

Separating Fact from Fiction: The Greening of Your College Catalog

By Anne Valentine, President
SmartCatalog

It's a funny thing about climate change and the economy — being environmentally sound has come at an opportune moment for those facing budget cuts. In fact, it may be that the only good news in curriculum publishing is that frugality has never been so environmentally correct. While these values support each other, going green isn't just about saving money.

Many administrators are charged with making their catalogs “greener,” but demonstrating success today means little more than just enumerating cuts in the print runs of standard catalogs. Long-term environmental success is not a precise science, but there are more meaningful measurements than just the number of books you didn't print. Let's explore a green approach to publishing — what works, what doesn't, and where the savings are.

Fact: What makes publishing 'green'?

In short, reducing or reusing natural resources. There are many resources to consider, but the two most significant are paper and petroleum. By focusing on just three areas you can make a big impact toward being green.

1. Quantity of paper
2. Choice of paper
3. Transportation of paper

Using less paper is the most common approach by catalog managers, and with good reason. It makes the most significant impact in one act. There are two ways to cut paper: cut the size of the print run, and cut the dimensions of the document itself.

Fiction: We publish our catalog online only. This is our green solution.

In the last few years, colleges have cut print runs drastically and even stopped printing catalogs altogether. The theory goes that by eliminating printed copies, the institution will reduce paper and preserve natural resources. The ubiquitous nature of online catalogs supports this notion.

In theory this is a good solution, but upon closer examination it can prove costly. First, anyone who says they don't print will, in the next breath, tell you that they don't print except for 100 or so for administrators' desk copies and for accreditation requirements. The issue here is that very small print run utilizes the same staff resources as a much larger quantity. The effort it takes a layout artist to create a print-ready document is the same whether you print 100 or 100,000. Further, it adds several weeks to the process of getting the catalog done at all. Add in the cumbersome task of manually creating indexes, and you are getting a very small return for a major staff effort.

Even when administrators don't provide or pay for them, catalogs continue to be printed on campus. Users download the catalog from the website and print parts or whole sections themselves. This is the antithesis to environmentally friendly publishing, since self-printers use heavier paper and one-sided sheets. In fact, for every page printed two sheets of paper are being used. Add to that the waste of paper when anyone prints a web page. It's an inaccurate practice at best.

In the above scenario, the financial burden shifts from the institution to the reader. The environmental benefit is break-even at best. This shouldn't be interpreted as advocating printed catalogs for all constituents who say they want them. Far from it. It's important to recognize that some requests are reasonable (legislators and accreditors), and some are excessive (every student that stops by the booth at a college fair). Providing the appropriate vehicle for the audience is the way to make the most out of budgets and natural resources.

Fact: There is a realistic strategy to print reduction.

It's important to find economies to the handful of catalogs that are being produced. Your staff is a human resource and one that's increasingly limited during times of hiring freezes.

When creating short-run print catalogs, using a service or an automated layout program can be more cost effective than performing these services on-campus. This is immediately apparent if one takes into account the total overhead of a staff member and the number of hours required to complete the job. If making that case in today's budget isn't feasible, the best thing a book designer can do is simplify catalog design for the few that you do print. That doesn't mean it can't be professional and easy to read, but design items such as side-bars, graphics, tables that run across two pages, or unnecessary footnotes add up to a lot of time and a lot of extra pages. There are many excellent web sites and books on presenting information, and of course the best solutions are found in other college's catalogs. Look at how other institutions present similar information and remember that it isn't the design that makes your school unique, it's the information itself. Bring new eyes into the picture and don't try to be clever.

The best way to approach those who print catalogs, or portions thereof, is by making targeted, smaller publications available as printer-friendly documents. After all, very few people actually need the entire catalog. In most cases, self-printers are academic advisors who need degree-specific information. Advising checklists, degree program requirements and degree maps are great tools you can provide in an environmentally friendly format on one page.

Creating targeted, smaller curriculum publications is a key benefit to managing catalog information in a central data repository. Since everything is edited in the same place, policies or degree information that is utilized in single-sheet publications will be consistent with information in the catalog.

The Case for a Leaner Catalog

Now that you have a simplified catalog, start thinking about trimming the fat. This is where publishers can conserve natural *and* financial resources. Every page counts, and many catalogs use far more pages than are required by accrediting associations — or even market demand. By addressing just a few issues, you can dramatically decrease the page count and cost.

1. Review catalog content against the requirements of the appropriate accrediting agencies. You will be surprised how much content can be cut simply by taking a cold hard look at actual requirements.
2. Review content for extraneous information and reduce and police for "information creep." This activity is best performed by a third party editor every 5 or 6 years.
3. Do not include "degree maps" in your catalog.

Degree maps are a suggested chronology of courses for each area of study, not the actual degree requirements. Many colleges have published degree maps in their catalog for so long, they believe it's a requirement. In most cases it isn't. These maps take up an enormous amount of room in an expensive book.

