

How To Set Up Your Graphic Design Projects for Print



One of my old posts from 2008 titled [Designing for Print – Setting Up Crops and Bleed](#) quickly shot to the top of Google and has become one of the most popular posts on my blog. I haven't posted much on the topic of print design recently, but I thought I'd provide an updated guide to designing for print. Here's my tips and recommendations for setting up, designing and exporting designs for professional printing.

Which program should I use?

Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Adobe InDesign are the three main options when it comes to creating graphic designs for print. There's pros and cons to each application, but rather than create your entire design in a single app, you should make use of each program's individual speciality.

Photoshop is a great tool for working with raster based images. Use it to edit photos and create awesome visual artwork for the background of your designs.

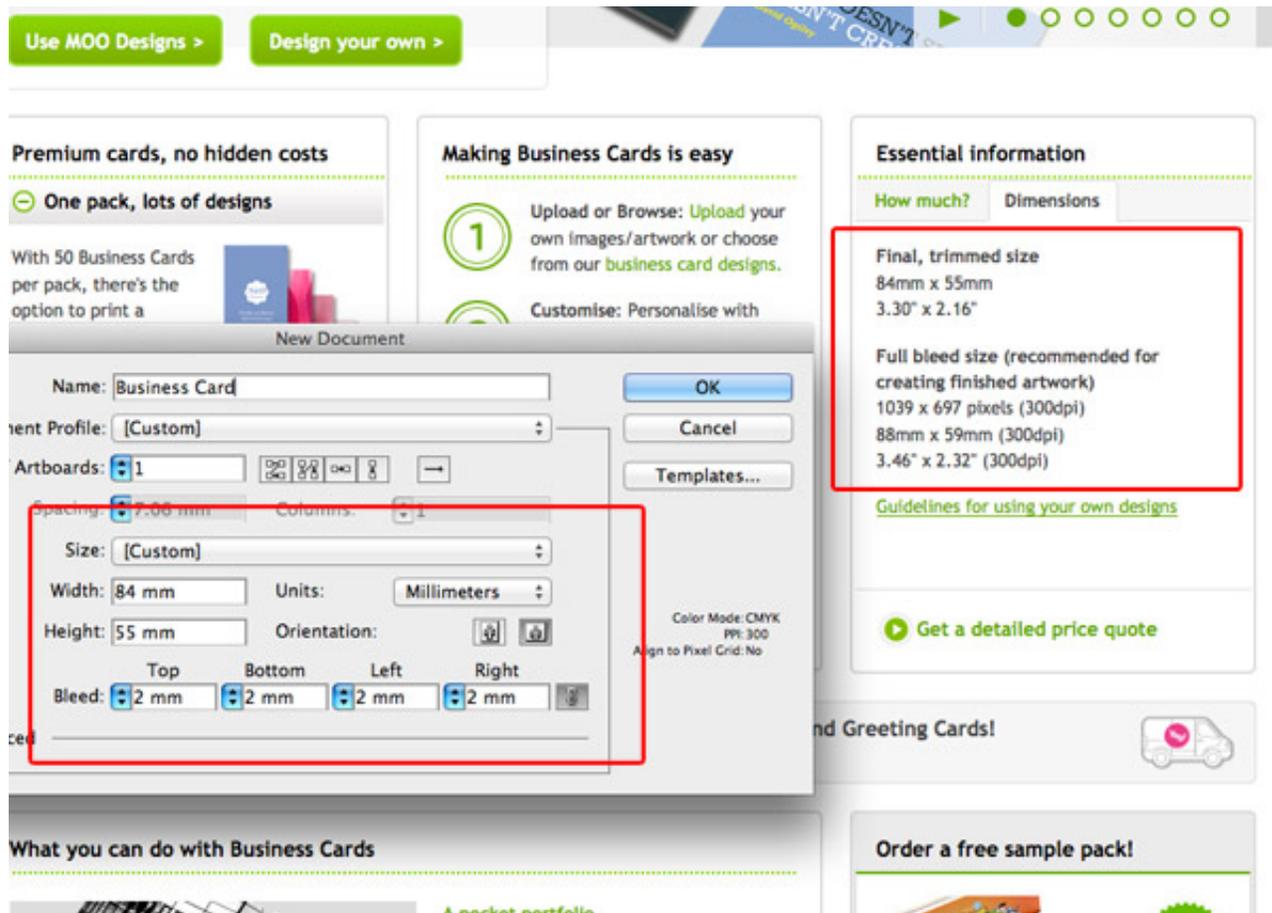
Illustrator is a great tool for creating crisp vector artwork, but it also features some comprehensive print design functionality. I enjoy using Illustrator for small scale print jobs that don't require multiple pages.

