



Facing Forward: *Q&A from a catalog cover design webinar.*

Questions from a webinar by Julia Moran Martz from MondoVox® Creative Group.

Designing catalog covers that sell and reinforce your brand.

This Q&A is a result of questions submitted during our recent webinar, ***Facing Forward: Catalog cover design***. Our hope is that this information assists designers and product marketers in making the best decisions for their catalog cover designs and thus, increase sales.

Catalog designers have a tough job: fitting an endless array of varying products on a page, creating compelling covers that get customers to open the catalog rather than trash it **and** doing it all while ensuring customers can actually read product details and make decisions. Meanwhile, designers also spend valuable time educating product marketers about design techniques that increase readability, functionality and compel customers to buy. They have to do all this while staying on top of the new multichannel tools such as social media, barcodes and digital advertising trends, integrating various tools as needed to maximize catalog success.

Q: How do you obtain/create a QR code?

There are basically two ways to get a QR code: through your printer or through an independent service, usually online. Either way, there are a lot of options with QR codes: complexity, tracking services, reusability, etc. I've found that basic QR codes through a website like <http://keremerkan.net> can get quite detailed the more info you include in the code. This means your code must print larger in order for phones to process it. There are truncating services that will make a smaller link to the more robust info and that will result in a simpler code that can be printed smaller. One that was suggested by a webinar attendee is <http://mobibrix.com>. Mobibrix also allows you to change the content associated with a code so you don't have to create a new code for each use. But keep in mind, as with other truncation services, if the provider's server goes down, your links are DOA. So choose a reputable provider.

Q: Our company is a B2B cataloger that sells more than 20,000 unique products. How can you visually show this without focusing on any one particular product?

A lot of folks feel trapped by a large number of products, often feeling like they have to communicate everything at once. Each time. Forever.

But you don't really need to worry about showing everything on the cover and you really shouldn't. Not all products are top sellers or even repeat sellers. Some sell more during different times of the year. Some are more popular among different demographics.

This is why you really need to develop a long-term view of your cover strategy. And you should tie it into seasons, holidays, trends and demographic preferences.

Also keep in mind that impressions are made not just by the cover but also by the thickness when you have a huge catalog. When I get Uline's catalog, for instance, I know they've got more SKUs than I can ever imagine just by feeling the thickness of the book. They don't have to show all of them on the cover to get that point across. They usually show just a smattering on their covers and change them up each issue, using a grid system to align them to make future covers super easy to produce. They could create a single photo for each cover and shoot several items together in a more glamorous arrangement but that would add more to the overall photo budget and time to the schedule.





Dot Whack Wannabe.

A dot whack is a printed circular or square sticker that is adhered to another printed piece. Alas, by definition they can't exist on an electronic catalog.



Ramblin' Man.

Snipes, on the other hand, are graphic elements that can be used in both digital and print formats.

Dot whacks can have the advantage of standing out more than snipes, especially when the dot whack is printed on a different paper stock than the catalog. But you have more design control over snipes because you're not limited by shape, size or ink colors.

Q: What is the difference between a "snipe" and "dot whack"?

A **dot whack** is an object, printed separately from your catalog. It's usually a circular or square sticker and then adhered to something else, like a catalog.

A **snipe** is a design element used to set apart key information in a layout. Snipes can be printed on the catalog as part of the design file or they can be created using dot whacks and adhered to the catalog.

Printed **snipes** have the advantage of more design options than dot whacks. Color, transparency, drop shadows, very unique shapes, aligning to edges or other elements perfectly each time.

Dot whacks can be aimed to a specific location on the catalog and even though they are machine-applied, they will not be in exactly the same spot from catalog to catalog. For that reason, you should consider refraining from designing them with strong horizontals, rules or graphics that would look off if the dot got whacked not exactly square to the cover.

Benefits of dot whacking include the ability to add custom messages to covers if you're segmenting your list. Like Win-Back efforts for folks who haven't ordered in a while. Coupon codes for those who order frequently. Free shipping for seasonal specials.

Q: My company sells wholesale medical supplies, we carry both popular and hard to find items. How can we effectively appeal to people who would buy both on our cover?

