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LETTERPRESS PRINTING TIPS

Letterpress was the first printing process invented and the standard for hundreds of years. Letterpress is now a specialty process and is specified for its craft look or as a dimensional option much like embossing or engraving. Letterpress printing on a fine uncoated paper denotes history and art, quality and integrity.

Letterpress printing is a relief process whereby a raised image is inked and then pressed into the paper, essentially making an indentation. Type, black and white line art, and solids work best for letterpress printing. Halftones can be printed with coarse screens and care; variable amounts of pressure are needed throughout the image area to make sure the highlight, mid-tone, and shadow dots are printing correctly without accompanying type filling in or disappearing.

The platen press is most commonly used today; flatbed and rotary presses can also be found. Letterpresses operate very slowly, printing either one or two colors, with lots of adjustments made throughout the run. There are a variety of press and plate sizes, ranging from 10 x 15 inches to 42 x 56 inches. Check with your printer before committing to an image and page size.

Letterpress printing requires either a photoengraved plate or handset foundry type. Plates are made from polymer, hard rubber, copper, zinc or magnesium. Using plates gives the designer complete control and

limitless typography options. Using metal foundry type, as done since the 14th century, is possible if your printer has a full set of characters, or can set type on a Linotype machine. The individual characters are set by hand into words and sentences and locked into place.

Because letterpress printing transfers more ink to the paper than offset, colors will appear more saturated and opaque. Oil-based and offset inks are used for letterpress printing; any match color can be specified; and the process is laser compatible. Like offset printing, metallic inks will not print shiny on uncoated papers.

Uncoated text and cover papers are well suited for letterpress. Heavier basis weights with a soft surface will carry a deeper impression. Look for papers with a wove, vellum or eggshell finish. Smoother papers can be used, and even preferred if you do not want to see much of the impression of the back of the sheet. Your letterpress printer will likely recommend strong papers that they know will handle the weight and pressure of the press.

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