InDesign is a robust desktop publishing tool. I use InDesign's powerful layout tools to create multi-page designs such as brochures or leaflets.



When creating a design for print I'll often construct a background in Photoshop (Don't forget: 300ppi, CMYK mode), save it as a full size JPEG and Place it into Illustrator. On the other hand if the project requires multiple pages or long passages of text I'll use InDesign's powerful paging features to keep track of the full spreads.

What size should the document be?



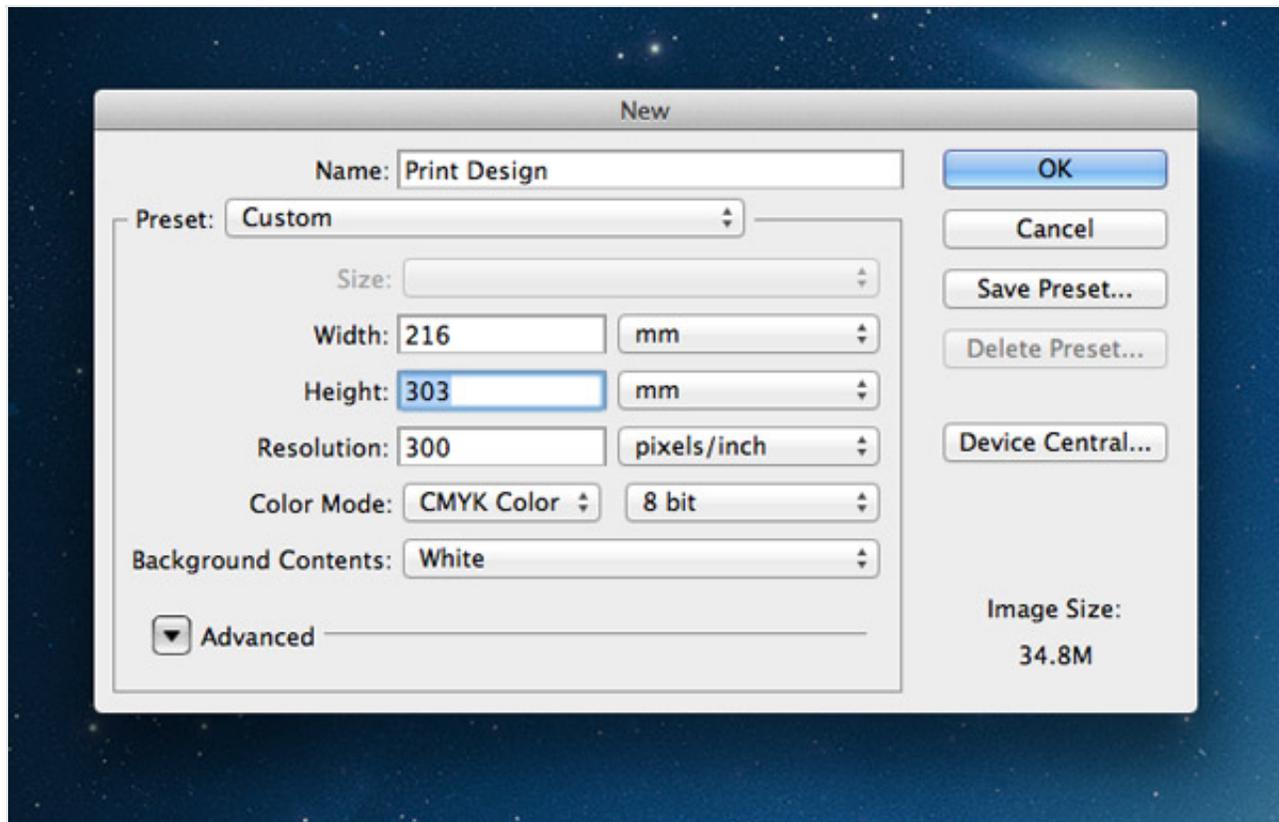
Printed products come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes there's a standard, such as A4 or Letter paper dimensions, but other products can vary drastically. Let's take business cards as an example. The exact dimensions of a business card will vary from one printing company to another. Before starting any design work make sure you choose a supplier and find their document requirements to avoid having to rework your layout later. Most companies these days list their products online and provide sizing information or guidelines.

