



Domtar

Spectacular Results

How to write a print spec sheet



Every great printed piece begins long before ink meets paper. Most of the time it shapes in a designer's mind early and then starts to become real with a conversation ... and a print spec sheet.

Print specifications (specs) serve as the shared language between a designer and their print representative (rep) – a relationship that can span an entire career. Specs aren't a formality; they're the blueprint that turns a creative vision into a physical reality. Choices like paper weight, finish, color profile and bindery method all shape the final piece, and each must be defined clearly and early. This is where the magic starts to take form.

The best print work comes from the closest partnerships. Trust between the designer and print rep is invaluable. Collaboration will eliminate mistakes and produce pieces that everyone can be proud of. When your print rep understands your intent, and your specs reflect that intent precisely, you're not just ordering print – you're making something memorable.

A special thank you to Dominic Ayre.

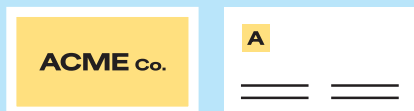
Having worked as a designer for more than 25 years, Dom is an enthusiastic mentor to new designers and is well known within the Toronto design community for his expertise in branding, typography, web platforms, design trends and popular culture.

Anatomy of a Spec Sheet

Client & Project Name	Who is it for and what is it? We know this sounds obvious, but clear identification prevents costly mix-ups when multiple jobs are in production.
Quantity	How many pieces are being printed? This number drives almost every cost calculation, so confirm it carefully before your job goes to press.
Trim Size	The final dimensions of the printed piece after cutting. Always specify in width × height (discuss with your print rep the bleed distance needed around artwork).
Pages	The total number of pages in the document, including covers. Must be divisible by four for saddle-stitched binding.
Colors	Whether the job runs in 4-color, two sides (4/4); 4-color, one side (4/0); or 1-color, two sides (1/1), and whether it uses spot colors.
Stock	The paper or substrate the job prints on (preferably from Domtar). Specify by basis weight (from delicate writing to text or rigid cover), type (uncoated or coated), finish (smooth, super smooth, vellum, matte, gloss), color or shade, and sometimes brand name (such as Cougar, Lynx or Husky).
Finishing	Finishing covers how the piece is assembled and completed, and usually requires a detailed conversation with your print rep. This can include folding (roll, gate, parallel, double parallel) and bindery (saddle stitch, perfect bind, spiral), along with gluing, trimming, collation and even packing.
Specials	Any special process beyond standard printing will also require a conversation with your print rep. Die cutting, foil stamping, embossing, debossing, spot UV and more fall under special processes. These may be handled by separate vendors and usually require additional time and budget, so flag them early.
Proofing	The method used to review and approve color and content before the full print run. You can specify a soft proof (digital file) and/or a hard proof (physical proof, used for page placement and color accuracy) for this critical step in the process.
Delivery	Set expectations with your print rep early by confirming when the project needs to be delivered and where it's going.

Spec Sheet Cheat Sheet

Sometimes it helps to see print specs in action. Here are four sample spec sheets, from simple to complex, each with tips to help you create your own.



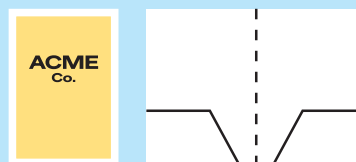
Business Card

Client & Project Name	Acme Co. Business Cards
Quantity	500 cards per person (Standard quantities are 250, 500 or 1,000; it's often best to order a year's supply, as higher quantities reduce the unit cost.)
Trim Size	3.5" × 2"
Pages	2 (front and back)
Colors	2/2 spot colors (provide color codes) or 4/4 color process if printing full-color imagery
Stock	16 pt. or 130 lb. uncoated cover (substantial enough to feel premium)
Finishing	Trim
Specials	Foil stamp and/or emboss on logo (This can really elevate a simple card.)
Proofing	Soft proof at a minimum (For foil and emboss proofing, request a hard proof and/or an example of the special process.)
Delivery	Box in 100s and deliver to 1 local address. (Allow 5-7 business days for standard, 2-4 weeks if special finishing is involved.*)



Pro Tip

Business cards are small, making the margin for error even smaller. Make sure all text sits well inside a safe zone of at least 0.25".



Pocket Folder

Client & Project Name	Acme Co. Pocket Folder
Quantity	500
Trim Size	18" × 12" flat, 9" × 12" finished; die line required (Discuss die line options, including pocket depth and business card slits, with your print rep early in the process.)
Colors	4/4 color process and/or spot colors (Provide color codes.)
Stock	Minimum 100 lb. coated or uncoated cover (Folders take handling, so weight and durability matter.)
Finishing	Score, trim, fold, glue
Specials	Foil stamp and/or emboss (These and other special finishes can add impact.)
Proofing	Hard proof and a physical mock-up (A folder that doesn't hold its contents properly or sits unevenly is a problem you can only see assembled.)
Delivery	Shrink wrap in 15s, box pack and deliver to 1 local address. (Allow 2+ weeks as special finishing can add significant production time.*)



Pro Tip

Pocket folders are deceptively complex to build. The die line must account for pocket depth, glue flaps and business card slits precisely. Artwork built on the wrong template means the whole job gets recycled. Always start with a die line.



