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The Fabulous Future of Print

John rubbed the sleep out of his eyes as they adjusted to the room around him. He sidled up to his personal information center and cracked his neck as it booted up and the thin, crystal clear screen glowed to life. By touching buttons on the screen, he navigated through sound and video clips of the local and national news. His stock portfolio crawled across the top of the screen and with a few touches he had sold 50 shares of Shambo Building Technologies and bought 200 shares of Macrovision Imaging Solutions...

One of the trends we seem to be facing in today's "dumbed-down" MTV world is a bit of a downscaling in the use of print to distribute information. People are tending to rely more on being fed information than going out and seeking this information, and we are finding more and more ways to present this information with symbols and moving pictures as opposed to words. Thus, our society is shifting from a literal one to more of a visual one, where communication is ruled by images, both static and moving. Although the art of flagrantly ornamental and ostentatious vocabulary has been on the decline since the days of Hemingway's taciturn and pointed style (That just gave the facts. In short, choppy sentences. And had little frill to it. Very little frill at all.), the art of storytelling and the written word are still appreciated and used extensively today, and certainly won't go away soon. But what we are seeing is an influx of strong graphic images in advertising and web design, and the lessening of the use of words as explanation. For example, many Nike ads feature strong photographs and contain no text at all, but a small graphic of the swoosh (Nike logo) buried somewhere in a corner. However, this advertising is still in printed form, so as we see a slight shift in the amount of printed materials, we also see a shift in the types of materials being printed. We are more interested in sounds, images, and interactivity. Extensions of printed ads are being placed on the world wide web in

such a way that they are entertaining and enjoyable to “participate” in. Not only that, advertising is a main focus of the world wide web. With more possibilities and cheaper rates, the only problem is directing people to that information. Doing that could take something that is more tangible, more forced into public consciousness....perhaps....print??? Today, many ads in magazines or papers, and even catalogues, feature the web addresses of the companies being advertised. By offering information and offers through the internet, companies have a powerful tool at their disposal. In order to draw a good volume of traffic and make the site worthwhile, though, they need to present the possibility of a visit in a medium that is more immediate, that being print. It can be said in this way, that print is a passive medium, as opposed to the active medium of television or the web, where the consumer has to turn on the TV and find something on a channel, or go to the web and search for something. So, the goal is to use the passive forms of media to direct attention to the active. By putting their web address on all their catalogues, fliers, printed ads, billboards, etc., companies can make their web site, which can be a hub for information and a very important part of business, highly visible. So, print is not getting any less in-your-face and ubiquitous. It is still serving as a main way to direct traffic to some of the more subtle advertising of the internet. In fact, many printed ads are becoming more and more stripped down often with a web address as their main form of visual communication. Print is becoming the signpost that directs traffic to the web, television, and beyond.

John stumbled into the shower and let the cool water widen his eyes and waken his joints. He reached for the bottle of Suave shampoo. The label was peeling in the edges and the bottle was almost empty. He replaced it on the shelf. He stepped out of the shower, dried himself, and headed downstairs for breakfast. He took out the box of Wheaties Cereal. “Ah yes,” he smiled, “the breakfast of champions.” He poured himself a heaping bowl and took out the carton of milk. “www.crowley.com,” he read aloud, “remind me never to go there.” He put the bottle back in the fridge and closed the door. The freezer started clunking again and he cursed its boisterous outbursts. “Just what I need, another thing to fix. Now where did I put that owner’s

manual?” After sifting through drawerfuls of papers, he finally found the owner’s manual and went to work on alleviating the clunking....

If newspapers, magazines, brochures, flyers, and coupons all went out of print, the last printed media left hanging on would be packaging. For many other printed items, there seems to be plausible substitutes that could take over in the future. (Let’s be reasonable, though, by ‘take over’ we are really just saying that these substitutes will continue to grow in popularity. It will be a long time before e-newspapers eradicate *every* newspaper subscription... IN THE WORLD!!! MWHAAAAHAHAHA!!! Yeah, at this point it still sounds like an evil master plan, but as electronic media continues to grow, only time will tell how far the change will go. Ok, back to packaging.) Packaging, however, is something that is very hard to consider a replacement for. Because of the plurality of its nature (that’s right kids, it’s not just to provide info, it also serves many convenience, structural, and freshness purposes), packaging is one printed medium that would be hard pressed to survive in any other manifestation. For the sake of play, let’s suspend disbelief for a moment, and say we want to buy an eggbeater. We’re operating on the assumption, of course, that eggs will still exist in the future. Well, in order not to assume, we had better give this gizmo the generic title of “beater.” So, we have our plain, ordinary, unpackaged “beater” and we want to find out some information about it. Somewhere, attached to the “beater” is a tiny computer chip with a good deal of information. If we were to then take our “beater” to a scanner located conveniently throughout the store (and incidentally, in most households) and run it under the reader, that scanner could then give us information about the “beater”: the metals it was made with, where it was manufactured, its uses, its price, etc. Doesn’t seem that practical, does it? And, you may be wondering, “what happens if I want to buy cottage cheese?” You’re on your own for that one, ‘cause unless we find a way to electronically transmit cottage cheese, packaging is here to stay. Another big staying point of packaging is that without it, heck, all brands would pretty much be equal. Now what kind of good materialistic, capitalistic society would that be? We’ve all seen the macaroni and cheese

