

Gray Bars

Balance

Color

More newspapers switch from color
dots to set densities correctly

Color dots are slowly fading into the past as more newspapers use gray bars to monitor their printing process and reproduce photos with ever-sharper focus. Because the bars are a relatively new approach to controlling ink density, though, this area of press operations still can be a bit fuzzy.

Newspaper companies already using gray bars make it clear that conversion alone does not mean overnight success. But by negotiating carefully with editorial departments and advertisers, training staff to scrutinize ink density, and standardizing the press to industry guidelines, among other actions, a paper's color can win awards, advertising dollars and reader praise.

Negotiating the Change

About a decade ago, the Los Angeles Times became one of the first newspapers to switch to gray bars, which create a neutral gray color when color densities are correctly set, thereby showing

visible color shifts.

"A task force got approval from advertisers to embed gray bars by explaining benefits like more consistency from press to press and achieving the best print contrast," says Russ Christensen, the Times' operations manager.

Similar partnerships with editorial departments are often necessary because the size and placement of gray bars could cut into editorial space. The Democrat and Chronicle in Rochester, N.Y., though, has been running its bar—built into the design template—just outside the image area for three years.

"The newsroom wasn't averse

Nutshell

- ▶ Make sure advertisers and editors know how your gray bar or color dots will look and how much space is needed for them.
- ▶ Calibrate, profile, monitor and maintain your machines.
- ▶ Adhere to industry standards, such as Specifications for Newsprint Advertising Production (SNAP).

by Heidi Ernst

“Once you achieve a well-calibrated press, only then can you work your color-management system to make your ad look better.”

— SANAT HAZRA, THE NEW YORK TIMES

to putting it on the page but didn't want to lose news hole,” says Bernie Szachara, vice president of production. “It was just a matter of finding the right way.”

At the Los Angeles Times, Agustin Moran, digital pre-press tech, says the bar's color-control target was dropped to 30 percent cyan, 22 percent magenta and 22 percent yellow—low enough to be less imposing to editorial and advertisers but still hold ink densities. The dot gain has decreased in some preliminary tests, he says, so all colors will therefore print lighter or with less density. As a result, the paper might soon be able to raise the bar, so to speak, to the 40-30-30 standard in Specifications for Newsprint Advertising Production, or SNAP. (See sidebar on p. 46 for more information about SNAP guidelines.)

Follow the Standards

After deciding those basics, a newspaper must calibrate machines to industry standards.

“People used to think you compensate for poor pre-press work in the pressroom by bringing ink up and down,” says Sanat Hazra, executive director of production at The New York Times. “But once you achieve a well-calibrated press, only then can you work your color-management system to make your ad

look better. So once you standardize the press, it's fixed; ours is going to print to the SNAP density standard, with very little adjustments on press.”

Hazra adds that the Times, which switched to gray bars eight years ago, needed to fine-tune the bar's value to compensate for dot gain. “We started with a 40-30-30 gray bar, but the gray balance wasn't there,” Hazra says. “You have to print to a standard. Now we're 90 percent sure if the bar is [in the correct color target], the picture will look good, or reproductions will match the proofs.”

In addition, the Times runs total maintenance on all 11 presses in the metro New York area every summer. “When a press comes back,” Hazra says, “we validate it by running the Ifra press-acceptance test. My theory is hands-off color and registration.”

The Ifra press-acceptance test, developed by the international publishing association in Darmstadt, Germany, evaluates the print capability of a new or reconditioned press to bring it back to its original specifications.

Keeping Gray Bars Balanced

Gray bars also create a target, another plus for these papers, some of which were named to the 2006-2008 International Newspaper Color

Five Tips for Improving Color Quality

REGARDLESS OF whether your newspaper uses gray bars or color dots, you can improve color quality. Take these tips from representatives of papers recognized for excellent color reproduction.

“If you can get the ink presets to come in right, your color will come in better, and you'll get consistent quality; if not, you'll be chasing it throughout the run and making changes on the fly.”

— Kevin Burton, quality analyst, Chicago Tribune

“What I profess is the four M's: man, method, machine and material. They all play an important part in the

printing process, and you can't just overlook one. You need to make sure all four are working together, with everything in balance.

Maintain, calibrate, calibrate, calibrate, and keep everything in specification.”

— Russ Christensen, operations manager, Los Angeles Times

“Get SNAP-certified to benchmark your process, then standardize the press. When the press is fixed, it is going to print to the density standard, so no adjustments need to be made on press to match a proof.