The beauty of working in print is you can also create bespoke products in custom sizes. This is when it's handy to find a local company you can visit, or at least contact an online printing company to make sure they can accommodate your needs.

Don't forget the bleed!

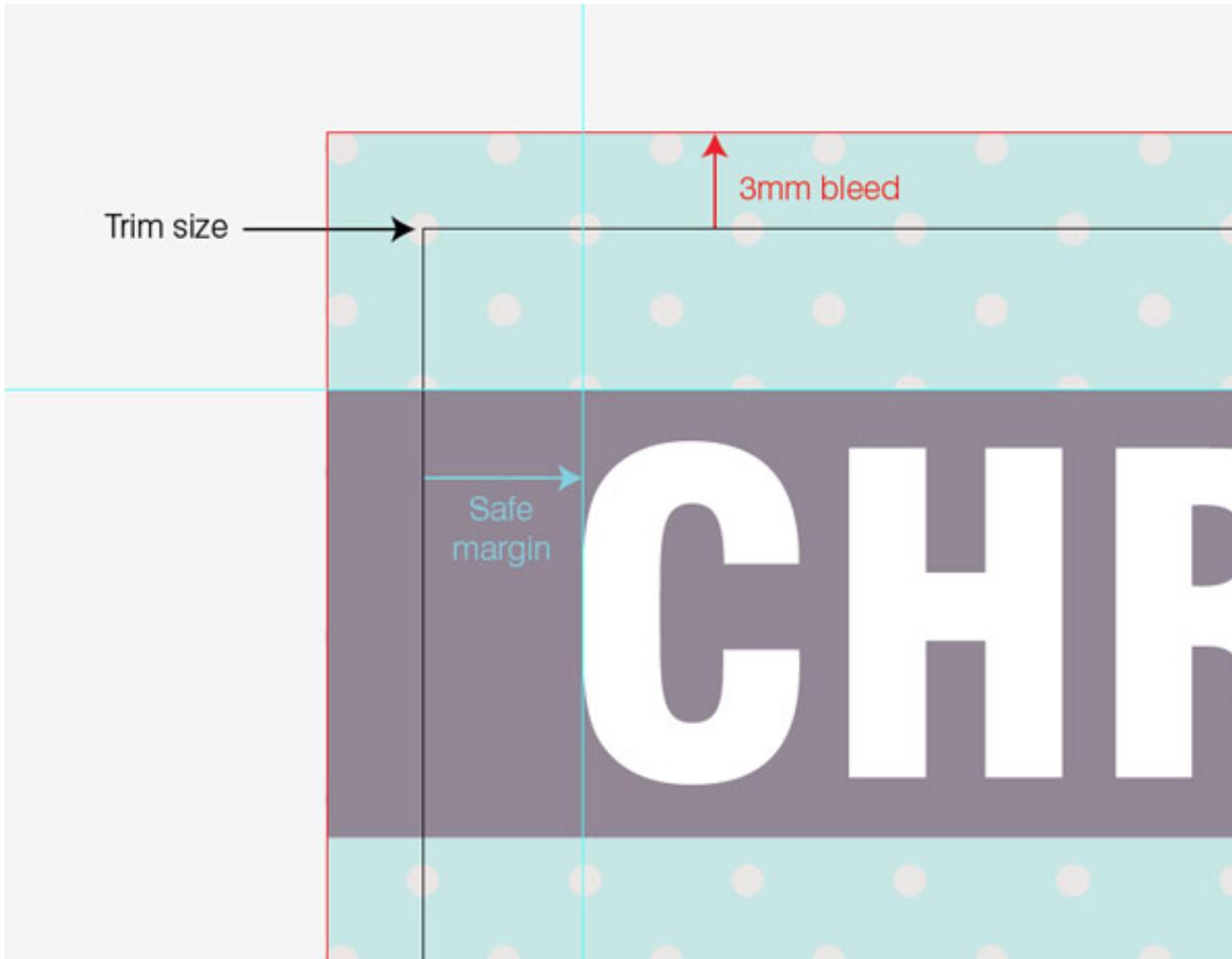
One crucial step when setting up your print documents is to remember to accommodate

