Moving in and out of modules in a management information system is generally far from straightforward, but it is with Imprint's Expert By Rod Hayes

Why buy... Imprint Expert

I may be gnawing at the hand that feeds me, but can I ask why most printers are so thick that they don't realise there is a significant cost involved in buying print?

And those that do know this far from startling fact do little to benchmark the costs of buying print from them. Few work out whether the customer service package on offer is actually competitive with the best available.

Now I am getting my hobbyhorse up to some sort of speed, could I be indulged to continue for just a few minutes more? It is a separate but linked issue and it is this: management information systems in general do not make it easy for a quotation to be evaluated across a range of scenarios. (A loose euphemism for working out what it would cost a competitor to produce.)

'What if' scenarios

Note the way I am using the word easy. All things are achievable if you are prepared to duck and dive, nip and tuck in and out of the modules that allow evaluation, comparisons and modelling scenarios to be done. By modelling, I mean introducing a 'what if' scenario. You know the sort of thing; what if lighter stock were used, or the job was slightly smaller and so forth.

So there you have it: three points to ponder. One: buying print costs money. Two: printers don't make any great efforts to make it easy for clients to buy from them; and three: moving in and out of modules in a MIS is far from straightforward.

There is no need for this to be so. Number crunching power has expanded enormously in the last couple of years and this has enabled Imprint to create a MIS that really works and thinks on two fronts. It is structured to deal with quotations in a way in which a printer or estimator would be comfortable, but also it has the knack of seeing the job in a way that a print buyer would understand.

Imprint Expert can make available in the calculating engine a range of cost structures based on various press and production formats

Printers forget that print buyers rarely have a good knowledge of the printing process and what's more, they don't care. Their skill lies in buying the print at the best price. Print just happens to be a cog in a business process whose cost has to be relentlessly driven down. Only rarely is a perspective put on the pricing structure to see if doing the job in the way planned represents the best value for money.

So at this point let us welcome Imprint Business Systems' latest MIS offering – Expert.

Standalone product

I may be biased, but I really love it. Expert is initially an estimating system for there has to be a starting point, but there are almost three decades of experience powering it. Imprint plans to sell it primarily as a standalone product, although it can be tailored to a more specific need by the addition, dare I say it, of modules. These 'modules' don't come across as such, they seem more like an expansion of the functionality of the core product.

The print calculating engine is powerful but not exceptional, though it quickly becomes apparent that there is plenty of functionality for your money. Expert works out the most cost-effective way of producing the job, not only with the equipment you have to hand, but also overall.

Cost structures

Imprint can make available in the calculating engine a range of cost structures based on various press and production formats. It is here that the printing ethos built into Imprint's history comes to the fore. Links can be established directly into production management systems based on the reasoning that there is little point in calculating the most effective price for a job if at the time it is to be produced those particular machines are running to capacity. Expert can flag this up and suggest rescheduling options.

At this point the customer interface steps in, which is another reason why I like it. The quotation letter format is embedded into the system and this will present all the permutations and elements of the order in an exceptionally clear way. The method of delivery and the responses generated can be customised.

However, a bit of lateral thinking is in order at this point. Perhaps Expert's most outstanding feature is its powerful pagination tool. Imprint has not just embedded a template driven layout program, it has also incorporated a full blown program that will respond to any form of specification change in a structured way. As an example, when changing from saddlestitched to perfect bound, gutters and margins will be changed along with the pagination and the different trims allowed, and so on.

Seamless modelling

The benefits this bestows on Expert are crucial to my stance on making print easier to buy. When the quotation goes back to the client, the pagination program allows modelling to be carried out seamlessly.

In other words, Expert presents an active opportunity to consider options that the client might not previously have considered. But it also gives the printer an opportunity to put a value added element into the buying process.

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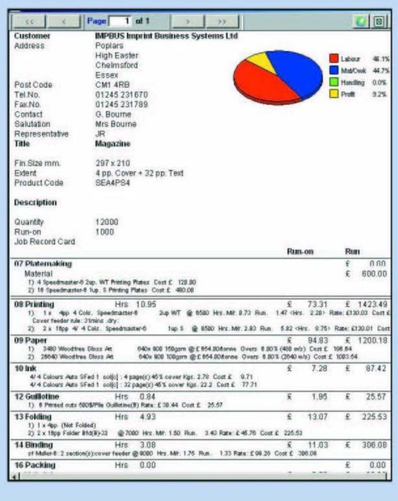
Expert witness

Expert is a MIS that has been evolving for nearly 27 years. Imprint Business Systems, Poplars, High Easter, Chelmsford, Essex CM14RB, telephone 01245 231 670 was founded by printers and all programmers must pass a series of technical courses concerned with printing, as distinct from programming, at the London College of Communications, the old London College of Printing.



Summary

- Expert from Imprint widens MIS into production environment
- Designed as a standalone package, no need to open and close modules
- Incorporates the potential for a dialogue on best print options