies in perpetuating non-standard file submission formats, by repeatedly

fixing the files in the background. In counseling circles it’s called “enabling bad behavior.” By taking care of it yourself and avoiding opportunities to educate clients, you miss the opportunity to avoid the problems in the first place. You have to teach your clients how to prepare their files, or you’ll be stuck in the never-ending cycle of manual file adjustments forever.

In addition to the obvious need for education in this area, the other important point to understand is that when there is a folding error, it’s your fault even if it’s not your fault. Do these scenarios sound familiar?

- I’m the designer and I told you what I wanted, or, even if I didn’t actually tell you, I thought you understood and you didn’t confirm with me;



Visualizing the folds is the first step in planning for them. But taking advantage of teachable moments with clients, rather than just fixing problems, will help change things for customers, and your operation.

Problem: Designer floats the document on a larger sheet with manual crop marks.

Solution: Proper file setup is to trim size.

Problem: Designer does not compensate for the folding process or use fold marks, leaving you unsure of the folding style and hesitant to move artwork.

Solution: File should be properly compensated, and fold guides and fold marks should be in the document.

Problem: Designer builds the layout in reader spreads, which requires that the file is completely rebuilt in prepress.

Solution: Proper file setup is in printer spreads.

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Image courtesy Trish Witkowski

• Or, if you didn't save me from myself by fixing the file, then I will blame you when it turns out wrong.

You were the last one to touch it, unfortunately, so the blame rests on your shoulders. Yes, I signed the proof so now I'm stuck with it, but somehow the designer feels duped—and designers don't forget. They live for their portfolio pieces, and wait anxiously for that final printed piece to arrive. Nothing is more disappointing than the realization that they can't put it in their portfolio because something is wrong with it. They'll remember who messed it up, and they'll do their best to block you from printing their stuff going forward.

Each of us must help change things

Sorry, I know that was harsh, but sometimes you have to tell it like it is. The good news is, it's not all that bad. With a few simple changes you can have clients sending much-improved, if not production-perfect files in no time. Here's how.

- Be proactive rather than reactive. Talk to your clients ahead of time if possible, and make sure they know they can call you to talk about production issues even before the job has been awarded. Become a team member, not just a vendor.

- Provide a template or a diagram to guide clients to proper file setup. You can also send them to my Website (www.foldfactory.com) for a downloadable custom InDesign folding template.

- Get involved in educating your clients. Never underestimate the power of a "lunch and learn" on-site training seminar at your facility. Teach your clients to build the files the way you want them to be built, and offer a direct line of communication to someone to help with technical questions.

- Help your clients understand folding as a process by inviting them for a tour of the bindery. This is a great way to talk about the mechanical folding process, and to illustrate why the bindery is the most costly place to find a mistake.

See? Pretty simple. A little education goes a long way. Furthermore, if we as an industry want even a hope of lights-out automation, it must be understood that we cannot automate a process that has not

been standardized. We have to face this problem head-on if we ever want to move forward into new territory. ■

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