Degree maps are a great example of targeted publications that can be created and distributed by academic advisors or departments, but omitted from the catalog

How does a shorter catalog affect print cost? Compare the following:

Page Size: 8.5 x 11

Quantity	5,000	7,000
Page count	Cost (\$)	Cost (\$)
184	8,350	10,620
264	10,620	13,850
296	11,800	14,500
400	15,100	19,600

Page Size: 6 x 9

Quantity	5,000	7,000
Page count	Cost (\$)	Cost (\$)
184	5,585.00	6,988.00
264	7,122.00	9,044.00
296	7,831.00	9,950.00
400	9,998.00	12,808.00

**Print costs are estimates only and do not apply to any specific project. They are used here for comparative purposes only.*

As you can see in both tables, the cost difference between 296 pages and 400 pages is dramatic. If your institution is printing a catalog in excess of 300 pages, reducing every page makes a significant impact over time. This should also be taken into account when considering the combination of graduate and undergraduate information in the same book. In some cases, two publications with different page counts and print quantities may be less expensive than one large book.

Fiction: All web catalogs are created equal

With the decrease of printed books, the web catalog takes on greater significance. What is a good web catalog? Consider the following simple guideline. A web catalog should be:

- Available in HTML *and* PDF
- Searchable
- Indexed
- Similar in design to every other part of your site

Over half the schools in the United States still have only a PDF catalog on their website. It's hard to believe in the digital age, and it makes it difficult for off-campus constituents searching for official information on the institutional web site to actually find the catalog. Though the PDF is a valuable archive tool and is useful for the self-printers, it no longer meets the expectations for electronic delivery in today's competitive market. An HTML catalog is more flexible than a PDF in that it is made up of individual electronic files linked to one another by hyperlinks and a table of contents. A PDF is like a photograph of a printed book. It's time-consuming to download and a drain on user's disk space. An HTML catalog is delivered to the user more quickly, is searchable, creates links to information instead of bookmarks, and can include graphics and other items that would be too time-consuming to add to a printed book.

Schools use PDFs because they are fast to create and post on your website. It's often difficult to talk stretched web personnel into creating HTML from a catalog because it can be time-consuming, but it doesn't have to be. If your web staff doesn't have time to create an HTML catalog, an outsourced service can do this for you quickly and relatively inexpensively. To save time and money on conversion, ask your graphic designer to convert all the text back to MS Word after the book has gone through final approval, and to simplify any styling and tagging prior to giving the text file to the web converter. It's usually the case that going from your designer's desktop publishing software to a text file is the real hidden bottleneck on the road to a good HTML catalog. If you can identify this as the bottleneck on your campus, and solve it, you will have gone a long way to getting HTML catalogs online with the minimum of work for all.

Of course, using catalog management software can get your HTML catalog done even more efficiently. By recording and maintaining all information in a central database, a system like SmartCatalog can publish print and web catalogs in under an hour, with no valuable staff time taken. In addition, such a system can integrate with student information systems to publish a completely comprehensive document with no redundancy or updates.

Getting Greener

Ink, paper and petroleum are the key resources that have an environmental impact in catalog production. Ink can be soy-based, not petroleum-based, if you ask for it. Fewer books with fewer pages mean fewer palettes on a truck, which reduces load, and in turn reduces the amount of petroleum used to transport the final product.

When it comes to paper, cutting out or cutting down is the most effective area to reduce environmental impact. It's also worth asking for specific papers to further this effort. In the past years, we've all started to ask for recycled paper, but the blanket term "recycled" can cover a broad range of stocks. To be as frugal as possible with natural resources, request paper with at least 20 percent post-consumer waste.

Another important consideration is if the raw pulp from which the paper has been manufactured has been harvested in a manner that preserves the natural timber resource. Paper that has been manufactured according to the Forestry Stewardship Council guidelines (FSCUS.org) does just that. FSC certification doesn't measure the quality of the paper, it measures the methods of forestry used to obtain the raw product. If your paper manufacturer is certified, they will be able to use the FSC logo on their products.

How to Measure Success

No doubt you will be asked to trim the catalog budget or make it more environmentally friendly, if you haven't already. There is no matrix for measuring environmental success, especially in the short-term. Financial and environmental success in decreasing the environmental impact of your catalog is best measured over a range of years.

In the short term, start looking at what you minimized in creating your books:

1. Staff resources: How many hours did you save by either outsourcing, implementing catalog management software or simplifying the catalog? When measuring staff time, take into account not only the cost per hour of salary, but complete overhead including parking, health care, etc.
2. Paper: How many fewer pages were you able to print?
3. Paper: How many fewer books were you able to print because you created targeted publications from catalog content?
4. Petroleum: How much lighter was the resulting, smaller catalog? Weigh a previous year's copy against that of the new catalog.