





# **CUSTOMER CONFIDENTIAL**

**A look into the mindset  
of today's print buyer**

Mary Ann McLaughlin remembers hearing the intense chatter as far back as 1984: The day would soon arrive in which print would be rendered useless and we'd all be thrust into a paperless society.

Such a forward-looking notion may have seemed a stretch in 1984, but not long after the advent of the 21st Century, the assertion certainly seemed plausible. With increasing reliance on email as not only a tool, but also a standard in communication, as well as the proliferation of digital technology and society's collective eyes focused primarily on screens, it's easy to think of print as an endangered species.

But if you ask McLaughlin, managing partner of Butler Street, a management consulting, training and research firm that specializes in client and talent development, to juxtapose those 1984 assertions with the reality of print's status today, she'll give a slight chuckle before commenting.

"If you look at my desk, [you'll see] that [the demise of paper and print] is not even remotely close to being the truth," she says.

## THE CHANGING PRINT BUYER

McLaughlin isn't the only person who has heard the notion of print's decline. Margie Dana, founder of [margiedana.com](http://margiedana.com), whose specialty is developing marketing communications for the print industry, also noticed a transformation in the role of print – in its use and marketing.

But to understand this transformation, it's first important to understand how the print buyer has changed.

In 2013, Dana and consultant John Zarwan, founding partner of J. Zarwan Partners, surveyed hundreds of professional print buyers across the country to find out who they are and how their print-buying practices and behaviors may have changed.

The study, "The New Print Buyers: Who They Are, What They Want and What You Should Do," found that just as print's role in the marketing mix changed, so, too, has the description of the print buyer.

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– Margie Dana, Founder, [margiedana.com](http://margiedana.com)

In the past, print buyers did primarily just that: purchased print. Now, the study found the people filling this role have other responsibilities outside of print buying, possibly rendering it a secondary function within their organization. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the print buyers surveyed indicated that print buying is not their primary job.

"[Print buyers'] roles, responsibilities and power vary depending on the organization for which they work," says Dana, who also was a print buyer for more than 15 years before founding Boston Print Buyers and Print Buyers International, two professional associations.

Moreover, some companies even delegate the print-buying task to other staff, such as marketers, for whom print may be just a slice of a larger pie. Still, Dana says print buyers generally play important roles and do a lot of the "heavy lifting" — they choose printers, get estimates, oversee file transfers to printers, select substrates, do press checks (if required) and monitor the progress of each job.

"As far as the printer is concerned, there is no relationship that is more critical — more important — than their relationship with the print buyer," she says.

The Dana/Zarwan study also found that the typical print buyer has more than 15-20 years of experience in that capacity. However, more than 20 percent of respondents have less than 10 years of experience and many have only been buying print since the introduction of the iPod. While it's not clear that this signals a youth movement in the industry, it almost assuredly means this changing demographic has different needs from printers.

"[The print buyer and the print buyer's] customers know so much more about their options today than they did before," McLaughlin says. "And in the past, the print buyer was looking to the printer for insight into their capabilities. While I still think that's key, most of that information can be accessed via the internet."

## WHAT THEY VALUE

Asked to provide a snapshot of what today's print buyer is looking for from printers, Dana rattles off several qualities: good quality, stellar service, specific capabilities, competitive pricing and ability to offer creative input.

The findings of the Dana/Zarwan study support this. Taking it a step further, the study asked the same question of print buyers, assuming variables like price, quality and turnaround times were comparable. Not surprisingly, creative input and ideas about how to use print were focal points.

“Print buyers with a ‘marketing bent’ are clearly looking for more services from the print industry today, not less, and certainly not ‘only print,’” Dana says.

While many traditional print buyers may consider “value-added” services in terms of tangible bonus capabilities or service bundles, McLaughlin believes thought leadership on the part of printers also is what today’s print buyers crave. “What really needs to happen is printers have to come prepared with true thought leadership and industry information,” she says. “Print customers rely on their print vendors to bring the most up-to-date information on what’s happening and truly add value by being thought leaders.”

## The most obvious change in the print buyer’s mindset and needs is the sustainability of print in the face of the digital revolution.

Other drivers of change include personalization and speed, McLaughlin says. “Many things can be boiled down to having it ‘my way’ or having it immediately,” she says. “The way that the consumer behaves today, the expectation of speed and individualism is so high, and it’s not going to slow down. I think that perception has changed what print buyers need.”

Aligning with groups such as NAPCO Media in an effort to bring the Net Promoter Score — billed as a leading indicator of client loyalty — to the printing industry, McLaughlin says Butler Street sent thousands of surveys to print buyers, high-volume users of print, printers and their contacts to find out what they wanted (see sidebar, “What They Want”). Part of the response indicated a need from print buyers to have more data and analytics.

“CMOs and CMTOs are being forced to really take a much deeper dive into the types of programs they put in place and the type of return they’re going to get, and also actionable next steps and insights,” McLaughlin says. “You can’t do that unless you have data.”

Is the manner in which print is marketed also an issue? Somewhat, Dana says. “Printers need to do a much better job of marketing themselves and understanding their customers’ motivations and challenges,” she says.

McLaughlin says the onus is on printers to help their clients embrace change. “If printers want to differentiate themselves and truly add value, they need to get into the customer’s operating reality,” she says. “They have to add value above and beyond a product and a price.”

## WHAT THEY WANT

Butler Street Research LLC, a management, consulting, training and research firm, sent its Net Promoter Score (NPS) survey to thousands of print buyers, high-volume print users and print companies to help get a clear theme of what they want. Mary Ann McLaughlin, managing partner of Butler Street, discusses three highlights:

1

### Innovation

“In a highly commoditized market, this is what printers need to do to really make a difference.”

2

### “Frictionless” Customer Experience

“When they engage, they want the process to be smooth regarding how to do business together.”

3

### Data and Analytics

“They need these things so that they can take action and know they’re getting a return on investment. It’s more about these things today rather than being about a product at a low price.”

The most obvious change in the print buyer’s mindset is print’s sustainability in the face of the digital revolution. Printers can help educate buyers on how print fits in today by positioning it as more than just a product, but part of an all-encompassing solution, McLaughlin says.

“As a printer, if you’re not offering a full suite of services that includes digital media, you need to have a partner that does,” she says. “You need to be prepared with a full solution that’s going to be more than just print.”

It’s important to note that in no way does Dana think print should, or will, wither away due to any shortcomings or ability to compete with digital. Quite the opposite, in fact. “Print has taken a back seat to digital channels for sure, thanks to amazing new technologies,” she says. “However, it remains a vital communications channel for businesses. Where digital communications are ephemeral, in my mind, print lingers. It makes a much better and more lasting impression.”