The 5 Most Common Printed Packaging Errors
And How to Prevent Them
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Introduction

Discovering an error in the middle of printing or even getting a worrisome call from distributors as a product hits shelves are unfortunately a part of business. Oversights happen, and many don’t realize simple safeguards exist to catch mistakes before they become costly. In this whitepaper, we’ll discuss the most common errors in print packaging, why they occur, and how to prevent them. At face value this all might seem like common knowledge, but we urge you to take a closer look and guarantee you’ll learn something.

The Fresh-Off-the-Press Stress

It rarely gets more stressful than when new preliminary packaging samples arrive on your desk fresh off the press. What follows are minutes of anxious proofreading as you scan and look for any imperfections. It always seems as though our best proofreading occurs when it is far too late. Once an error is caught either by Quality Control or, worse, a furious client, it’s not pretty. Brand packaging represents a company’s public image, so the fallout that follows is understandable. There is just too much at stake for mistakes to be made. Consumers rely on perfection from their entrusted brands, both in the product and its packaging. Heavy expectations like these can weigh over the heads of the best of us, but they don’t have to.

Let’s look at the five most common sources of printed packaging errors, why they’re likely to occur, and suggestions on how to prevent them.
Spelling Mistakes

It’s true, but few dollars are ever invested in protecting against spelling mistakes. What can be confusing about this is that they’re responsible for the most printing reruns. If this wasn’t bad enough, try asking who’s to blame. Most clients contract the development of the package copy and assume spellchecking was done at that stage. Meanwhile, internally, no one will raise their hands because so many professionals make up the supply chain. Someone else has to be responsible, right?
Potential Reasons for Mistakes:

- Clients may sub-contract copy development and assume it’s accurate.
- Proofreading is a detailed and painstaking task that few are willing to pay for.
- Many technical words are long, complicated, and unfamiliar.
- Foreign languages pose a significant barrier.
- Multiple proofreaders can mean conflicting opinions.

How Can We Prevent This?

- Assign someone within the company the role of spellchecker.
- Consider paying your graphics or print supplier as a secondary back-up.
- Regularly update and distribute software dictionaries and lists of critical words, like brand names and ingredients that are proprietary to your firm.
- Make sure everyone responsible for copy uses spellchecking. This includes the Graphic Artist, Writer, Copy Editor, and Marketing & Legal departments.

**OBSERVATION**

Almost no dollars are ever invested to ensure the text copy is free of spelling mistakes.

As a result of taking these precautionary measures, spelling mistakes are more avoidable. But, even then, you may have to consider living with errors in the hopes they never happen again. Without top-of-the-line proofreading software, you may have to pay to repeat print jobs and play the blame game. For everyone to be put more at ease, not have production rescheduled, and see products hit the market on time, safety-net investments speak for themselves.
Delays Due to the Printer’s Proof

Many people consider the approved PDF file to be the end of the line. However, as packaging engineers know full well, this is just the start. Following the receipt of an approved PDF, the Printer’s pre-press team traps, bleeds, imposes the file, corrects errors, and much more. The end result is the printer’s proof, but printing still can’t begin. Remember the purchase order the Client sent to the Printer? This is the “contract”. In order for the Printer to get paid, let’s say for 500,000 labels, the contract requires that they each match the brand company’s approved PDF, not the proof. Most printers will send it out and wait for sign-off before starting production. This is when things can go very wrong.
Potential Reasons for Delays:

- The Client may sign off on the final PDF, but never check the Printer’s proof properly.
- The Printer cannot take the risk, assuming there are no errors even with the sign-off.
- The Client may be wrong and refuse to pay, delaying the print job.
- The Client may be wrong, but the Printer will not want to lose the Client and proceed with the print job, even though there are mistakes.

How Can We Prevent This?

- Recognize that the final PDF you approve is not print-ready.
- Require the Printer to compare the two files (proof to PDF).
- Have each party automatically compare them with electronic inspection systems.
- Designate and train people within the brand company to compare them.
- Have the Printer supply a “proof print” which is one step closer to the final product and more representative of the final deliverable.
- Alternatively, consider going with just a single approved print supplier and instituting a zero-fault arrangement for when something goes wrong. This would make you partners and theoretically remove the fear of having to pay for a rework from the equation.

Ultimately, with any process in place, both the Client and Printer have to verify the Printer’s proof. Thorough verification of it and the PDF is essential to preventing inconsistencies from popping up on the final printed materials. But the verification process is a choice. Switching from manual to automated software is a necessary and vital step towards the perfection for which both parties strive.
The Belief Your Copy Will Remain Intact

Generally, people are confident that what they see in a word processor will appear exactly the same when it comes out of an inkjet printer. Truth be told, if you were to print the same file on five separate printers, each version wouldn’t necessarily be the same. Let’s go even further. Does that same text need an inserted artwork file from a graphic designer? What if that original text came from a PC but is now being reworked on a Mac? When it finally prints out on a five-year-old laser printer, unwanted changes are almost guaranteed.
Potential Reasons for Changes:

- People use word processors different than Microsoft Word.
- Computers could be using different versions of the same software.
- Font libraries can differ between each computer.
- Printer drivers vary from one machine to the next.
- Printer models vary throughout the supply chain.
- People forget electronic-to-hardcopy printouts constitute a conversion.

