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DM Paper Stock 101

How to Choose the Right Paper Stock For Your Campaign

When planning a direct mail campaign, you spend hours writing and designing the perfect piece. But how much time do you spend on the paper selection? Choosing the right paper, with the right finishing touches, is as important to a successful mailing as the message. Here, are some key factors to discuss with your printing partner before your next mailing.

Choosing a Finish

Papers come in a variety of finishes, each with its own best use. Coated stocks, which are often more expensive than uncoated stocks, are well suited for most direct mail pieces because they reproduce images crisply and attract the attention of your prospect. The three most common finishes for coated stocks are gloss, matte and dull. Make your selection based on the content of your piece.

For a piece that features many graphics, gloss coated stocks allow for the most crisp images and vibrant colors. However, if your piece is mostly copy, such as a letter or reply tool, you are better off using dull or matte coated stocks, which do not reflect as much light as a gloss coated stock, making your piece easier to read. Dull-coated sheets tend to be more expensive, while matte coated sheets are a great budget option and work well for pieces with a shorter shelf life.

If you are using an ink-jet process on any part of your direct mail piece, or you expect your recipient to write on the piece, matte coated sheets are the best choice to ensure that your ink bonds securely to the paper. The slick surface of a gloss-coated sheet will cause ink to smear easily.

Uncoated sheets can be strong options as well, and tend to be less expensive. Just be careful when your campaign uses graphics—uncoated stock absorbs ink more than coated sheets, and images can quickly lose their crispness. Or, ask your printer about calendered sheets, which tend to be smoother than other uncoated stocks.

Choosing a Weight

Several factors can contribute to the decisions you make regarding weight of the stock you use: the purpose of the piece, how the recipient will use it, durability and more. An element that impacts paper weight selection and is often used for direct mail campaigns is perforation.

If your sheet will be perforated on-press, it will usually have to be heavier than a 20 lb bond sheet, and no heavier than an 80 lb cover stock. For stocks lighter than 20 lb bond, microperfining is available keeps the paper from tearing during the perforation; for stocks over 80 lb cover, a letterpress can be used for perforation. Each of these are specialized processes, though, and may need to be outsourced by your printer, potentially adding to cost.

Choosing a Coating

Coatings are used to create a finishing touch—either functional or aesthetic—after ink has been laid down. For visual purposes, coatings can be used to control glare, highlight specific spots on



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a piece, or enhance readability. On a practical level, coatings can protect a piece from fingerprinting or scuff marks, but they make a sheet nearly impossible to write or ink-jet on.

The three primary coatings are varnish, aqueous and UV, and each has various options.

- **Varnish**, available in gloss and dull, can be applied on-press across an entire sheet or in specified spots to create interesting design effects. Varnish is a cost-effective coating, but does not offer the protection or brilliance of other coatings
- **Aqueous** coating is glossier than varnish, but less glossy than UV—creating a wet look. Aqueous coatings are not only used for aesthetics, they are also used to shorten drying times by sealing ink in the paper, and to provide added protection against abrasion and moisture. Available in gloss or satin, aqueous is applied to entire sheets on-press, and cannot be applied as a spot coating.
- **UV** coating, which can be applied to entire sheets or to spots, is highly protective and can create a crisp, glossy finish or a dull, flat finish. However, many printers will have to outsource UV coating, making it a more expensive and time-consuming option. Consult with your printing partner to determine if UV coating is appropriate for your project, timeline and budget.

Consistency is Key

Whatever choices you make—from finishes to paper weight to coatings—be sure you're consistent within your DM package. Not only will colors and images within your package reproduce differently on varying paper stocks, mismatched stocks will give your reader a sense of disconnect between the parts of your package. Work closely with your printing partner to select stocks and finishes that will enhance your DM campaign as one cohesive package.