Judging Print Quality

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Introduction

The purpose for conducting a print quality contest by an industry association is (a) to recognize excellence in printing quality, (b) to promote the innovative use of a particular printing process, and (c) to heighten the public awareness of print as an effective mass communication media. On the other hand, the motivation to enter into a print quality competition is quite different. It may include, but not necessarily in the following order, (a) to be recognized as the best in class, (b) to feel good about one’s achievement, particularly, if there is an award presentation ceremony at an annual convention, and (c) to learn from each other as to what it takes to be excellent.

In printing and publishing, quality is more than just in the eye of the beholder. In a print quality contest, judges do not necessarily agree with each other in their quality judgments. This means that the visual impact of printed product matters only to a degree. Consequently, the determining factor for the winning entry often hinges on the quality of the documentation that accompanies the entry.

This article attempts to describe the author’s experiences regarding how a print quality contest is organized and what judges are looking for. It offers many pointers and examples as to how entries should be presented and documented in order to increase the odds of winning the award.

How a Print Quality Contest is Organized

From an organizational point of view, all entries are classified by market segment and by category to avoid the “comparing orange and apple” syndrome. This means that there can be many market segments, and a number of categories for each segment, in a print quality contest. The award is given to each category. For example, in the GAA’s Golden Cylinder Awards Competition, there are 5 categories in the packaging segment of the gravure industry, i.e., paper product, film, foil, paperboard product, and technology innovation. And in the publication segment of the gravure industry, the contest offers three (magazine, supplement, and catalog) categories. Each entry is usually accompanied by a completed entry.
Some contests require entry fees. Some don’t. If this is an annual contest, entries usually are limited to those that were produced in the past 12 months.

The judging site should be spacious so that entries are properly displayed. Any accompanying document should be accessible at the time the entry is being judged. The room lighting should be bright. While most offices are equipped with fluorescent lighting, office illumination quality is different from the standard viewing conditions that the graphic arts industry endorses for critical color appraisal. If color matching becomes an important criterion in the contest, it’s a good idea to set up a portable viewing booth to perform the color matching task.

Judges are usually selected from among professionals with recognized knowledge, but often have diverse backgrounds and experiences in their field of expertise. Entries will be identified only by an ID number. The judges are asked to examine all entries for a given category and then submit a score sheet for each entry. When the number of entries is large, the judge may be asked to identify the top three entries for each category individually. In a deliberation process, they may work as a group to determine the winning entry for that category.

**Judging Print Quality**

There are many ways that quality of the product and process are judged. Quality often means free from defects. Quality also means meeting customer’s requirements or conformance to specifications. Quality should never be defined as “I’ll tell you when I see it.”

Many people think that a print quality contest is the same as a design contest, i.e., the printed piece that looks more pleasing wins. And that’s wrong! A print quality contest is more than just a design contest. Visual quality of the image accounts for only a part of the criteria. In other words, an award winning designer cannot simply turn a mediocre printer into an award winning one. What matters more in a print quality contest is process quality. In addition, factors such as fit for use, technical innovation of the process, and overall impact of the product are also critical. The following paragraphs elaborate these judging criteria in more detail.

*Product quality*—Product quality refers to judging the printed product on its own merits. Here, the reference used is what the judge thinks it is, and any deviation from his/her mental image of what print quality should be becomes a demerit. For example, strong color cast, improper rendering of memory colors like red of
apple, green of grass, and blue of sky, wrong highlight placement which render
the image poorly, etc. Interestingly enough, high print quality is ascertained when
judges cannot detect any visual defects in an entry.
Many post printing operations, e.g., finishing, folding, trimming, stitching, die
cutting, binding, embossing, foil stamping, can add significantly to the quality of
the product.

Process quality—Process quality is different from product quality. Judges often
assess the quality of the reproduction process by looking for defects that are
process oriented. For example, noticeable hickies, uneven inking, mottling,
excessive printing pressures, rough vignettes, mis-registration, etc. Freedom
from process-related defects is not sufficient to verify that a reproduction process
has a high degree of process quality. Documentation is necessary to help support
the process quality claim.

Quality of the process may be supported by the company’s routine practices of
SPC and its quality assurance efforts. Improvement of the environmental quality
and waste reduction efforts are also considered as part of the process quality.

Quality of the process may be supported by the degree of job difficulty, i.e., how
challenging was the entry to the printer, e.g., line art vs. halftone, screen rulings,
number of printing units, traps, registrations, ink coverage over a large area of
solid, varnishes, etc.