How Can We Prevent This?

- Coordinate the versions of each application with your team and suppliers, including word processors, operating systems (OS), design programs, drivers, etc.
- Remember you may not be the owner of the text you type. Fonts may require a special license and printers have different applications as well. If you purchase fonts instead, install them on your computers and package them with files to reduce unpleasant surprises.

Hurdles like these have a strong connection to today’s mobile world. Text can travel from your system to dozens of others around the world and be processed in seconds. To keep things accurate, everyone you work with must have a license to use the same fonts. Companies can actually create their own fonts and standardize symbols like bullets, hyphens, quotation marks, and brackets... but more on that in Section 5.
Problems with the Barcode

Every product imaginable has a barcode. As consumers, we don’t care much for them. How we identify products is primarily by their branding, packaging, and pricing. However, despite our lack of interest in what makes barcodes tick, these finicky printed strips of ink help manage a global supply chain that includes distribution, logistics, inventory, point-of-sale, discounts, pricing, and returns. For instance, imagine you’re buying a carton of milk for $2.19. If the cashier scans the barcode and your bill says “Red Wine for $39.50”, it’s a hassle and not just for you. Stores now have to return the product to the distributor, but not just a single carton—possibly the entire warehouse inventory.
Potential Reasons for Mistakes:
- The numeric barcode value doesn’t match the product.
- The printed barcode isn’t of high quality and can’t scan properly.
- The Graphic Designer failed to properly set up the barcode.
- The Printer didn’t verify the barcode during the pre-press and printing processes.

How Can We Prevent This?
- Look up the barcode’s numeric string to verify that it belongs to the correct product, as a handheld scanner will only confirm the “Human Readable” value below.
- Check that the Print Supplier is connected to a Management Information Systems (MIS) database so the right barcode is used.
- Verify the barcode quality on the PDF artwork or, even better, the Printer’s proof using the proper software.
- Purchase an ISO grade barcode verifier and check not just one, but each repeat position printed on a press sheet. You might want to request an uncut press sheet to be delivered with your order, too.
- Ask the Printer if they have the latest inline barcode scanning technology so that they can scan each one to be certain they’re all of the same high quality.

It cannot be stated enough, but the barcode is a critical design element. Even the smallest error can cause catastrophic issues throughout the entire supply chain for the client and the printer as a result. To ensure quality, everyone through the supply chain must work together to check barcode correctness and efficiency. Using barcode verification software like GlobalVision is the first step in the right direction.
The Assumption the Printed Packaging is Okay

For most people, the assumption is that the printer is no different than the office photocopier. You press print to make 100 copies and out pop 100 identical copies. So that would mean if we were to print 500,000 Aspirin® labels or cookie packages, it should be just as simple, right? Back in reality, printed components must be shipped to a production plant where everything is packaged, filled, and distributed to warehouses all over the world. Sadly, this is often when clients discover costly errors.

Let’s say that once this work is “finished”, a Printer gets a call days later from an upset Client about a missing barcode. Bring out that previously mentioned Aspirin because we’re going to need it. Even if the Client settles with the Printer and doesn’t pay for the job, that still only represents around 5% of the total distributed cost. A loss of this magnitude includes the cost of the contents, the distribution, and the collection and destruction of the defective product. Oh, don’t forget the production will have to be run again.
Potential Reasons for Problems:

- Many companies depend on the Print Supplier to catch all conversion issues.
- Packages aren’t labeled properly.
- Barcodes are wrong or faulty.
- Colors are wrong.
- The printed packaging position is offset.
- Text is blurry.
- There are spelling mistakes.
- Logos are missing.
- There are smears, ink splatter, or smudges.
- A section is cut off or the packaging is folded wrong.

How Can We Prevent This?

- Know heading into the job that there may be unavoidable and unwanted changes to the color, images, dimensions, barcode, or layout due to conversions.
- Check it at every step: when copy converts into the artwork, then into the proof, then into the imposition file, then into the printed press sheet, and when it is cut into individual components. You may have to follow it around to different departments and suppliers, but the sooner you stop an error, the faster you get to the finish line. It also means less cost, liability, and delays to market.
- Most importantly, try to have your organization and suppliers standardize with the same software including:
  - Word processors
  - OS (Operating Systems)
  - Application software
  - Design software
  - Printer drivers

If automating with software like GlobalVision is not an option, manual proofreading of copy, artwork proofs, and prints has to be made a priority. But we recommend to consider automated proofreading for the highest return and degree of consistency. After all, redundancy to equals safety and a stronger brand.
The Takeaway

After combing through all this information, you may be feeling a bit worried or overwhelmed. Please don’t be. Try considering that proactive solutions are cheaper than reactive ones when fixing mistakes downstream. All of the problems of the picture we partially painted are manageable. Avoiding those errors can be a huge undertaking, but it doesn’t have to be a costly one. With the right guidance, support, and, of course, proofreading software, you can have your business running more efficiently than ever.
Prevent common printed packaging errors with quality control software from GlobalVision.

Learn why 80% of our Quality Control Experts use GlobalVision daily

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