NEWS&TECH

May 2010

www.newsandtech.com

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SNAP, ISO and divining the difference

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So what's the difference between SNAP and ISO?

That's a question that came to the attention of the SNAP Committee after one newspaper commented that it was planning to "move beyond" SNAP and instead use ISO to measure its production quality.

While that may be a laudable endeavor, the apparent misunderstanding that exists regarding SNAP specifications and ISO standards suggests a need for clarification.

SNAP specs, ISO standards

In a nutshell, Specifications for Newsprint Advertising Production (SNAP) is the specification that coldset commercial printers and newspapers use to assure reproduction quality. As a specification, the SNAP document has been created using a consensus process based on real-world testing and practical requirements shared by newspapers and coldset commercial printers.

To assure the broadest range of perspectives, the SNAP Committee includes representatives from coldset commercial printers, newspapers and suppliers to this industry segment. The group's mission is to research, compile, publish and explain technical and process information that will advance coldset printing quality, consistency, and efficiency.

By contrast, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is an international standards-making body. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is ISO's American partner. To that end, ANSI oversees standard committees that develop American standards. These committees initiate standards development efforts based on industry requests, and use a balloting process to achieve consensus or agreement on the contents of these documents that is carefully documented.

SNAP supports ANSI

In many cases, these ANSI Committees draw on the research and knowledge that is compiled in specifications such as SNAP. In turn, these ANSI standards are often drawn upon in the development of ISO standards that use balloting processes such as those ANSI uses in order to create international standards on a specific topic.

The good news: SNAP supports work by ANSI and ISO committees devoted to formulating and publishing ISO standards for coldset printing. Working in coordination with the ANSI Committee on Graphic Arts Standards (CGATS), which is the umbrella facilitating group for ANSI standards making committees working on graphic arts topics, SNAP representatives share objective data plus editorial commentary on draft ANSI CGATS as well as related ISO standards so that these documents align with SNAP contents. A result: SNAP specifications and the allied ANSI and ISO standards are "harmonized:" They agree with one another.

This means that a newspaper or coldset commercial printer adhering to ISO standard 12647-3, the standard governing coldset printing, will by default be adhering to SNAP.

The even better news: In addition to harmonizing with ISO standards, SNAP contains a wealth of useful information and references that can be shared with the newspaper or commercial coldset printer team, including:

- Design for coldset printing (including guidelines on type, rules, and photography).
- Gray balance in prepress and the press-room.
- Scanning.
- Digital file preparation and management (including information on PDF/X, which conforms with the ISO standard).
- Proofing.
- Platemaking.
- Materials, including paper and ink.
- Viewing conditions (which conforms with the ISO standard).

SNAP and ISO 9000

What about ISO 9000? Perhaps the newspaper was considering implementing ISO 9000 at its production facility. ISO 9000 is an acronym for the 9000 standard series developed under the auspices of the ISO. The standard defines how a process should be documented in order to assure that everyone with a role in that process knows everything he needs to know to perform their specific role, which actions should be taken and where to find materials documenting the correct workflow.

Included in this standard is management overview of the process to make sure instructions are being followed and that any deviations from these defined work instructions are documented and addressed.

Implementation of ISO 9000 is also supported by SNAP. SNAP specifies coldset aim points and tolerances, along with proven best practices, compiled from across the coldset platform. An ISO 9000 implementation would necessarily draw on SNAP aim points and tolerances, and could benefit from adopting or adapting in full or part SNAP best practices that are also included in the specification. In fact, it would be possible for a newspaper or coldset printer implementing ISO 9000 to cite SNAP in its ISO 9000 materials.

Other improvement areas

Newspapers, coldset commercial printers, clients, vendors and other stakeholders sometimes ask for background information about how SNAP relates to other targeted process improvement efforts such as Six Sigma, SMED, 5S, and TPM.

It is important to understand the definitions of these efforts.

As described previously, ISO 9000 defines how a process should be documented and the roles everyone needs to play in order to ensure that tasks supporting that process are completed successfully.

According to the book, "Six Sigma Simplified," Six Sigma draws on teams and uses a results-oriented, project focused approach to process improvement, Six Sigma is a way of measuring and setting targets for reductions in product or service defects that is directly connected to customer requirements.

SMED, or Single Minute Exchange of Dies, describes how teams can analyze processes in order to make process changeovers — printers would call these makereadies and version changes — as efficient and effective as possible.

5S refers to a methodology used to create a workplace that on a continuing basis is clearly organized, free of clutter, arranged so that people can find items and sparkling clean. The term 5S refers to the process used to achieve this outcome, which calls for teams of people to sort, set in order, shine, standardize and sustain.

Finally, TPM, or Total Productive Maintenance, outlines a maintenance strategy that optimizes equipment performance, eliminates breakdowns and, in the words of the book, An Introduction to TPM: Total Production Maintenance, "promotes autonomous operator maintenance through day-to-day activities involving the total workforce."

How do these relate to one another and to SNAP? SNAP defines aim points and tolerances for good coldset printing, and shares best practices as it pertains to workflows and procedures that have been validated as yielding quality coldset printing in the real world. ISO 9000 outlines a process documentation methodology that, as previously reported, can draw on SNAP. Six Sigma, SMED, 5S, and TPM are carefully thought-out methodologies that support and ISO or other internal process assurance methods.

All of this means that newspapers and coldset commercial printers have access to a variety of programs and efforts aimed at helping them improve quality and throughput while reducing waste and downtime. The key is understanding how these different specifications, standards, and process improvement activities tie together and support or reinforce one another.

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SNAP, GRACoL and SWOP

Questions have also been raised about the similarities and differences among SNAP, GRACoL and SWOP. In short: All three are specifications. They are not standards like ANSI or ISO documents. The three specifications are not the same and do not provide specifications for the same processes. This means that there can be no such thing as "SWOP for newsprint" or "GRaCOL for coldset." Anyone who makes such a claim is confused — and is confusing others. Here is a review of the role these specs play:

SNAP
Process focus: Coldset web offset (also touches on letterpress and flexography).
Substrate: Newsprint.
Marketplace: Newspapers and coldset commercial printing.

GRACoL: General Requirements for Applications in Commercial Offset Lithography.
Process focus: Sheetfed printing.
Substrate focus: Coated freesheets.
Marketplace focus: Commercial printing.

SWOP: Specifications for Web Offset Publications.
Process focus: Heatset web offset and publication gravure
Substrate: Coated No. 5 and Coated No. 3
Marketplace: Publications