for bleed. Again, the exact amount may vary from company to company and product to product, but 3mm or 0.25" is a common figure. Bleed is the area around your final document dimensions where your design is extended. This allows for slight inaccuracies when the printed sheets are being trimmed down to size. If the sheet is misaligned slightly, the bleed will avoid leaving a thin white strip of plain white paper down the edge of your design.



Photoshop doesn't have any page layout features, so you'll have to calculate the final bleed size yourself. It's pretty easy though, let's say you're working on a 210x297mm A4 design and need 3mm bleed. This 3mm is added to each edge, so the width now equals 216mm ($3\text{mm}+210\text{mm}+3\text{mm} = 216\text{mm}$) and the height equals 303mm ($3\text{mm}+297\text{mm}+3\text{mm} = 303\text{mm}$).

In Illustrator and InDesign there's options to add bleed when setting up your document. Enter the required amount and the program will offset a coloured margin around the edge of your design.

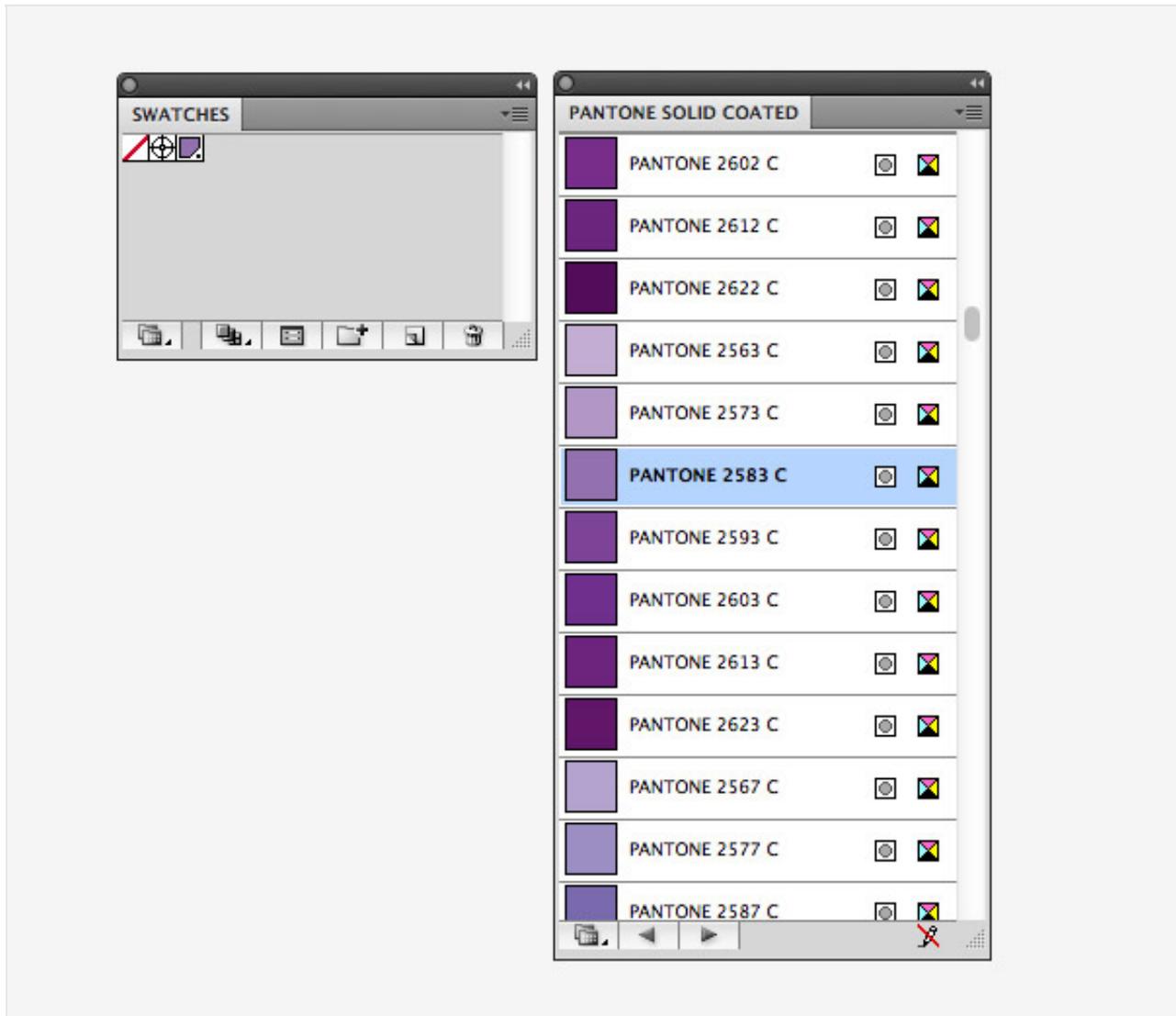


Only elements that touch an edge of your design need to extend into the bleed area. Background photos or images should be large enough to fill the entire bleed size (remember bleed area is trimmed off). Make sure your logo and any text elements are placed well away from the edges of the document so they don't get accidentally cropped or look like they're about to fall off the edge. It's often useful to designate a "safe margin" between 5-10mm from the edges using guides. Place all your design elements within this safe zone to nicely balance your artwork on the page.

