

19 Ways to Cut Your Paper Costs



Get the inside scoop on 19 cost-saving tips – from paper grades to merchants' close out lists. With paper prices rising constantly, this crucial knowledge will go a long way toward stretching your budget.





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The Shortcut

Just a short hike. My friend Jane's words still ring in my ears. Jane and her husband had bought this little rustic cabin on the south end of Yosemite.

It is located in a wonderful alpine setting and the perfect get-away for a long weekend. Just a quick hike up to a small mountain lake. The whole walk was estimated to take no more than three hours all together.

We made it up to the lake in gorgeous weather and in good time, had a short rest and were just about to head back, when Charlie discovered this amazing shortcut. It was barely visible on his fading map, but it would save so much time ...

Four hours later, we finally reached civilization

Admittedly, we saw extraordinary wildflowers on the way and mosquitoes the size of small helicopters. Trust me, it got pretty adventurous at times.

But: If you don't save time or money, is it really a short cut?

As you well know, paper prices have already risen twice this year. They have increased again a few weeks ago and are doomed to rise again later on this year.

Considering that printing paper accounts for 25-50 percent of a print project, it is very tempting to take some unexplored shortcuts to keep within budget.

To ensure you know your way around before venturing off, the following 19 tips will help you discover money saving techniques that will apply to you and many of your projects.

The Dinosaur

1 Have a Good Relationship With Your Paper Provider

A good relationship with your paper provider (let it be your printer or paper merchant) is key and should be number one on your priority list.

We all have experienced young and eager reps, who, when it came down to it, knew less about paper and printing than we do. In cases of emergency, you need to be able to rely on your paper provider to come through for you. And this can only be achieved if you have built a good, solid relationship with him or her.

So find a dinosaur, someone who knows more about print than you do, someone who cares as much about your project as you do, and someone who calls you after the project has been delivered or the special event has taken place to see if everything went well for you.

Overall Savings

2 Merchant's Paper Program

With paper prices rising again and again, signing up for a merchant's paper program is a great way to lock in prices. You don't have to be a printer to do so.

Is a paper program suitable for you? Talk to your paper merchant and find out if they offer a program. Naturally, conditions vary from merchant to merchant, but as a general rule of thumb, you can expect to have a minimum paper need of 500 tons a year. This can be based on core grades (one or two specific brands) or mixed grades (from coateds to opaques to Writing, Text and Cover sheets).

With the economy and especially, transportation costs being as unpredictable as they currently are, most merchants will not lock in any contract beyond a one-year limit. Be aware though, this doesn't mean that you will have one fixed price. Contingencies are usually made to adjust prices depending on the RISI or other indexes.

How much can you save? From the quantity and variety of paper you buy, to how good your wheeling and dealing skills are, there are a lot of variables that come into play when determining how good a deal you can get from your merchant.

3 Merchant's Closeout List

Think of a merchant's close out list as an outlet center.

A sheet might have been discontinued and your local merchant still has some left in stock. Brightness levels or other paper properties might have changed and a certain quantity of the "old" sheet is still available. Or, your merchant simply might have some overstock he wants to get rid of.

What I am saying is, we are talking great papers here – no faults, no hidden agendas.

Closeout lists are usually updated quarterly and sales are made on a first come, first served basis. If you have to think about your choice for a few days, the paper might be gone. But your savings can be as sweet as 35-50 percent off the normal sheet price.

4 Better Credit Terms

The average printer has set up accounts with two paper merchants. As dealings go, your printer orders the paper, prints and delivers your project, but does not get paid till your company has received payment from your client. This means your printer is out of pocket until weeks and weeks after the actual job was on his press.

Most paper merchants offer a certain discount, usually 1-2 percent, if their invoice is paid within ten days. This percentage used to be a more lucrative one with up to 10 percent discount, but times are changing ... Talk to your client and allow for an extra “paper invoice” to be dealt with ahead of the final job delivery.

This way, you and your printer can take advantage of the ten-day discounts being offered.

5 Consolidate Your Needs

We all have papers we are very partial to because we know they will perform great on press and make our project look fabulous. If two or more projects from your company can run on the same sheet, try to coordinate deadlines and gang them up.

Not only will this provide you with savings on the actual paper cost (since you are buying a larger amount of paper and will get a different

price break – see point 6 below), but also your overall run cost will be lower because you need less make ready time for each job.

I know how hard it can be to keep deadlines, let alone “gang them up,” so to speak. Alternatively, let your printer know up front how much of a specific paper you expect to use in the next quarter. Once committed to the quantity, your printer can buy in bulk and provide you with cost savings of up to 25 percent.

