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Exploring Print Production Opportunities

An interview with Lauren Elliot, a print production consultant

Editor's note:

The career path for print buyers and production professionals is very limited in many organizations. How do you keep moving up? What positions are available for print buyers to move into once they become more experienced? Is the role of a print buyer or production professional only a full-time position working for one company?

PBO will be exploring non-traditional print production roles and opportunities. Our first article, below, features Lauren Elliot, Principal of Wicked Good Print Production, located in San Francisco, CA. Lauren is an independent print production consultant and print buyer. In the article below, she discusses her unique and exciting business.

Lauren can be reached at lauren@wgpp.com or by phone at 415-586-4475.

Suzanne

Suzanne Morgan: What services does your company provide?

Lauren Elliot: It's difficult to concisely describe what I do, because it can be so diverse! But basically, I provide outsourced print production services for corporations and agencies. I do everything from creating the specifications, cutting the purchase order, routing and managing the proofs, to conducting the press check for a print job.

I work primarily out of my office, but will spend time at my clients' sites to conduct business as needed.

Organizations benefit from my services in that they minimize the overhead and staffing of full-time production managers. By outsourcing some or all of their print production projects, they pay only for the time it takes to produce the print jobs. This is helpful for companies that don't require full-time staff, year-round for print production. It also helps companies that have full-time print buyers, but have periods of time that are busier than others. If their buyers or designers are swamped, they will bring me on to help during those peak periods.

A greater benefit is my 17 years of expertise in the industry. I've worked for advertising agencies, have been a vice president of production, and a sales representative for a major direct mail production facility. I have extensive direct mail experience - both with production and marketing, so I know how to bring all those pieces together. I am also well versed in developing outdoor campaign programs, which is rather unique.

SM: What types of organizations to you work for?

LE: I do a lot of work for advertising agencies, which makes sense, because their work can be more cyclical. Their print production needs vary based on the specific promotional programs they have developed for their clients. I also work with corporations. There is no typical size of the organization that might hire me. It just depends on each company's specific needs and work load.

SM: Is it your job to find the appropriate printer for your clients or do you work with their printers?

LE: Both. I do encourage my clients to obtain competitive bids on all print projects - which I can do for them if they would like. Sometimes they ask me to find the appropriate printers, and sometimes I work with their preferred set of printers. It just depends on the client's preference and the type of print project. I'm more than happy to work with printers with which they have existing relationships.

SM: So, would you consider yourself a freelance print buyer?

LE: No, not exactly. There is a bit of difference between being a print production consultant and a freelance print buyer. A freelance production person usually works at the client's site and over a certain period of time, to help out when someone is out on

maternity leave or on vacation, for instance.

In addition, a freelance buyer specifically works on a set of projects and mans a desk. Having set up processes and procedures for many agencies, I work within existing systems, with the mindset of improving them, especially for corporations. I usually leave behind an improved process and a few document templates to facilitate a Request For Proposal or an approval process.

SM: Do you broker the printing?

LE: No, I am not a print broker. A broker is an individual that makes his/her income from marking up print projects. It's a fee that is tacked onto the cost of the print job in exchange for their expertise and execution of the print production. I have nothing against brokers; there is definitely a place for them. In fact, I know print brokers who are saving their clients tons of money, although they mark up the printing, by negotiating with the printers, creating more efficient print specifications, etc.

I perform similar services, but I earn my income from a flat fee or hourly rate. My clients pay the printer directly.

SM: What services do you offer that perhaps a client might be initially surprised to learn about?

LE: I think my clients are pleased that I offer services to help train their staff on print production, if necessary. I'm looking out for the long-term interest of my clients. I'm very process oriented, so I keep an eye to how things can be improved and more efficient in the future. A few items I leave behind: Request For Proposals, ballpark templates, approval processes, reconciliation reports, and project estimate forms. You wouldn't think that would be in my best interest because the client might not feel the need to hire me again. But actually, the opposite is true. The more they understand my function and role within the creative and production process, the more they see the value of someone with my experience to assist them in creating efficiencies within their marketing efforts. In many cases, the money saved by using my services pays for my fees.

SM: What advice would you give to print buyers, production professionals, and designers that have full-time positions but want to improve their skills and value?

LE: I would tell them to make sure that they devote the time to become more educated. They should make the time to read industry publications, research new technologies, and talk to their printers and peers. This is critical because our industry changes so quickly. Finding new solutions for their organizations is job security.

Personally, I read trade magazines such as *Direct*, *Print Media*, and *Electronic Publishing*. I attend every local trade show and peruse the exhibits. This is a great place to identify trends! I am also involved with several local production groups, such as the Advertising Print Production Association, which is great for formal presentations on new technologies and local trends. I'm also active in Print '01, which we refer to as a "salon" where ideas can be exchanged in a casual atmosphere.

SM: If a print buyer wanted to start a business similar to yours, what advice would you give him/her?

LE: I'd say to wait until the market becomes stronger! If you have a full-time position, stay with it for now. It's a tough market out there. There are not a lot of job openings for full-time production positions and many organizations may not be accustomed to hiring someone like myself. Although an independent print production consultant provides even more value when companies are trying to save money, it takes time to become known by those companies that could benefit from those services.

SM: Thanks for your insights, Lauren!

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