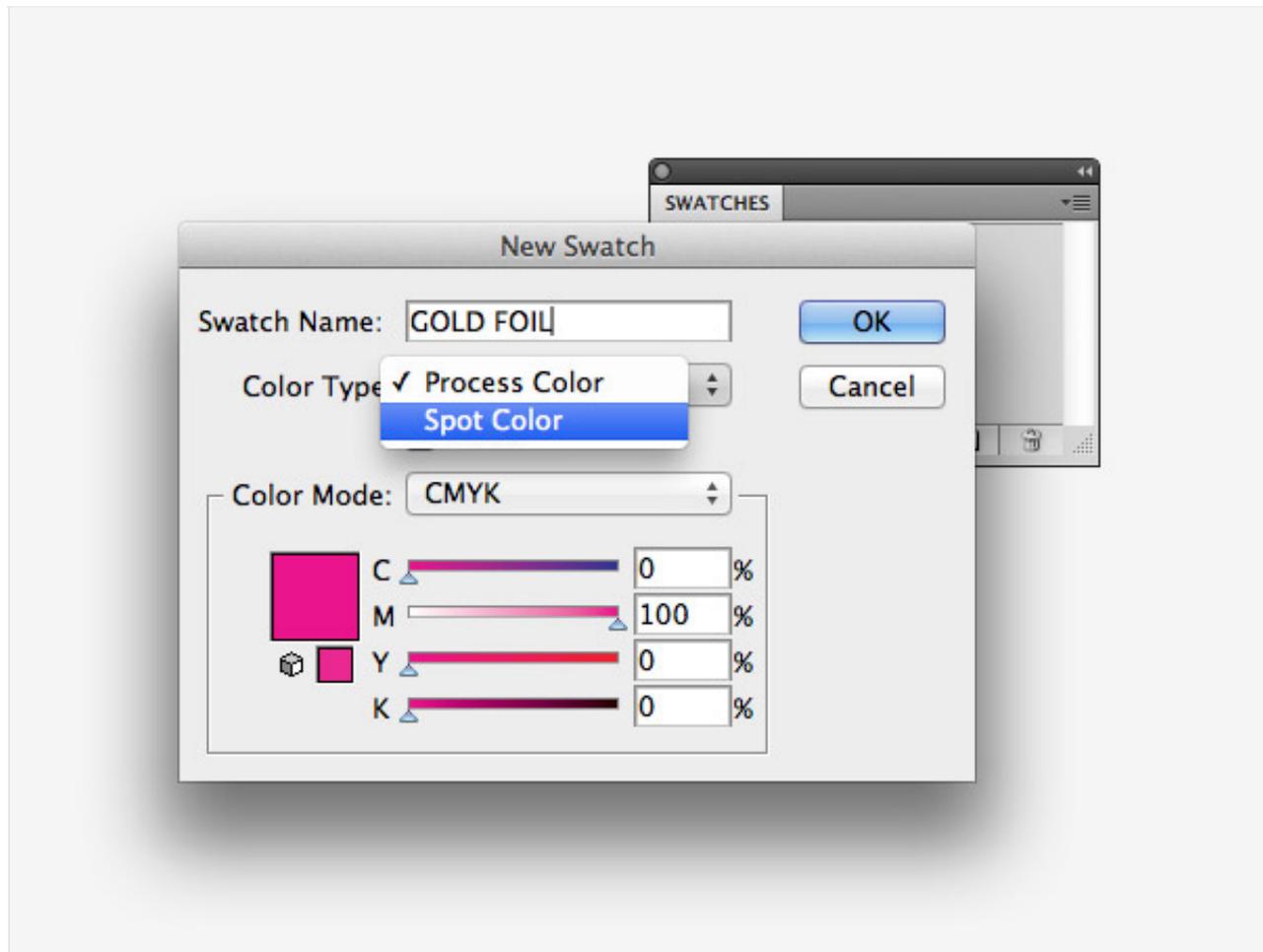
What color system should you use?

CMYK is the standard for print projects. Make sure you set your Photoshop document and Illustrator color palette to CMYK (not RGB) mode before creating your artwork. The spectrum of colours that can be produced in ink is much smaller than what can be created by light on your monitor, so working in CMYK from the start will avoid any

unwanted surprises when you receive your freshly printed products off the press.