Committing to a certain paper usage is especially advisable when you have repetitive jobs, such as newsletters, which allow you to plan ahead very easily.

6 Know Standard Price Breaks

When it comes to offset printing, the rule of thumb is: The longer the print run, the better the cost per unit will be. The same goes for paper prices. The more you buy, the better your pricing.

So be aware of the general price breaks on offer:

One carton is the basic paper price. The quantity of sheets per carton varies by mill and grade and is usually listed with the stocking information in the paper’s swatchbook.

Four cartons already amount to a savings of 5-15 percent.

16 cartons gets you a 10-25 percent cost reduction per carton.

Broken cartons are 15-60 percent above a one-carton price and thus, the most expensive of them all. No, these are not damaged goods, but quantities that run below the “sheets per carton” listed in the paper’s stock list.

Printing papers are usually sold in full cartons only. If your job requires less than a full carton, your printer has to buy a carton anyway and runs the risk of sitting on the leftovers of your paper needs. If it is a paper he is not likely to be using again in

the near future, the cost for the whole carton will lay heavily on your invoice.

For example, if your job requires 1,200 sheets and your printer can only purchase full cartons at 1,000 sheets per carton, he has to buy two cartons, paying for a total of 2,000 sheets.

Be aware of any “leftover” paper and if applicable, ask your printer to cut up the unused paper for your client’s internal use.

7 Seconds & Broken Carton Specialists

If you are in need of a broken carton and the paper is available in full cartons only, don’t despair. Some mills, usually Writing, Text and Cover, as well as specialty papers, have online order facilities and offer small quantities on their Web sites.

Other companies, such as Glodan, ThePaperMillStore.com, and Limited Papers make broken cartons available to you.

Following the trend of the general retail world, seconds are papers that didn’t qualify for the mills’ rigorous testing standards. For example, the paper’s brightness might not be on a par with the mills’ published levels.

As with all products classified as “seconds,” there are no guarantees, but the savings from companies that sell these seconds (Calpaco, SabinRobbins) can make it worth your while.

On the Job

8 Utilize the Sheet Size

When designing a project, the last thing creatives have in mind is if the final artwork fits well on the press sheet and uses the sheet economically with the least amount of waste.

To utilize your paper as best as you can, get your printer involved early on in the project and be open minded to adjusting the trim size of your piece. Sometimes, taking off 1/8 inch can help the artwork fit better on the press sheet and provide you with great savings in the paper arena.

9 Order a Special Sheet Size

If the design doesn't fit well on any of the standard sheet sizes provided, consider ordering a special sheet size from the mill, one that maximizes your paper usage and minimizes your paper waste.

All paper is produced in large “jumbo” rolls and mills are happy to cut the sheet size you need, often at no extra cost. Be aware though, that mills usually have a minimum order of around 5,000 lbs. for this service and you have to expect a turnaround time of 5-10 business days. It pays to plan ahead.

Many mills offer special making orders (SMO), which allow you to get a paper in a specific weight, allowing for savings when it comes to mailing costs, recycled content or color. Again, minimum orders apply and lead time usually runs up to six weeks because your order has to fit within the mill's production schedule. But there are times when it is well worth the wait.

10 To Bleed or Not to Bleed

We all have heard this one before: “Don’t have the job bleed off the page. That will be soooo expensive.” Sounds logical. But what expense are we really talking about?

Printing on offset, opaques or coated sheets gives you a large variety of stocked sheet sizes to choose from. It’s easy for your printer to go up one step to the next paper size that allows extra space needed for the bleeds.

Expect a price increase of 5-10 percent, no matter if your project bleeds on one side or all around. From a designer’s point of view, I’d say this is worth the minimal extra cost, so “bleed away.”

When it comes to Writing, Text and Cover sheets, this is a very different story. A quick look on the paper’s stock list tells you that this category usually has a much more limited variety of sheet sizes to offer. The next step up in sheet size is usually a big one and a big step means big cost increases for you. The norm is a 30-50 percent increase, particularly when the paper you have chosen also includes a watermark.

11 Know Your Paper Grades

There is still an overwhelming belief that brightness levels alone will qualify a sheet to be a number 1 or 2 grade, but you and I know that this is not the case.

The original AF&PA standards for paper grades, established some 18 years ago, indeed were based solely on the brightness of a paper. A number 2 sheet should have a brightness of 83-84, a number 3, 80-83.

So how come we see number 3 sheets with brightness levels of over 90 these days? Well, let’s just say, brightness is by far not the only concern when grading a sheet. It is based on brightness, opacity, formation, run-ability ... and marketing.