that comes in “that” box...the stark white cardboard with the militaristic stamp emblazoned on its front. How many people would be proud to buy faceless “brand X” products like that? Let’s be honest, there are only two types of people who would buy that over a colorful, inviting brand in a blue box with a cartoon character on the cover slyly grinning because you fell for it. Those two types of people are poor people, and very smart people. Honestly, we as Americans place a lot of trust in a logo, or in a good design, or in a name, and that’s most likely not going to stop. Perhaps, though, along with the print, some smarter features like those our “beater” had might come in handy as well. Already available is a product which scans barcodes and directs you to the webpage of the product you’ve scanned. Perhaps something like that in the future might take packaging beyond just print, but the print foundation will always be there.

Another very important part of printed information is its accessibility and immediacy. If John didn’t have the Owner’s manual for his Frigidaire, he would have to do a search for the company page on the internet, then navigate through a site and try to find the information he needed, possibly winding up a Frigidaire employee of the month page or an online guide to Refrigerator Space Management (RSM) in the meantime. With a manual, John has a tangible, portable reference that can travel with him into the bowels of the refrigerator and back. Not only this, but the true sticking point of many printed materials as opposed to electronic ones is that printed materials are a nice, complete unit all on their own. Everything you need to understand them is right there in front of you. There are no bells or whistles to worry about. Electronic media always has the requirement for some sort of device or software or other crazy contraption to actually get the information. As these crazy contraptions become more and more available, though, the need for some forms of print will be somewhat scaled down. This of course includes newspapers, certain magazines, maybe even manuals and corporate documents. Instead of being mass distributed, printed documents can be stored electronically, and maybe even printed if necessary....printing on demand...that makes me wonder what John’s doing....(what a beautiful segue...)

John took off after the cereal for the local bookstore. He wanted to see if he could get a copy of the Pocket Guide to Digital Prepress version 23 by Frank Romano. In the store, he browsed through the electronic database of available books until he found what he was looking for. He had his purchase information sent to the checkout counter and verified. Then he settled down with the latest issue of National Geographic (in magazine form or on his hand-held pocket magazine reader thingy, I'm not sure which) to wait. He heard the quiet low whirring of one of the massive printers in the bright, fluorescent "back room." In 10 minutes the worker returned with a freshly bound copy of the selected book. He handed it over, still warm. Beautiful. John handed him his card and the man scanned it, deducting \$35.99 from his bank account.

Why print thousands of copies of books that will just eventually have the covers torn off and be marked "lost or stolen" (or whatever the gibberish on the inside cover of books states)? Isn't that wasteful, especially at a time when our planet is already sagging under the weight of all the garbage we've piled upon it? So why not print books when we actually need them? Think about it. You need it: you have it printed. You don't: it doesn't sit on store shelf for five years gathering dust only to become more garbage. So, printing of books might take a more "do it when you need to" role. In addition, we can maybe look forward to some kind of electronic book, if a suitable model can be settled upon. Many books in the public domain are already available on the world wide web even today. If we can find a way to capture the feel of a book, or a comfortable feel, in electronic form, we may be able to cut down on a great deal of printing in that way. However, once again, we are dealing with a device...outside mechanisms that need to be utilized in order to read. So, although electronic reading like this may become very much accepted, there is never going to be complete coverage. Not everyone in the United States will be able to afford the e-book, whatever form that might take. Also, certainly in the near future, people will be slower to accept these new ways and these little phasings-out of print here and there, but in time, reading a book off of a small electronic device may seem as comfortable and natural as turning pages in a printed book.

John returned from his errands and settled down in his bed. (Ok, he did other stuff before that, but it's not really pertinent. Suffice it to say it was a fairly good day.) He took out his Palm Book and scrolled through a few chapters of Moby Dick. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, and placed the Palm Book back on the shelf with his mini-book-discs, stacked along side his collection of bound books. He turned the blanket up to 78 degrees and 65% humidity and settled down for a nice rest. He knew the Wheaties would be waiting for him in the morning.