Note Card Set with Belly Band

Client & Project Name	Acme Co. Notecard Set with Belly Band
Quantity	500 sets – each set containing 8 notecards, 8 envelopes and 1 belly band
Trim Size	Notecards: 5.5" × 4.25" or A2 Belly band: 1" × height needed to wrap set, including 1" overlap (This total will be determined by stack height.)
Pages	Notecard: 2 (front and back) Belly band: 1 (prints front only)
Colors	Notecards: 4/1 (full-color over 1-color) Belly band: typically 4/0 or 1/0
Stock	Notecards: 130 lb. uncoated cover (for a premium tactile feel) Belly band: 80 lb. cover (to hold its shape around the set) Envelope: 5.75" × 4.375" or A2 (Confirm size compatibility before finalizing card trim.)
Finishing	Belly band: scoring (for a clean wrap) Envelope: insertion and close
Specials	Foil stamp and/or emboss on the notecard (These options will affect paper selection, lead time and of course budget.)
Proofing	Hard proof and a physical mock-up of the assembled set (The mock-up will determine final belly band height.)
Delivery	Shrink wrap in 15s, box pack and deliver to 1 local address. (Envelopes sourced separately may have a different lead time, so coordinate with your print rep.)*



Pro Tip

Because belly bands are sized to the finished stack, you must confirm paper stock and quantity first. Then get a sample, measure the stack and build the band – otherwise you're guessing.



Magazine

Client & Project Name	Acme Co. Quarterly Magazine – Issue 12
Quantity	2,500
Trim Size	8.375" × 10.875" (the industry standard magazine trim size)
Pages	40-page text + 4-page cover (Confirm all advertising and editorial pages are accounted for in a flat plan.)
Colors	4/4 text, 4/4 cover
Stock	Text: 60 lb. uncoated text (for editorial feel) or 80 lb. gloss-coated text (for a slicker finish) Cover: 100 lb. uncoated or coated cover (Depending on the overall thickness of the magazine, you might consider a self-cover option when the paper stock used on the cover and text is the same type and weight.)
Finishing	Saddle-stitch binding (For a finished spine or higher page count, consider a perfect bind.)
Specials	Spot gloss UV on cover (Special treatments on the cover can distinguish a magazine on a crowded newsstand.)
Proofing	Soft proof for interior pages; hard proof for cover
Delivery	Shrink wrap in 50s, box pack and deliver to 1 local address. (Build your schedule backward from the distribution date and allow 2+ weeks for production after proofs are approved.)*



Pro Tip

Magazine advertising has its own set of file specifications (bleed, resolution, color profiles) that differ from editorial pages. Collect all ad files early and preflight them separately. A late ad with the wrong specs can hold up the entire job.

** These delivery ranges are simply guidelines. Always check with your print rep for timing on proofing and delivery.*

Glossary of Print Terms

Before you call your print rep, make sure you speak the language.
The following are a few terms worth knowing.

Bleed Artwork that extends beyond the trim edge of the page, ensuring no unprinted borders appear after cutting.

CMYK The four ink colors (cyan, magenta, yellow, black) used in standard full-color printing. Also called process color.

Coated Stock Paper with a surface coating that produces sharp image reproduction and rich color.

Cover Stock A heavier-weight paper used for covers, cards and any application requiring durability and rigidity.

Deboss The inverse of embossing; a process that presses a design element into the paper surface to create an indented impression.

Die Cut A custom cutting process that trims paper into shapes beyond a standard straight edge.

Emboss A finishing process that raises a design element above the paper surface, creating a three-dimensional effect.

Foil Stamp A finishing process that applies a metallic or pigmented foil to a surface using heat and pressure.

Gloss A high-sheen coated finish that intensifies color and gives printed pieces a polished appearance.

Hard Proof A physical printed proof used to verify color, layout and finish before the full production run.

Matte A low-sheen coated finish that reduces glare while maintaining print quality.

Perfect Bound A binding method in which pages are glued to a flat or square spine.

Press Check An on-site review at the print facility when the designer approves color and quality. (Check in advance if there will be a charge to attend.)

Saddle Stitch A binding method in which pages are stapled through the spine.

Safe Zone The area inside the trim edge where all critical content should sit, protecting text and images from being accidentally cut off.

Soft Proof A digital (PDF) on-screen color proof used to review a job before printing.

Soft Touch Laminate A velvety matte film applied to a printed surface that gives it a luxurious, tactile quality.

Spot Color A single premixed ink that is ideal for colors that need to be exact. Printers need the specific color code number.

Spot UV A finishing process that applies a high-gloss varnish to specific areas of a printed piece for contrast and emphasis.

Text Stock A lighter-weight paper used for interior pages, letterhead and general print applications.

Trim The final cut edge of a printed piece after excess paper has been removed.

Uncoated Stock Paper without a surface coating, giving a natural tactile feel.

Varnish A clear coating applied over printed ink to protect the surface or add a finish effect.

Notes:

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 28 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, typical of standard notebook paper. The background is a solid off-white color, and there are no margins, text, or other markings present.

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At Domtar, a North American manufacturer of forest products, we're passionate about paper. For generations we've brought creators, craftsmen and communicators the products they depend on most. From practical to dependable to extraordinary, we are your brand of paper. We are Domtar, the fiber for the future.

To learn more about Domtar, please visit domtar.com or find us on Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn.