A good quality, brighter sheet is a more expensive sheet to make. Fillers and chemicals are needed to create the paper’s brighter appearance.

They help to give the paper a blue-white shade, but also take a toll on the paper's stability and run-ability on press.

This is what you pay the price tag for when it comes to a premium or number 1 sheet. Great brightness and perfect run-ability.

How do you know which grade is right for you?

Once you are considering a paper, also ask your supplier for a printed sample of this sheet one grade below and compare.

Mills are known to constantly work on improving the quality of a sheet. Even though the sheet could pass for a number 1 grade, if the mill already offers a number 1 sheet but has no offering in a number 2, they will market it below its actual value to complete their offering. Marketing is everything.

How much can you expect to save in the grade game? Based on the price of a premium sheet, going down to a number 1 sheet will provide you with a 12 percent savings on paper cost. Moving to a number 2 sheet can save you as much as 24 percent.

NOTE: There are times, when only a premium sheet will do. Depending on the project's live span, the finishing techniques you have in mind and the overall impression you want to make.

The important key to success is: Know thy grade and compare.

12 Consider House Sheets

They have been lifesavers to each and every one of us at some point in our life. Even though they might make your designer's hair stand on end, house sheets are there when you need them.

We are not talking about anonymous sheets here, but mainly well-known number 1 or 2 brands, which your printer makes always has in stock for you in two finishes.

House sheets fit a wide range of printing applications and because your printer buys larger amounts, you get a better price than if he had to order one carton of another sheet especially for you (see point 6 – “Know your Price Breaks”).

13 Reduce Basis Weight

Even in these modern times of ours, printing papers are still sold by the pound – or ton for that matter. So it is very easy to understand that a heavier sheet will set you back around 10-20 percent more in your paper pricing.

Lighter sheets use less fiber, thus are less expensive to produce. If suitable, choose the 50 over the 60 Text sheet for your project and reap in the savings.

14 Reduce Page Counts

And just as I said choose lighter weights – now I'll tell you to spec' heavier sheets.

Since 9/11, large corporations wanted to show they care and not be seen as big, squandering money wasters. So, they started to reduce the overall page count of their projects. Anyone working with annual reports can vouch for this.

To still portray a trustworthy, dependable feel, designers have made up for the reduction in page counts by spec'ing heavier basis weights.

The increase in the basic paper price for selecting a heavier sheet is outweighed by the reduced page count and spells out s-a-v-i-n-g-s.

15 Utilize Digital Printing

There are times when digital printing is just unbeatable. If you are in need of an insanely quick turnaround time, digital printing comes to your rescue. For short run, full color projects, turn to digital printing.

I am talking digital presses here (NexPress, iGen3, Indigo etc), not your desktop printer, which theoretically qualifies as digital printing, as well.

The key word is “make ready,” or in the case of digital printing, “no make ready.” There are no plates to be made or hung, no major press alignments or cleanups. Your job comes off the press perfectly the first time around – very fast, one by one with no overs and no unders.

Breaking-Even

Unlike offset printing, where the motto, “the more you print, the more affordable it gets” holds true, when it comes to digital printing, you pay the same price for each sheet that comes off the press.

Naturally there is a break-even point; a point where digital printing becomes more expensive than offset printing. Depending on your project, this point lies between a 500 and 1,000 print run.

Consider switching some of your projects to “on-demand.” Print brochures and booklets, as they are needed, in the amount needed at the time. Many printers offer this service already and on-demand printing is experiencing ever-increasing popularity. You only pay for what you really need.

The newest trend in digital printing is called “hybrids.” I am not talking Toyotas here. In the case of hybrids, part of the job is printed offset, while some of it is printed on digital presses and then both are combined to one finished product.

This could be a brochure, where the inside is printed offset and the outer pages are alternated, depending on regional requirements and printed digitally.

This method is especially popular when it comes to larger variable data printing (VDP) projects.

Beyond Paper

16 No Dirty Mailing Lists

If you are anything like me, you open your mail close to the recycling bin. It never ceases to amaze me that so many companies send multiple copies of the same beautiful full color brochures and mailers to me. Granted, the spelling of my name has a tendency to vary slightly from “Sabine Lenz,” to “Sabine Lena,” “Sabrina Lenz” ... you get my drift.

Needless to say, I have no intention to read three copies of the same piece, so the majority goes straight in the recycling bin.

Clean out your mailing list and make sure to send only one copy per household wherever possible. The reduction in print quantity, mailing costs and, last but not least, savings to the environment will be well worth the time.