I can think of a couple really good ways to handle both types of products on your covers.

On the front cover, you could use a large full-bleed photo addressing the standard popular items and incorporate an inset image or box or sidebar that addresses the hard-to-find items. If designed carefully, it could look very dynamic and cover worthy.

Another approach is to keep your most popular items on the front cover and create a hard-to-find item story on the back cover. Seed Savers Exchange does exactly this on their catalogs: front covers always show gorgeous color photos of their most popular vegetables for which readers can buy seeds while back covers have an article or story about the benefits of joining the exchange as a member. Creating new members is their secondary sales goal.

Remember, both covers count. Your catalog could land face up or down upon mailing or after someone has sorted their mail.

Q: Can we email Julia after the webinar with specific questions relating to our catalog designs?

Yes, absolutely. My email address is julia@mondovox.com and I'm on Twitter @mondovox.

Q: We sell medical supplies to the home users, very personal in nature. What would you do with the cover?

My initial inclination is to stick with lifestyle shots for your cover and you may be able to include inset photos of some of the more personal products but it will depend on the product and the tolerance level of your market. This is where some really solid data on your list would be helpful.

Also, you may be surprised at your customers' abilities to handle products of a sensitive nature. But you'd have to do a little research and/or testing to confirm this.

Consider also how your catalog ships. If it's in a plain brown wrapper, you have no issues. I just would never show a person actually using a product of a sensitive nature.

There are certain personal product companies that by their very nature deal with this because all products in their catalogs are highly personal. Many of them send their catalogs wrapped.



Sweet Idea.

A product photo can be shot with a full background and also be used elsewhere as an outlined image. If you're going to do this you might want to have your photographer shoot the photo with a couple of lighting options so you don't have to sacrifice quality in either of the usages.

Q: What is your opinion of using cut-out product images vs. images of the products in use?

I don't think you can make a generalization either way. It's going to completely depend on factors such as: product type, what encourages customers in your specific industry to buy, and whether or not you have a cover photo budget. Uline reuses many photos from their catalog interiors and that's a great way to save money and time producing each issue.

But for something that's not printed as frequently or each issue is topical or seasonal, you should really consider showing custom shots on covers. In some cases, products-in-use. These will generally not be outline shots.

Products-in-use photos are typically very effective for selling action or high performance products like sporting equipment. Products that appeal to a visceral level visually may be better shot in extreme close ups, maybe outlined or without humans, such as Vosges Haut Chocolate uses on many of their catalogs.

Q: Some of the covers shown do not necessarily point a customer inside the catalog using products and page numbers. Isn't it true that a good catalog design should always draw in a customer as opposed to just be visually appealing?

Absolutely, a good cover design will draw the customer into the catalog but there are several tools to use to accomplish this. One is, of course, page number references but using too many of these can backfire, making your cover look like a table of contents rather than something more emotionally compelling. So I'd be choosy when including page numbers on covers.

Also, there may be product categories where it doesn't make sense to show the actual product but rather the results of the product. Seed catalogs are a great example of this. Showing millions of tiny seeds is not what sells them. But showing what the seed will grow into provides appropriate information for the customer while also promising success in their garden. Nutritional supplements are similar in that sometimes it may be more effective to show resulting muscles instead of a pile of beige powder or a pill so large it's hard to swallow. However, with supplements, you could also consider photos that focus on solubility and taste since even health-focused consumers would prefer something that tastes good and is not gritty.

Another way to draw readers inside is to make the outside highly functional and simply look great. If your outside covers look cumbersome, busy and hard to read, they're going to lower their expectations for the inside accordingly. If your product photos aren't up to snuff either, page numbers won't cut it.

Whatever you do, don't rely on just page numbers to draw readers inside. Page numbers can become an overused crutch allowing you to ignore other design and copy tools that will drive readers to actually buy.

Q: Do you recommend spot UV to emphasize products?

The two things you have to consider when adding coatings to a catalog are the environmental perspectives of your customers (will it turn them off) and cost. Spot UV can really make colors pop on product shots as can flood varnishes and aqueous coatings. But if you're in an industry that caters to, say gardening or the Audubon Society members, you may want to refrain from doing so as they may feel you're not aligned with their wants and concerns.

