

Chapter 12



PRECIOUS PRINT

(ORIGINALLY CURATED 2013)



What's the Non-Obvious Trend?

Thanks to our digital-everything culture, the few objects and moments we choose to interact with in print or physically become more emotionally valuable and deeply personal.

In the American version of the popular comedy series “The Office,” the blundering but lovable regional manager Michael Scott of paper supply company Dunder Mifflin (played by Steve Carell) decides to create an ad for the utility of his product. The ineffectually hilarious tagline he eventually lands upon, “limitless paper for a paperless world” is at once ironic, silly and profound.

The fact that we are heading towards a paperless world seems inevitable.

Every business leader hears about the need for “digital transformation” and doing away with old modes of business. Banks encourage consumers to get statements delivered via email. Airline boarding passes no longer need to be printed. And many newspapers and magazines are reducing circulation – or discontinuing their print editions altogether.

Four years ago I first wrote about a countertrend to our growing digital world and called it *Precious Print* to describe the growing sense that in a digital world, those few things in our lives which we chose to keep in printed form were becoming increasingly intentional, rare, valuable and even precious.

At the time when I first shared this trend, the examples I shared as evidence were mainly based on top tier printing solutions, the few magazines that embraced their printed roots out of tradition, and small businesses standing out for how they offered paper based experiences.

In 2017, this trend has grown far bigger than family photos and beautiful business cards. *Precious Print* is now a macro idea and trend that describes the evolution of entire industries from the resurgence of neighborhood bookstores to the explosion of art collecting. At the heart of each of these unlikely movements is the underappreciated magic of print in all its forms.

The Middle Collector

The hobby and profession of art collection has had an elitist reputation for decades. Just mention art collecting and most people might conjure up a Hollywood image of well-dressed people holding up paddles at an auction to spend insane amounts of money on questionably artistic artifacts. One economist's exposé of the world of art recently published on *Quartz* justifiably called high-end art "one of the most manipulated markets in the world."

Yet the market for art is changing, thanks to several innovative startups who are working to make art collecting far less pretentious and more approachable. For example, startup website Paddle8.com was founded in 2011 to offer well-heeled consumers an alternative to the stuffy experience of the high end auction. The online auction platform chose to focus on the "mid-range" collector – offering works of art averaging around \$5000 each, and the site later merged with longtime rival Auctionata.com to create one of the world's largest online auction marketplaces for art, with combined sales in 2015 of over \$150 million.

When it comes to the broader world of art collecting, the industry

leading Hiscox's Online Art Trade Report recently predicted revenue may grow to \$6.3 billion by 2019, a threefold increase from 2014.

The numbers point to an interesting conclusion about what role art collection plays in modern culture. While much has been written about the younger generation's preference to share rather than own – when it comes to art, even younger consumers are actively choosing to invest in printed pieces they value as a financial and emotional investment.

The Cult Of Paper

Of course, not all artistic ideas are meant to be hung on walls. Some of them are created through the simple act of putting pen to paper in order to capture an idea ... in a notebook.

Notebooks today offer the ultimate homage to the emotional power of paper and the written word. From evangelic online user communities to ongoing memes encouraging people to share their drawings – notebooks from legendary makers like Moleskine, Leuchtturm and others have become the ultimate badge of honor of any creative person today. It is a decidedly popular analog habit for entrepreneurs and artists alike to pull out a worn paper notebook with pride to capture their handwritten notes, journal their thoughts or draw sketches to express ideas.

It turns out there is some science to support the idea that using notebooks instead of digital tools may even boost the memorability of ideas. In 2013 a Norwegian study of 10th graders clearly demonstrated that teens who read on computer screens understood less than those who read on paper. The researchers concluded that this could partially be due to the fact that “the brain has an easier task when you can touch as well as see.”

American University Linguistics Professor Naomi S. Baron has gone a step further, spending five years examining the pros and cons of reading on-screen versus in print. Her survey research with University students in the United States, Germany and Japan revealed that “if cost were the same, about 90 percent prefer hard copy for schoolwork. If a text is long, 92 percent would choose hard copy.”

Perhaps the most wide ranging defense of paper for the past several years has predictably come from a group with the most at stake – paper

manufacturer Domtar. The brand's PAPERbecause campaign is a long running public advocacy effort on behalf of paper, but it also reminds us all of our human connection to paper.

Beyond the sentimental bias, the website goes on to present data and research about everything from how it is easier to learn on paper to how paper is one of the most recycled products on the planet.

Of course, a component of the campaign is in defense of direct mail, so clearly not all aspects of paper could be fairly described as “precious” – but the point is that important ideas shared on paper have a resonance, memorability and preciousness that ideas on digital often don't.

Especially when it comes to books.

Why Argentines Love Bookstores

Argentina is a fascinating place for any book lover.

