

I Blame The Printer

The last sentence in the last column in the last issue of *Sports Illustrated* reads: *I blame the printer*. The column, by Michael Rosenberg, deals with cheating in sports, and it really has nothing to do with the graphic arts. But the last sentence resonated with me, as I think it will with you, because printers often get blamed for things that are not their fault.

Or Are They?

One of my clients recently lost a customer over an all-too-familiar issue. The customer signed off on a proof that was wrong. The postcard mailer featured a photo of one of the company's delivery trucks, and the truck in the photo had the company's old logo. The new logo appeared in two other places on the same side of the postcard, but nobody noticed the discrepancy. The customer's position was that the printer should have noticed, specifically the graphic designer who had also designed the new logo, but still chose a photo that had the old logo on it.

The printer's position was that customer should have noticed. He explained the importance of the proofing stage in an e-mail: "The proofing stage is where we tell you, 'this is what we think you want us to print.' But we need you to tell us that you *know* it's what you want us to print."

The customer responded: "I depend on you to make me look good, and you have, until now. This time you made me look really bad. I won't take that risk again."

As you well know, according to the Printing Trade Customs, the printer was not at fault. He still offered to reprint the postcard at a discount, or to apply an equivalent credit to the next order. The customer basically said there wouldn't be a next order.

Mission Statement

So my client did nothing wrong, and even tried to make good on the customer's mistake. I think most printers would say that he went above and beyond the call of duty. But there's a little more to this story. I guided this particular client through the process of creating a formal, written marketing plan a few years ago, and he adopted parts of a Mission Statement I had written for another client even farther back. One sentence in that Mission Statement reads: *Our job is to see and solve all the problems, before ink or toner goes on paper or any other substrate.*

So which takes precedence, the Printing Trade Customs or the printer's Mission Statement? Almost everyone sells on some variation of the "*we got your back, Jack*" theme. You have to remember, that's a *commitment*.

Sadly, my client didn't remember, at least initially. Yes, he did offer a discount or a credit, but he admitted that he did that just hoping to salvage the account. He still thinks the customer treated him unfairly. And he's partially right, but I hope you see that he's at least equally wrong.

Heroes and Villains

Mike Rosenberg implied in his column that some of our sports heroes are actually villains. I want my column to be more about rising to each hero opportunity. Mistakes are going to happen, we know that, but let's not forget that every mistake comes with an opportunity to learn from it.

That's where my client eventually found himself. He still maintains that the problem was more the customer's fault than his company's, but he wants to minimize the likelihood of any similar problem ever happening again. He has initiated a procedure he calls "the incongruity patrol" and it even has a theme song — from Sesame Street: "One of these things is not like the others. One of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell me which thing is not like the others before I finish my song?"

"I think we catch more mistakes," he told me. "I can't prove it, but I am sure that we're more focused on living up to the Mission Statement."