17 Ask Readers If They Care

At some point in time, we tried to stop the invasion. We constantly received mailers from a specific stock photography company. Unfortunately, their efforts were wasted on us. We have a large stock library already and if we need additional images, we have our favorites to go to.

We started sending the brochures back, relying on Elvis’ memorable “Return to Sender” phrase. But they kept insisting.

So, we called the 800-number on the back of the brochure and, after a very pleasant lady took down our address and promised to take us off their mailing list, we still kept receiving a steady flow of more and more brochures.

No special prizes for guessing where those brochures ended up. Remember my famous recycling bin?

Every legitimate e-mail broadcast gives you the option to “unsubscribe” – the point here is legitimate – so why do we keep sending expensive material (think of the printing, handling and mailing costs) to people who have no intention whatsoever to look at the material?

Give them a way to opt out – a business reply card, a phone number to call or an e-mail address to contact. Don’t waste your time and your client’s resources.

18 Save on Mailing Costs

DuPont was sending out 650,000 mailers to their stockholders – no small amount if you consider printing, paper and mailing costs. The company decided to print their message on lightweight papers, papers that fall below your standard basis weights, but have a surprisingly high opacity.

Well, not quite surprisingly, since they are specially made this way with large mail-outs in mind. A 38 Text sheet, for example, usually has the same opacity as a standard 50 Text sheet.

Following our “lighter is less expensive” rule, does this mean lightweight papers are remarkably cheaper than regular offset ones? Well, not quite, as they are more or less specialty papers.

In the case of DuPont, the company ended up spending \$900 more on their paper cost, but saved \$28,000 in mailing costs. Definitely worth the trade off I’d say.

19 See the Job as a Whole

As you see in DuPont's case, it pays to see a job as a whole, not only segregated into print, paper and mailing costs.

A great starting point is to consider if a piece really fits a specific printer's press. Hardly any printer will return your request for a quote saying that they don't have the equipment best suited for your project. So, it is up to you to be knowledgeable and flexible enough to "move the job around," if needed.

In the case of a small printer I know, the owner had a client's self promo piece printed with five different printers (yes, she outsources when applicable), each best suited for a specific part of the project, and ended up saving her client \$4,000 on a 3,000 print run.

Yes, she is one of those dinosaurs I mentioned earlier. In another case, after receiving the spec's from the client, she sat down for a week, thinking of ways to make the project run more smoothly and efficiently, thus saving the client money.

Some small adjustments to the design (remember point 8) allowed sections to be automated, that originally were to be manually assembled. The original spec's had the booklet saddle stitched and then, manually bound with a rubber band. After design adjustments, the booklet was just fine with the rubber band alone and the stitching was eliminated all together.

Overall savings: \$40,000 on a 50,000 print run. Now, these are numbers we can all admire.

So, go out and find yourself your own dinosaur

A printer that knows more about printing than you do, cares as much about your project as you do and calls you after the delivery or the event you have been working on to see how things went for you.

Yes, they are a rare breed, but they are out there and worth building a great relationship with to make sure your paper and printing needs are always fulfilled at the best possible price.

You are stressed out

... working on current projects, setting up new client meetings, and dashing from one deadline to the next. Budgets are tight and you squeeze every last ounce of productivity and creativity out of your time.

There just aren't enough hours in the day to meet all of the expectations, goals and deadlines. Or are there?

Don't waste your time. Your livelihood is at stake.

Dazzle Your Clients. You will instantly have access to the latest swatchbooks and paper promotions, so that you can create pieces with a wow factor that dazzles your clients.

Create the most inspired pieces. You will immediately have access to fiercely independent and in-depth paper information, so that you can clearly envisage the final product, let your imagination run free, and create the most inspired pieces.

Grow your well-deserved reputation. You will be able to rely on a large variety of in-depth webinars and objective paper facts, that will help you utilize the most amazing paper features, printing and finishing techniques, so that you can grow your well-deserved reputation.

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About the Author



Sabine Lenz is the founder of PaperSpecs, the first online paper database specifically designed for the design/print industry. For more than 15 years, she has been a graphic designer in Germany, Australia, and the U.S.

Sabine worked on design projects ranging from corporate identities to major roadshows and product launches. From start-ups to Fortune 500 companies, her list of clients included Oracle, Sun Microsystems, Deutsche Bank, IBM and KPMG.

Seeing designers struggle worldwide to stay current with updates and paper trends inspired Sabine to create PaperSpecs, an independent and comprehensive web-based paper database and weekly e-newsletter.

Her articles appear in Process Magazine, Printing Impressions, Canvas Magazine and other industry publications. She is also a speaker on paper issues and educational topics related to the paper industry.

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