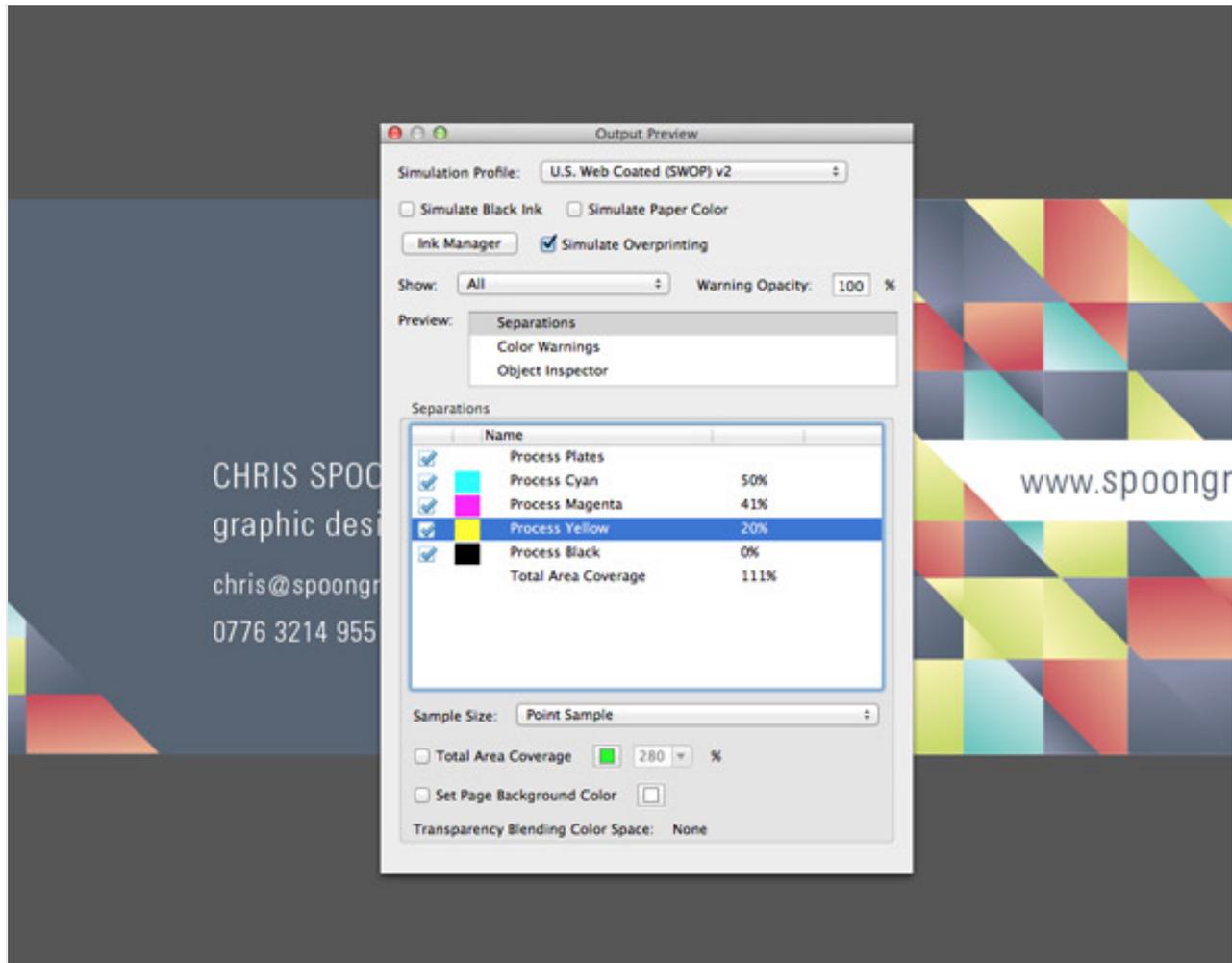
Pantone colors are another option. Pantone inks are ready mixed, so you can guarantee an absolute colour reproduction whereas CMYK colour mixes may vary depending on the printer's individual calibration and setup. Most small print jobs will be entirely CMYK, but if you require an exact colour match (EG: a company's corporate identity), you'll have to open that library within Illustrator/InDesign and add the swatches to your palette. Keep in mind your printer will charge you extra for the use of the additional ink as it now becomes a custom job.



Pantone colours aren't the only kind of custom ink, you can also choose crazy fluorescent colours, metallic inks and metal foils to really spice up your artwork. Again these custom inks drastically ramp up the cost of your prints and will require correspondence with your printer to receive specific instruction. Obviously we don't have metallic colours or foils in Photoshop, Illustrator or InDesign, so you'll have to identify these areas of your design with a custom Spot Color swatch with a recognisable name.

How do you export your design for print?

The required file type and delivery of files is again another factor that can vary between suppliers. Some online printing companies even allow you to upload a JPEG using their web UI. For small scale jobs with no custom inks a high resolution CMYK JPEG file can often be the safest way to go. It will avoid any strange reproduction if the vector file is opened in a different program or version.



Otherwise an EPS file or a print PDF will retain your design's full quality and preserve any custom swatch selections. You can even open a PDF file in Adobe Acrobat to see what colours swatches are used within the design and see their individual ink coverages.

When exporting an EPS or PDF file I prefer to outline my fonts to turn them into solid shapes (don't save your working file after outlining!). Fonts usually cause the most trouble when a file is being sent between computers, so eliminating the possibility of a font mismatch will avoid any ugly prints coming back to you.

For large print jobs in Adobe InDesign, use the Package feature to bundle all the pages, placed elements and fonts into a handy digital parcel to send your printer.