Q: Shouldn't each cover page and every body page display how the customer can contact you, i.e., email, phone, URL?

It's annoying when you can't find the phone number isn't it?

At the very least I think a phone number and online catalog URL should be on each spread of catalogs. And if not on the front cover then at least on the back cover. If your individual pages are very packed, consider splitting the info between the left and right



A Fresh Face

You don't have to change your interior grid or look every time you update your catalog. Freshening your cover can make the whole catalog seem new.

Note how Gardener's Supply makes use of very different color schemes to differentiate between issues. The user is left with little doubt as to which is which.

Also note how Gardener's Supply nicely integrates color from their cover photo into their masthead, giving the catalog a very unified look.

They also make use of promotional headlines and positioning copy on each issue.

pages. If your catalog is delivered in PDF format and not in spreads, then you really should put the info on all pages.

Given that many orders take place online these days instead of phone, catalogs are increasingly becoming research tools and should also provide more valuable connections with customers (QR codes that link to rich product info or videos, Twitter and Facebook links so customers can ask questions at their leisure rather than calling during business hours, etc). I don't think though that your Twitter and Facebook link must go on every page but do put them somewhere handy.

Critical cover information is phone and online catalog. Interior info is the same. Additional info that would show you love and care about your customers would be emails, Twitter and Facebook URLs, and QR codes placed appropriately.

Q: Do you design the cover first or last?

Sometimes you'll have different designers working on covers vs. the interior but in the event of the same designer working on both, I'd do what's most efficient and inspiring for the designer. You'll get better solutions that way. Some designers, like myself, prefer to start with the catalog insides because it helps to organize thinking and understanding of that issue's primary focus and specific needs.

But if the interior hardly ever changes, it will probably be better to start with the cover.

All that said, if you're in a situation where the interior has to go through a long review and approval process, the designer should really get that going quickly. Then while that is being reviewed, he or she can focus on the covers.

Q: That actually brings up a good point though about whether you should change the inside of your catalog often or keep it the same so people know where to look for things.

This is going to depend on your catalog length, product types, customer needs and publishing frequency. If, like Uline, you have a huge catalog that is published frequently, it may be very inefficient to change the interior layout each time. In a situation like that you should focus on unique covers and new product or seasonal sections.

If your catalog is an annual, however, you may have the option to change things more than you would otherwise. I'd just be very aware and cautious about changes for changes sake and make sure you're consciously maintaining your brand's image.

Q: What's the best way to measure the results of an A/B Test?

The first thing you want to do is make sure you are setting up the test to **get** accurate results. So always keep in mind that you want to test only one variable element at a time. otherwise you won't know which variable changed the data.

And since there are a lot of factors that can come into play, I like to ensure that half see one version and the other half sees the other in strict rotation. Now I know that you can test 90-10, 80-20, etc., but you need someone more mathematically inclined than I am to determine those factors for you.

You should also ensure that your test is showing a statistically meaningful impact on the variables, which means you have to know if you've demonstrated enough of a difference (delta) between the tests to declare a true winner: As a rule of thumb, experts say you should have at least a three times larger result (e.g., if A is 10, B should be 30).

That's absolutely as far as I'm willing to venture into testing since I'm not technically a market researcher and I really recommend that you work with a marketing professional since so much is on the line. But **do** test.



Does Paper Really Matter?

Remember that everything you use in your design reflects on your brand image. There are many lower priced papers that mimic the look and feel of more expensive stock. Work with your printer and/or paper merchant to see what your options are, rather than assuming your choices are limited to low-cost papers you're already familiar with.



Photography or Illustration?

It's not always an either/or situation. For instance, Annie's cleverly combines photos and illustrations for a cover that is unique and memorable.

If you choose to combine both photography and illustration, be sure the two styles are compatible — just as you would when combining serif and sans serif typefaces.

Q: We tend to buy our paper almost exclusively on price, and we're often inconsistent about issues like brightness, shade and sometimes, even grade. Should we be more concerned about our selections, keeping in mind how important costs are today? Does anyone really notice?