Fit for use—Refers to the appropriateness of the design, prepress, as well as the
choice of materials in the printing process that make the printed piece perform
the way it was intended. For example, wet strength of paper is a critical measure
in label printing to assure the integrity of beverage labels when it’s immersed in
ice and water; color fastness of ink is important for outdoor poster; scuff
resistance is an important ink property for printed materials to be handled by
many people; scanability of UPC codes is of utmost importance for products to be
sold in today’s modern grocery stores.

Technical innovation—Refers to how technology is utilized to stretch the limit of
the process both in terms of its quality and productivity attainment. For example,
the innovative use of a filmless, all-electronic digital prepress system to prepare
the work may be emphasized; a patented paper chemistry is used to overcome a
paper curl problem in bottle labeling; graphic arts standards are used in multiple
printing sites to achieve accuracy and uniformity across the geographic
boundaries, etc.
Overall impact of the product—Here, we’re looking for something that is more than just expected quality, but something that’s exciting! An entry with high product impact means its quality is exciting. It makes one wish to hold on to the piece longer and wish to discover why it’s pleasant. That sensation may be the result of many right things being done, e.g., the choice of typography, the look and feel of paper, harmony of design, interaction of color, etc. It could also be because something is experienced out of the ordinary. For example, making the printed image match real objects, be it the delicacy of eggs or exact rendering of Monet’s painting, can be exciting. Having the fragrance appeal with the use of encapsulated ink on perfume ads can be enlightening; the application of thermochromic inks on beverages indicating the optimum drinking condition is a real attention getter.

While the overall impact of the product may be difficult to document, the degree of customer satisfaction regarding their experiences may be cited as a more objective measure. For example, a very difficult job was done flawlessly and achieving high market impact in the marketplace, or a job that can only be done with the use of a specific process economically while maintaining quality.

Synergies, stemming from diverse partners, may be portrayed as a quality factor in the extended process. For example, partnering with a telecommunication company to allow files to be distributed first, then printed, help shorten the cycle time and cost significantly. The combined use of more than one printing process to provide both fixed and variable information in the same printed product is an extended process quality. Planning for a more environmentally sound process, e.g., using toluene-free inks in a gravure process, is another process quality dimension.

How to Increase the Chances of Winning

If you have ever listened to the mild-mannered Minnesotan, Garrison Keillor, you probably remember the opening line in his “Lake Wobegon” story which states: “In Lake Wobegon, All men are handsome. All women are strong. And all children are above average.” Printers must have gotten the same idea from Garrison Keillor, because every printer believes that he is above average. Thus, all printers provide quality printing.

In any competition, the meaning of average means a value or ranking whereby about one-half of the entries is above and the other half is below this value. The notion that “every one is above average” is great! But it’s a misnomer. The reality is that it does not matter if the company thinks it deserves to win. What
does count is its ability to present the work, and document why its entry deserves to win. The rest is up to the appraisal and deliberation of the judges.

Having a winning attitude is often not enough to be a winner. You need to know what to do to increase your chances of winning. The following are the top 10 list that you should consider when entering a print quality contest:

1. *Study the contest rules carefully*—Do not guess. Make sure that you’re eligible for the contest and you understand rules of the contest fully.
2. *Look for entries that stand out or have unique features*—Conduct a mini print quality contest within your own company and get as many employees involved as possible.
3. *Pick the printed sample carefully*—So that the printed sample best represents the reproduction quality.
4. *Keep your entries limited*—Do not enter every conceivable category there is. Multiple entries will increase your chances of winning only if there is a significant difference among your entries.
5. *State what makes your entry outstanding*—Focus on technical achievement and illuminate on the technical innovation used in producing the product.
6. *Justify the process efforts and its fit for producing the printed piece*—Demonstrate the degree of difficulty of the job; describe how functionality of the product was met through design, prepress, press, and post-press efforts.
7. *Keep the document simple*—Do not provide too much detail. Do not over structure the document; i.e., numbering every possible paragraph and subparagraph.
8. *Make it easy to read*—Write short sentences that clearly state what has been accomplished. Use language, not jargon. In a close race, the quality of your documentation could be the determining factor.
9. *Submit all required pieces in one package*—Include your sample(s), a completed entry form, accompanied documentation, and appropriate fees (if there is any).
10. *Submit your entry on time.*
Learning by Doing

As a faculty member, I have advised my students in various scholarly related contests. I have hoped that they would win and didn’t. Consequently, I had doubts about the value of any contest. Fortunately, these thoughts don’t linger. Because we have the opportunity to observe and to learn from others who just might know something more than we do. If we begin to look for ways to improve our own performance, it surely will increase our chances to be a winner next time around. On the other hand, we will never become winners if we don’t enter the contest.