

The Case for Professional Service

I write from the perspective of a service company that runs across many customers who look to service their own equipment. We do not discourage people from doing so. In fact, we generally need customers to help with the diagnostics to prevent having to send out a technician more than once. In too many cases, the issues are maintenance-related, but that is a topic for another article.

Proper maintenance will ensure that your device can continue to perform optimally. However, every machine will eventually have bigger problems, and sometimes it is necessary to “call in the cavalry,” so to speak; i.e., a professional service technician.

Professional Service *Is* Necessary

There are many complex mechanical and electrical systems on printing units, and it is not unusual for manufacturers to change things as they experience units that need improvements. Though such improvements may be integrated into new production, you may only find out the hard way via failure that such an inherent problem exists on your current machine, and maybe only after your unit is out of warranty. To prevent that, it's important to make yourself aware of these service

bulletins not typically sent to end users. For instance, if there were a recall notice on your car, would you not want to know about it and have the appropriate service performed?

Here is a partial list of things that technicians have come across over the years when they are commissioned to do a job:

- Updated/new part numbers for both electrical parts and mechanical sub-assemblies
- The latest firmware for your printer if necessary, and whether or not it is compatible with what you are doing onsite such as using a bulk ink system or a non-OEM printhead
- Field updates as mentioned above
- The little secrets that only an experienced technician knows that are not in the manual, but are necessary to do the job right

Here are a couple of stories to illustrate the points I am trying to make:

A very popular printer's capping station had a design flaw where the screen inside the cap could lift and scratch the printheads. A client said he had replaced his capping station and a couple of printheads, and within a week or two they were scratched. It turned out that his

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Bob Flipse, President, Grafex Network



A professional service company will stand behind their work and the parts they sell.

Though there may be a cost to utilizing professional services, ask yourself, "What is the cost of having things done right?"

dealer had sent him the old style capping station but had marked the box with the new number. No big deal? Wrong! The old style lacked the flanges the manufacturer had begun to place in the capping station, starting with the newer version of the part. Any experienced technician would not have installed the old style — which the customer had installed himself. A new capping station, two printheads and several thousand dollars later, all was fixed.

A customer with another popular printer had some printing problems and tried to replace the printhead himself. It turned out the problem had not been the printhead, but rather that the trailing cable inside the printer was rubbing on the inside of the cover each time the printer passed back and forth (numbering in countless thousands, of course). Apparently, the customer was not aware of the manufacturer's field update to correct the issue, and in the process of the attempted self-repair he fried the printhead, main board, head board and some cables. The \$100 cable and the field update would have been all that was needed, perhaps \$600 with labor and travel. Days later and after \$5,000, all was fixed.

There are happier versions of this story. More recently, a customer called with an issue that seemed related to the trailing cable on the same model of printer. Sure enough, his printer fell into the field update range by serial number. Replacing the \$100 trailing cable and performing the field update took care of his problem.

Know When to Call for Help

Our war chest is absolutely filled with sad stories from people who have either ignored such notices or attempted repairs themselves. Finding a box of screws on the floor and the printer in pieces after arriving to the job is a technician's worst nightmare. A few more anecdotes follow to drive my point home.

We received a call on a 5-year-old printer that has **never** been serviced. At a minimum it needs preventative maintenance service and probably a couple of printheads. The estimate was finally approved **two months** later! In that time, he was probably printing at crawl speed in order to mask the missing nozzles, wasting media and ink on reprints due to poor quality and nozzle dropout, likely paying overtime to redo the work over and over again, plus probably fending off angry customers due to the poor quality and not having the work done on time.

Customers might say, "Your travel costs are too high for the tech to come out," or, "Let me know when your tech is on location closer to my shop so I can cut down the cost of travel by an hour or two." If you make excuses so you can put off service, you will continue to be inefficient, plus waste money on labor, ink and media, and dealing with angry customers when the work isn't done — ultimately spending more down the line than the upfront travel cost of your technician.

Remember to Maintain

I do want to make it clear that there are things you can do to take care of your end, mostly having to do with regular and studious maintenance. Let's talk about what you can do:

1. The diligent and studious maintenance mentioned above. Ask your dealer for his or her recommendations. If they are fuzzy on things or say no maintenance is needed (never true), then go to the manufacturer or their website, or call a qualified service company.
2. Make sure your printer is registered with the factory for warranty purposes. If it is, you have at least a chance of receiving any of the service bulletins as they are published. Dealers are often busy and may not keep good records of serial numbers in order to pass that information on to you, so unfortunately you may need to stay on things yourself. Printers are not like cars where there is stringent regulation for recalls and notices that often have legal implications attached to them.
3. If your printer is under warranty, make sure you fully understand the requirements and restrictions of the warranty, such as use of OEM inks, etc.
4. If you are buying a fairly new (but used) printer, or selling or moving your unit to another location, find out if there are any warranty restrictions or requirements for doing so to maintain warranty coverage. For example, one customer merged his company with another sign shop and moved the printer 700 miles to the new location. It was only a year old and carried a two-year warranty. He was able to get the unit going on his own, but a month later one of the printheads clogged and needed

replacement. Of course, the factory needed to know where the printer is in order to perform necessary service. After finding out it had been moved, it was immediately stated that, "An authorized dealer or service company must be involved prior to such a move or the warranty is voided." This one had a happier ending, if only by accident — the printer had been decommissioned by an authorized dealer and shipped in a factory-approved shipping container, so it was covered.

Be Prepared

To briefly summarize things, do what you can do and leave the rest to professionals. For the most part, that means taking good care of your printer through maintenance, and replace only the user-replaceable, less-sensitive parts. Make sure your printer is properly registered with the manufacturer for warranty purposes to receive any notices or service bulletins that are published. Additionally, be thoroughly familiar with the warranty requirements when either buying a newer but pre-owned piece of equipment, moving it to a different location, or using alternative inks in the printer.

Most of all, consider the true costs of doing business. It is more than simply \$X per square foot for media and \$Y per square foot for ink. Efficient waste reduction accounts for not only these factors, but also your general overhead (rent, utilities, insurance, direct labor,

etc.), plus the time you take to deal with issues and inefficiencies as they arise. All printers will require maintenance at some point, even if your care is stellar. Keep a cookie jar and throw your spare change or a few bucks in there each day. The call is coming, and it is a matter of when, not if.

As the late, great Steve Jobs said, "And just one more thing." Much of what I have written is about knowing your system and equipment, the subtleties of warranty details and maintenance, and what you should do and what you should leave to professionals. In a word, it is knowledge. The "one more thing" is professional training. Having a professional service your machine can be invaluable, because there are so many parts to the process — printer, RIP software, the ink, media, color management, application and more. Though there may be a cost to utilizing professional services, ask yourself, "What is the cost of *not* having things done right?"

A 25+ year industry veteran, Bob Flipse was an early innovator in wide format digital printing. Starting in aqueous, his knowledge now covers solvent, UV, and other ink technologies. Bob is currently a partner in GrafX Network, a nationwide service company for wide format printing equipment. Their services include maintenance, repair, training, color management, and moving and logistics. Much of their work is performed for dealers and manufacturers, some of outsource to them for overflow work while others use them as primary service providers.

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