



Hard evidence about soft proofs

A Sydney prepress house is demonstrating that a reliable means of delivering soft proofs to clients can be a sure-fire way of boosting service levels.

The well-known prepress bureau, Alfred Johns, based in Marrickville, Sydney, is using a new soft proofing solution called Proof Manager to help reduce the cost and time of its job approval process.

Soft proofing of files from screen to screen is now a widely accepted practice throughout the industry. Every day PDF attachments fly across our networks, filling the broadband pipes and generally contributing to the overall speeding up of the production process. "I'll PDF it" has become a common mantra.

The industry's dependence on keeping these files on the move has led to the development of a number of solutions to help optimise and manage the soft proofing process. Email attachments are fine (most of the time) but there has to be a better way.

Proof Manager has been developed by a local IT company, Pent Net, and is distributed in Australia and New Zealand through Graphic Systems Australasia (GSA). A stand-alone programme, it operates on standard web server platforms providing instant delivery of artwork to

clients as well as a range of useful correction tools and job tracking options. It's fast, easy to use and can be customised to suit specific business needs.

Wayne McDougall, operations director at Alfred Johns, has been using Proof Manager for about a year now.

"It's used mainly for first stage approvals," Wayne explained. "Some just use it to check content while others will use it at each stage of the process, all the way to final approval. It really depends on the client, what suits them and how they want to use it. We have such a variety of clients — end users, printers, designers — that they all tend to use it in different ways."

While there are other soft proofing tools on the market, Wayne points out that they tend to be either part of a workflow system and incorporate proprietary features or work out more expensive on a per user basis. Proof Manager is an open system in that it doesn't require any specific workflow system to work with it and doesn't require any proprietary software being installed on client systems; all they need is a standard web browser and an internet connection.

Alfred Johns is best known for its work in the packaging and label markets, a fact which, according to Wayne McDougall, influences how Proof Manager is used. For instance, clients will use the soft proof to check the content but if they need to look at how the job will print on the sheet they will usually take a hard proof as well. Packaging jobs often require at least an A3+ size printer in order to print out on a single sheet so, even if a soft proof is sent to a client, not all clients are set up to output such large proofs. Nevertheless, they can still scroll around the soft proof on-screen in order to check details.

As a result, Wayne believes that a soft proofing system such as Proof Manager actually complements and enhances hard proofing instead of replacing it. What it does mean is that there are fewer hard proofs being sent out at each stage of the production process. It also results in less data being sent out as attachments via email and that means fewer files getting lost or corrupted.

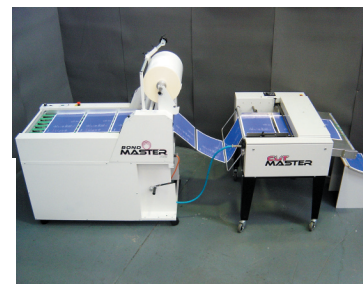
With this system, there is now a clear process and record of when files are sent, when approvals are given and

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if there are any changes to be made. The approval process is also faster and more cost-effective.

"Yes, it's definitely faster," commented Wayne. "There's no delivery lag time while you're waiting for jobs to be collected and sent out and, at the client's end, they have access to their work when it is convenient for them. When they sit down at their computer to get their emails, they have a link straight to the job so they can look at it any time that suits them."

"As for reducing costs, we see it more as a service for clients to utilise but, to the extent that it saves time then, yes, it does save money. It's not primarily about cutting costs though. It's more about giving our clients a better service that suits their needs."

In this way, the programme is helping Alfred Johns to achieve a high degree of customer retention and repeat business.

How does it work?

When a job is ready for approval, the operator uses Proof Manager to submit the job to the client. A file gets uploaded to a web server and an email is automatically sent to the client telling them that the job is ready to view. This file can be a PDF or even a fully RIP'd file such as a 1 bit TIFF, Postscript, EPS or one of over a dozen different formats.

The email includes a link which takes the client to their secure log-in page where they enter their own user name and password. Several users can be given

access to any particular job or access can be restricted so that not every user at a client company gets to see every job.

Alfred Johns has separate log-in pages for its production department and its graphic design division called StratAJe. Each



Wayne McDougall, operations director at Alfred Johns: Proof Manager actually complements and enhances hard proofing.

page is branded with the appropriate logo so that every time a client looks at their jobs, the Alfred Johns identity is reinforced.

Once the client has logged in they are able to view the job on-screen, add comments or suggest changes. When the job is

uploaded to the server by the operator, it automatically generates a small preview of the file. The client can click on this preview to look at the full job and even type changes directly onto it. Any changes the client makes doesn't affect the actual production file as the client changes are made on a separate layer. Clients also have the option of downloading a PDF of the job which can then be printed out to get a hard copy.

When the client is finished, they re-submit the file and, at the other end, the operator can see instantly whether the job has been approved or returned with changes.

At all times, both client and operator are seeing the same files, comments and corrections so there can be no misunderstanding. Every action is logged in a history file so, again, at all times both client and operator can see exactly what has happened with each job.

Alfred Johns runs its own web server which hosts the Proof Manager software and stores the files, an arrangement which Wayne McDougall says is very straightforward to set up and run. However, if a user didn't want to run their own server, Proof Manager is available to run on a third party web hosting service.

Even though only recently released to the printing and prepress industries, Proof Manager is gaining significant market share, with more than a dozen installed sites in Australia and New Zealand, ranging from companies such as Alfred Johns to the Queensland University of Technology. ■

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