It's going to depend on your audience, some will notice something like paper. Like the Vosges audience really expects a high-end catalog that ensures the product is what they claim it to be. In their instance, appropriate paper works with design to manage customer expectations.

Certainly there are some industries where it won't be as critical but remember that everything will either reflect well or poorly on your brand image.

You might want to sit down with your printer and work through a long term paper strategy that ensures more consistency and is still affordable. Or use that as an opening discussion if you're considering changing printers. I know from experience that Ripon is very attuned to both costs and quality.

Q: What do you think is the price difference for a typical studio photo for a catalog cover versus commissioning an illustration? Doesn't using an illustration add a lot of costs to the cover?

It really depends on the illustrator and photographer you're comparing. I've known photographers who have incredibly high day rates and illustrators who were much more affordable and flexible. Like just about any industry, you'll pay more when they're in high demand than when they're hurting for work.

Another way to manage costs is to find illustrators or photographers who are just starting out or are looking to expand in new directions. They'll often work with you on price.

Keep in mind that both illustration and photography are subject to federal copyright laws so you're going to end up negotiating usage rights either way unless they're on staff or the images are created work-for-hire, which will obviously be cheaper.

One more tip: you can take an approach like Annie's (at the left) and use stock illustrations with custom photography to manage costs. This takes more time for the designer to integrate well but can be very effective for creating your brand image.

Q: When you were talking about the "busy" versus the less cluttered back cover, how do you know the busy one didn't perform better? We've tried both approaches and our results show that the more products we show the better.

Good question. Keep in mind that I'm responding from my training and experience in graphic design and that tells me that you need to invite readership, not force people to read.

While testing is always the best way to determine what works in your particular market, I would still contend that design done well — or as well as possible — will still generally outperform design done at a lower level. And it is possible to include more products while not appearing so busy the customer can't make heads or tails of all the information.

I would also suggest that you test multiple designs with the same number of products. You could use your current design as the control, and create a second design with a more sensitivity to functional space to increase reading comprehension.

Q: I'm guessing that you didn't design the Heartland catalog cover, but did you design any of the others in the presentation?

I purposefully did not include any of our own work in order to be as unbiased as possible. A discussion like this should be about the best approaches and not specifically about our portfolio. Of course you can see samples of our work on our website.

Q: What do you think are the best criteria to use for choosing products that you feature on the cover?

I'm not a marketer, but my experience says that you should give special attention to product launches, best sellers and other marketing priorities. Also, seasonal schedules and holidays play a role and may have different image needs than regular catalogs. Shoot for encouraging your customers by showing products that are both profitable and allow for multiple purchases.

About Julia Moran Martz



Julia Moran Martz is Partner and Co-Creative Director of MondoVox® Creative Group. and has 25 years experience in communications and design solutions for consumer products, biomedical and technology.

Ms. Martz has led creative teams in developing creative solutions for brand identities, sales collateral, direct mail, catalogs, packaging, advertising and trade show support for international and regional clients including Spotlight Business Affairs, Ripon Printers, Banta Corporation, Ellerbe Becket, Gourmetceuticals, Excello Products LLC

and Prinova Group LLC. She has also provided consultation in brand strategy development, planning, and implementation of marketing-based solutions using print, interactive and social media.

About Ripon Printers

Ripon Printers serves small to mid-size catalog marketers and publishers, producing catalogs, publications and a wide range of direct mail products. Linking our capabilities together is an obsessive devotion to customer service that places your satisfaction above any other business goals.

We offer a complete range of print solutions that includes coldset and heatset web printing as well as sheetfed and digital printing. Whatever your needs, Ripon Printers has the right fit. A variety of integrated multichannel capabilities, from digital editions, email marketing, personalized URLs, QR Codes and digital storefronts, complement our print production, fulfillment and distribution services.

Extending your multichannel presence with Ripon Printers is easy and hassle-free. To learn more about our broad range of services for catalog marketers, including digital editions, please contact your representative or send an email request to sales@riponprinters.com. You can also view a short video highlighting our capabilities at our homepage, www.riponprinters.com.

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- Sustainable print



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