

The Wild Format guides are intended to expand awareness and understanding of the craziness that can be created on wide format digital printing devices, from floors to lampshades and everything in between.

These guides are made possible by a group of manufacturers working together with Digital Dots. We hope you enjoy the articles and that you put into practise what you learn. If you want to talk about it, go to our LinkedIn group at <http://linkedin/1pkeLH1>

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## Variable Data Printing

Understand what you can do with variable data content, and you open up a whole new realm of creative possibilities. Now that digital printing technologies make high quality print affordable and accessible, designers can exploit the benefits that working with data can bring. Don't let the idea of "working with data" scare you – you do it every day on your smart phone. All

the stuff that gets delivered to your mobile device or your favourite social media apps is made possible because someone somewhere has been “working with data” to make something special happen. And you can do it too, using data to create innovative wild format digital printing projects.

Fortunately you don’t have to do it alone because the graphics industry has a vast array of tools to help you to use data creatively. These tools include variable data software, such as EFI’s DirectSmile or XMPie, so that you can create different versions of the same basic creative concept, for different uses. The versions could be iterations of a design idea, using a variable data design tool such as HP’s Mosaic. Or they could be variations in a page’s entire content, for instance to personalise a poster using images and texts that are specific to an individual. This is where the creative possibilities can get really wild.

## Why variable data isn't a mistake

When you proof a page you expect all the content to be what you added to the page, be it text or graphics. If you find a misspelling or a missing image, you could be forgiven for considering it variable data. But this is not what we mean by variable data. Pictures that don’t show

up where they should or typos are simply mistakes. Variable data on the other hand is a deliberate and intentional variation of the page content, to create a series of customised and unique print media products. This is the single most valuable advantage that digital printing has over traditional methods. Digital printing is data driven. You can manipulate the data to suit your own ends and create customised content, just as a social media content stream gets customised for different interests. It’s all about how you set up your print file so that it can include page components that change with each impression during the print run.

## Do what?

The most common application of variable data software tools is for transactional print, where each credit card customer gets their own credit card statement, based on transactions specific to that individual. At the more creative end of the printing industry it has been big brands working with forward thinking printers which have pushed variable data applications most strenuously. However there are plenty of printing companies around who have started to understand how variable data projects work for short run printing. These are the sorts of companies you need to work with if you want to have a successful variable data project. You should be aware



*Variable data software allows you to take an image such as this and vary the colours and text throughout the print run.*

that there is a cost for this service because it can require additional software support, compared to conventional print runs. There is also the fact that this form of print can have considerably higher value to the end user than a static data print project. This means people are more likely to hang on to the print rather than throwing it away, making it more effective for longer.

## Starting gate

There's no denying that adding variable data to your wild format print project adds a layer of complexity, so be prepared to go through a bit of a learning curve. You

should be ready for this and be ready to run some trials of how the software works with your design. You do not need to do an entire print run for this, just check on your monitor that the data is appearing where it should in your layout, and that the software can access the data correctly.

The data is fundamentally important to the success of a variable data production project, so you need to have your data ready and up to date. Don't forget that the data includes text such as names and addresses, as well as illustrations and images. You can store all of this content



*You can create multiple versions of the same content using variable data software, as shown here.*

in a database and use a plug-in tool such as PDFlib Block. This is freeware which simplifies the placement of variable text, images or graphics and although it is basic it works fine for simple applications.

Content elements should be organised into reference databases that the production software can access during the print run. The software will use the items in your digital lists to populate pages as they are output. This could be a collection of different irregular sized pages on a single wide format digital print that you cut

later, or you could be creating variable data posters using partial or entire output widths. Keep in mind that you are no longer working to create mass communications where everyone gets the same content. With variable data software you can create individual pieces that have considerable worth to the reader and that have the potential to be extremely compelling.

## Playing hard

It sounds complicated and it is, but you can trust that the complications have all been



*With a digital press such as this HP Latex 3500, you can produce high quality variable data wide format projects.*

sorted for you by the software engineers who have made the plugins and other software. For the end user getting the results you want is straightforward even if the underlying process is complicated. Once you know what you want to vary on the different page designs, you have plenty of tools to help you to do it. Choose the one that works best for you.

You can use variable data technologies to create more compelling promotions, say for a poster customised for individual households. You might want to include imagery from the neighborhood or

street addresses. This sort of work can be handled by first printing all the static elements conventionally and then printing the personalised parts on a digital press which processes and prints just the variable content page by page. An increasingly common and convenient approach is to print all of the content in one go, which means you must be completely sure that your data and its placement are absolutely correct. Test before you commit and you should be fine, but be prepared to go through a cycle of testing, checking, tweaking and retesting. And make sure you cost this work in the project budget,

because it can be very time consuming. The good news is that you will have an extremely effective and impressive result, one that yields responses from the recipients.

## Forewarned

When you come to output, make sure you work with a printing company that has some expertise in variable data production. Ask them which software tools they use and what sort of processing capacity their raster image processing (RIP) system has. The RIP is the brains of any digital printing system so a feeble RIP will be slow and may not be able to print your work to the quality level you expect. For instance, if the RIP cannot manage colour data so that the colours you want can in fact be printed you will be disappointed. Variable data software tools range in beefiness from products such as GMC's Inspire which supports personalised mailings, transactional print and variable publications, down to very basic tools such as Microsoft Excel, which isn't really suitable for graphics projects. Plug-ins that work with Adobe Creative Suite abound and they too vary in muscularity.

## Don't forget

Variable data printing is as much about data management as it is about putting ink on paper. When planning your variable data print project, think about how you will

manage the data, the databases you will use, colour control of content elements, and what you or your client expect to spend for each piece of variable data print.

The ability of digital printing technology to image variable data quickly, means all sorts of new creative opportunities for wild format projects. Be bold and brave and take a closer look at what the technologies can do for you.

– **Laurel Brunner**