Once you achieve a well-calibrated press, only then can you work your color-management system to make

your ad look better.”

— Sanat Hazra, executive director of production, The New York Times

“Focus on the basics. Make sure your equipment is calibrated and maintained, and use the tools that are available.”

— Eric Gustavson, imaging and quality manager, Democrat and Chronicle in Rochester, N.Y.

“There's no magic bullet. If you're looking to buy one thing and think it's all going to get better, you're dreaming.”

— Bernie Szachara, vice president of production, Democrat and Chronicle in Rochester, N.Y.

SNAP Standards Gain Acceptance

Quality Club (“Committed to Color Quality,” October 2006, p. 53).

“Gray bars will have color shifts if you don’t maintain an equal balance of your target,” Christensen says. “Our target is 55-55-58, and we want guys to shoot for something in the range of plus- or minus-three of that.”

The Los Angeles Times’ color didn’t improve instantly, he adds. With the gray bar, “you didn’t have to have high color acuity; you could shoot for numbers rather than an assumption.”

One challenge the Los Angeles Times faced when converting to gray bars was recognizing that its 11 presses, purchased around 1990, had to be capable of maintaining those targets.

“We were quick to realize that the gray bar is only as good as your ink system,” Christensen says. And as good as its halftone-dot size, he adds. “I like the 40-30-30 SNAP dot size because you’re not jeopardizing the newsprint that you’re putting it on. Make sure your film can consistently produce a dot to your specs.”

As for cost savings, Hazra says theirs are realized in such things as optimizing the process, obtaining higher ad rates and giving “very, very little refund” to advertisers. Others say they made the change to improve quality, not for monetary reasons.

At the end of the press run, the gray bar is still just a tool, these experts say. “We have pre-presses look at every color ad from outside advertisers, and with their experience, they can recognize one-color black type from four-color, for example, and be able to pre-press the files accordingly with a variety of software,” says the Times’ Moran.

“It’s really part of a process that’s driven by people,” Szachara echoes. “In the end, it comes down to what you’re asking them to do and how well trained and knowledgeable they are.” ■

ABOUT 130 newspapers in the United States will receive a certificate from NAA in 2006, acknowledging that their printing process is compliant with Specifications for Newsprint Advertising Production (SNAP) standards. If that doesn’t seem like a high number,

consider that in 2003, the first year such certification was offered, there were only 11 recipients.

SNAP industry standards are one of the most important tools a paper can use to achieve great color reproduction consistently, according to industry leaders and press operators at newspapers renowned for color quality.

“You need to benchmark to an industry standard, such as SNAP,” says Sanat Hazra, executive director of production for The New York Times. “Don’t create your own. If you follow a standard, you’ll have consistent color.”

SNAP goes well beyond ink density and dot-gain specs for papers, says Michael Brady, NAA director of production operations. “It really gives guidelines for the design process for the newspaper industry,” he says. “And it gives [external] designers the tools and specifications to deliver pagination-ready files to newspapers—everything needed for an ad to come into a newspaper and reproduce well.”

SNAP standards are widely

followed even by newspapers that might not apply for the certificate, Brady notes.

“It offers a standardized set of numbers that you can use to compare your print process with the rest of the industry,” says Dennis Cheeseman, director of customer services at US Ink and vice chairman of NAA’s SNAP Committee. “If the numbers don’t match, it’s interesting to go back and see why not.”

The July 2006 edition of “SNAP Cold-Set Printing Standards” includes a new alignment with newsprint standards of the International Organization for Standards. Cheeseman says his committee is exploring increased levels of Gray Component Replacement within the profile—essentially removing percentages of the three underlying colors (cyan, magenta and yellow) and replacing them with black, which “generally helps in terms of lower show-through, especially with lighter-weight papers.”

Download a copy of SNAP standards at [http://www.naa.org/Operations-and-Technology/Press-and-Materials/Specifications-for-Newsprint-Advertising-Production-\(SNAP\).aspx](http://www.naa.org/Operations-and-Technology/Press-and-Materials/Specifications-for-Newsprint-Advertising-Production-(SNAP).aspx).

To receive a SNAP certificate, a newspaper must complete a press test to show that its printing process complies with the program’s guidelines. See www.naa.org/operations-and-technology/standards-and-guidelines/snap-certificate.aspx for more information. **H.E.**

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