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SAMPLE PREFLIGHT CHECKLIST for the Prepress Service Provider

The following checklist is intended as a guide (but not an all-encompassing one) to preflighting for prepress service providers, and as an example of one standard method for thoroughly and consistently evaluating digital files.

REVIEWING THE JOB ORDER

- Make sure the customer has supplied:
 - Electronic files
 - Non digital art (slides, illustrations, signatures, etc.)
 - Laser proof with color breaks and varnish indications
 - Completed Output Request Form
- Examine all of the above for damaged and/or missing items
- Determine supplied media format and compatibility
- Are files compressed? Is there adequate disk space to decompress files?
- The following information is on the work order:
 - Job number and customer name
 - Name of sales/customer service representative
 - Tentative proof due date
 - Tentative print/delivery dates
 - Trim size of job (flat)
 - Trim size of job (folded)
 - Bindery method
 - Inks to be used

MANAGING DISKS, FOLDERS, FILES AND FONTS

- Write-protect any customer's floppies you may be working with.
- On your hard disk, create a folder entitled "Job Output."
- Within the "Job Output" folder, create a "job number—customer name" subfolder.
- Copy supplied customer's files to that sub-folder.
- Eject customer's disk and place in a safe place.
- Within that subfolder, create another subfolder called "Original Document."
- Locate the customer's page layout document; highlight it; and create a "duplicate" of it (filename.copy).
- Drag the customer's original page layout document into the "Original Document" subfolder, so that an unedited copy of that original document (with unchanged date of creation) remains untouched.
- Rename copied document file to something short but distinguishable and add a reliable extension (e.g., orf, which stands for output-ready file).
- Check to see if customer included fonts for the job. If so, use a font management utility.

OPENING AND PREFLIGHTING A DOCUMENT

- Launch the appropriate page layout program (like Quark, PageMaker); open your document. Fonts missing? Note them on the job problem report.

- Check the picture usage and re-establish any links (if broken). Missing image files? Note them on the job problem report.
- Low-res files linked; do hi-res files exist?
- Check page size: does it match customer's and customer service rep's information?
- Check folding panels size(s).
- Check bleeds (standard=1/8 inch; press stock size may affect amount).
- Check color palette to see what colors are being used (delete any unused colors). When required, set spot to process; set process to spot.
- Provisions for varnish?
- Extraneous elements? Delete them to avoid possible RIP problems.
- Ink in glue areas?
- Do images fit picture boxes?
- Rules not specified as holding or printing?
- Do elements butt properly?
- Potential trapping problems? Identify and estimate trapping time.

VECTOR GRAPHICS

Exit the page layout program and view the files on your hard drive. Locate all vector graphics and launch the associated programs. View each graphic individually:

- Check for special colors created within the illustration applications. Make certain that the color's name is spelled exactly the same as it appears in the page layout document.
- Check trapping. Are there elements that require trapping but were either inadequately or not trapped at all? Note this on the Job Problem Report.

BITMAP IMAGES

Quit the illustration program and view the files on your hard drive. Locate all bitmap images and launch the associated programs (like Photoshop). View each image individually:

- On all 4-color scans, check if files are set to CMYK color (under MODE in Photoshop).
- On all images, check the resolution to be certain it matches your normal output resolution (under IMAGE—IMAGE SIZE in Photoshop).
- On all duotones, check for special colors created within the application. Make certain that the color's spelling is exactly the same as it appears in the page layout program (under MODE-DUOTONE in Photoshop).
- On all duotones, check for special colors created within the application and assign a screen angle to the special colors (under MODE--DUOTONE in Photoshop).

FINISHING THE PREFLIGHTING

Estimate time for imaging: Use a set of guidelines, deduce from experience, or use software designed to produce accurate estimates.

- Amount of film needed to be output to complete the job.
- Amount of time needed to RIP, expose and process the intended media
- Prepare Job Problem Report.
- Review problems with customer service rep, who should discuss problems with customers. (Is there time to send the files back to the customer for repair, or will the customer pay to have the mistakes corrected?)

COMPLETE THE PREFLIGHT REPORT

- Detail the problems found.
- Suggest methods for overcoming or correcting the problems.
- Note the location of the job files (which hard drive, which directory).

Preflighting Issues for the Prepress Service Provider or Printer

Electronic files can arrive in several different ways, including floppy disks; SyQuest, Bernoulli, and optical disks; CDs and on-line digital transmission. With so much coming from the outside,

it is important for all prepress service providers and printers to install and consistently use virus protection software. Sales personnel and customer service reps also have preflighting responsibilities. They can, for instance, evaluate the completeness of the output request form; make sure submitted disks are undamaged and are readable; make sure a laser proof is submitted with the job; check in-house font availability; check that linked graphics are correct and not missing from the submitted disk; find out if a compression program was used but not indicated; and ensure that folders and files are neither disorganized nor unusable. They can spot potential fundamental problems early on to save time and money.

Some of the same preflighting routines can be double-checked during the digital process. It is not uncommon, for example, for the customer service rep as well as the preflight technician to check the page size. A mistake that one person missed earlier could be caught at a later preflighting stage. Traditional image assemblers can be a primary resource for preflighting because they understand many of the issues that underlie preflighting and the printing process. Trapping, the responsibility of traditional image assemblers, is now a preflighting task. Sometimes, preflight technicians will also serve as output specialists. People who know the various computer platforms (IBM, Mac, UNIX), illustration, image manipulation, word processing, page layout programs, and also trapping and imposition software, can make excellent preflight technicians. Skilled preflight technicians can perform what has been called "prepping files." Different from preflighting, prepping files involves actually correcting, adjusting, and/or manipulating digital files before final output. This can include recreating often poorly constructed objects (like gradations and blends) in order to speed up output, decrease waste, and improve quality. Preflight technicians can help customers who do not have the expertise to do their own file repair. File repair is usually charged to the customer since it is not included in the original quote, which is based on a "computer-ready file."

It is important to preflight incoming files when they are received to allow enough time for correction, or, if necessary, replacement of the file by the customer. Preflighting requires attention to detail and concentration, something that can be difficult to achieve in the hustle and bustle of a production environment. A formalized preflighting checklist, a step-by-step routine for analyzing digital files regardless of the software used, can be a great help.