The country boasts more bookstores per person than any other country on earth (734 for a population of 2.8 million) and its capital city Buenos Aires has more bookstores than any other city in the world. This prevalence of literary culture reaches every generation, as Antonio Dalto, business manager of the Ateneo Grand Splendid bookshop, shared in a recent interview about the Argentinean passion for books and bookstores.

“Culture is very important to the people of Buenos Aires,” Dalto shared. “Even young kids read books, we see them here every day. Books for teenagers are one of our biggest sellers.” The idea of young “digital natives” preferring books perhaps seems like the most counterintuitive of all. Kids are the ones driving the digital revolution, right?

The latest sales data from the publishing industry would seem to disprove that assumption.

Near the end of 2015, the entire industry was celebrating new numbers from Nielsen Bookscan that pointed to a slight rise in print book sales for the year. The news was widely celebrated as a sign that ebook sales may have plateaued and that there were plenty of people who preferred books – including young people (evidenced by the fact that teen fiction was one of the best-selling categories).

While some skeptics pointed out that some of the gains were partially

due to the explosion of adult coloring books (which don't have ebook versions for obvious reasons), the popularity of print books seems for the moment to be on the rise. And the industry is responding.

UK-based Waterstones bookstore stopped selling Kindles and ebooks outside the UK, gave the shelf space to books instead and saw a 5% spike in sales.

In the U.S., beloved children's book author Judy Blume opened her own independent bookstore in Key West, Florida. When asked about her unexpected venture, Blume said: "I just think people are so hungry for a real bookstore again ... it's not just us doing well. A lot of independent booksellers are."

Precious Unboxing

One of the most common ways that most of us interact with print without noticing is through product packaging. Most product packaging, though, could rarely be described as anything close to precious. The closest it usually comes are the beautifully ornate designs and packaging used for items like perfume or bottles of high end alcohol.

Usually, when you received a product with packaging worth lusting over, it was a moment to be enjoyed in private. When it comes to many high end consumer products like video gaming consoles or smartphones, that is no longer the case.

A simple search on YouTube for just about any popular recently released product will generate a stream of videos from ordinary users filming and posting their "unboxing" videos. The unboxing video is exactly what it sounds like – a user getting a product and filming the act of taking it out of the packaging and starting to test it out. Several years ago, the prevalence of these unboxing videos exploded – to the point where CNN published a story called "The Bizarre, Lucrative World of 'Unboxing' Videos."

One example is Tech video unboxing blogger Lewis Helsenteger, the creator of the "Unbox Therapy" video blog on YouTube which has over 6 million subscribers and over 900 million views of his videos since 2010. Another example from a different category is the MommyandGracieShow,

a video blog run by a mother daughter team who unbox toys and dolls – and have more than 700,000 subscribers. The viral popularity of their videos even landed them an invitation to the industry Chicago Toy and Game Fair tradeshow to create a live unboxing video from the stage.

Unboxing as a category now officially even has its own Wiki to catalog who is doing unboxing and the rise of unboxing as a category.

Some unboxing videos rack up millions of views within days of a product being released. The videos also have a big influence on whether consumers buy a product or not because they are far more engaging and truthful than a simple three sentence review posted on Amazon. They are intimate, personal and highly persuasive – often celebrating the inherent preciousness of the print packaging itself.

Why It Matters:

While it may seem counterintuitive, the digital revolution is actually making print more precious in those moments when we encounter or experience it. Sometimes that may come from the beautiful packaging of a product that we buy. Other times, it may be from the experience of just visiting a bookstore or library to browse the collection. Or we may choose to buy art that creates some emotional connection for us to put on a wall and transport us to a different time or place. Or it could come, as it does for many entrepreneurs and creative people, through that moment when they find a powerful idea and choose to write it down in a notebook and save it for later digestion. Regardless of the form, there are plenty of situations where print is the preferred medium for passionate engagement.

How To Use This Trend:

- ✓ **Make your experience collectible.** Part of the appeal of print comes from the human desire for collections. We love to gather pieces of a puzzle together and enjoy the sense of achievement when we complete something. It is the reason

for that moment of pleasure when you get another stamp in your passport at immigration, or why we still buy products in sets. To harness this trend, consider what aspect of your customer experience you might be able to make collectible in print, so customers would come back again and again to collect them.

- ✓ **Recognize VIPs with paper.** Nothing makes people feel as good as recognition. For your best customers, giving them discounts or greeting them by name every time they come to your location are great ideas ... but consider what you might be able to offer them in print. It might be a membership card, or a custom greeting mailed to their home for the holidays.
- ✓ **Create a culture book** – Zappos founder Tony Hsieh is famous for creating a company culture book that is so iconic business professionals from all kinds of other industries have used it as an inspiration to create an internal culture worth evangelizing. The less appreciated fact about this Culture Book is that it is, in fact, a printed book and artifact that all employees receive as a tangible demonstration of just how important the corporate culture is. Creating a printed publication could help do the same for your organization.