VARIABLE DATA PRINTING FOR BEGINNERS

Whether you want to personalize names and addresses for a mail campaign or prices and photos in flyers and brochures, variable data printing makes it possible. But how exactly does it work? Variable data printing (VDP) enables mail campaign, brochures and other media to be personalized during the digital printing process. The layout, together with elements such as the company logo, illustrations and text blocks, typically remain the same in all copies and form the master document. This is combined with variable data that changes from copy to copy. Variable content such as names, customer addresses, figures, images and background colors are normally prepared and sorted in a database or Excel spreadsheet. ◗

TIPS &
TRICKS

Title I First Name I Last Name I Address I City/State/Zip ...

Title I First Name I Last Name I Address I City/State/Zip ...

Title I First Name I Last Name I Address I City/State/Zip ...

Title I First Name I Last Name I Address I City/State/Zip ...

Title I First Name I Last Name I Address I City/State/Zip ...

Title
First Name/Last Name
Address
City/State/Zip

LINKING PLACEHOLDERS TO VARIABLE DATA

All the necessary placeholders are first defined in the static master document. These then need to be linked to the appropriate variable data. If this data is contained in an Excel spreadsheet, for example, the contents of individual columns or rows can be linked for the replacement process. Descriptive labels such as <first name> or <surname> are then normally used for the columns.
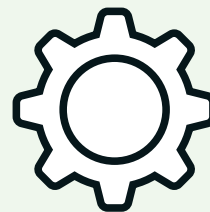
MS WORD
INDESIGN
VDP

WHICH SOFTWARE PROGRAMS CAN BE USED?

The mail merge function of MS Word, Adobe InDesign with appropriate plug-ins and special VDP programs can be used to link the master document to variable data. The main differences lie in the range of functions. InDesign, for example, only supports text variables, but plug-ins are available for images. VDP software offers the widest range of functions. It enables additional elements to be defined, such as colors and fonts to be replaced, and processing rules such as automatic insertion of line breaks after a pre-specified number of characters.

RiP

76 %

RIPPING BOTTLENECK – FORMAT DETERMINES PROCESSING TIME

Intelligent use of optimized output formats significantly shortens this RIPping time. The static data that always remains the same is only RIPped once and only the variable content is replaced. How efficient this process is and the RIPping functions that are supported depend on the output format of the master document. Manufacturer-neutral formats such as PPML or PDF/VT are recommended. The latter is the current VDP standard (ISO 16612-2:2010) and offers benefits such as fast screening, transparencies, layers and ICC-based color management.
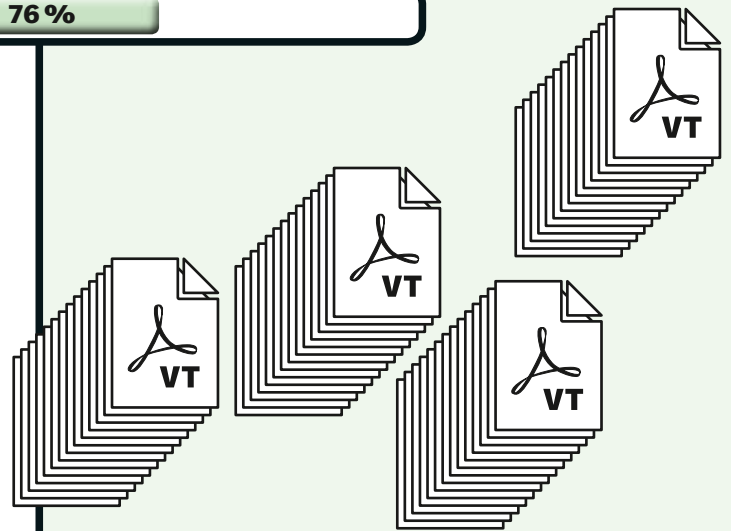
PDF/VT – COMPACT FILES AND HIGH PRINT THROUGHPUT

Many VDP programs can export files in PDF/VT format, which enables separate processing of the static and variable content. Recurring elements in the master document are converted and saved once only. To personalize the eight-page flyer in the example cited below, the RIPping software thus only replaces the variable data for each data set and combines it with the static content. This saves time and money, because far less data needs to be processed and a less powerful RIPping system can be used. PDF/VT only processes eight static pages and, separately from this, the variable data – rather than 8,000 full pages!
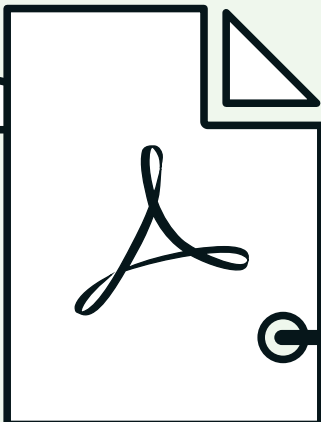
LARGE FILES SLOW DOWN PROCESSING IN PDF FORMAT

InDesign can only output data in PDF format and therefore always saves the entire page description in a file. In the VDP process, this means a copy of the complete master document is generated for each personalized version – even if the only changes are the name and address on the first page. This results in huge job files that require a great deal of time and powerful systems for RIPping and impositioning. An eight-page flyer with 1,000 data sets, for example, produces an 8,000-page PDF, with a correspondingly long RIPping process.