Custom Fabric Printing
Poster presentations the easy way

By Brian Detweiler, Wilhelmina Randtke, and Fang Wang

Being invited to present a poster at a professional conference is always exciting; however, these feelings are often accompanied by a certain level of anxiety because posters can be difficult to transport and may incur substantial shipping costs or baggage fees. Fortunately, there is a more cost-effective and convenient alternative to traditional paper posters: custom fabric printing.

St. Mary's University Law Librarian Fang Wang still remembers her first time transporting a paper poster to the Texas Conference on Digital Libraries in 2010. Since conference organizers only provided an easel for presenters, she had to pack a whiteboard along with her poster, reluctantly checking both items at the ticket counter because they exceeded the size allowance for carry-on luggage. Upon arriving at her destination, she was shocked to find both the poster and the whiteboard had been badly damaged. Since she did not have time to print another poster or buy a new whiteboard, she had to bring the damaged poster to the conference. Thankfully, an employee at the conference hotel took a large painting off of a wall to use as a display board for Fang's wrinkled poster, but not before a lot of needless anxiety. While looking at her improvised display and wrinkled poster she thought to herself, "There has to be a better way to do this!"

Three years later, as Fang and her colleagues at St. Mary's prepared to give two poster presentations at the AALL Annual Meeting in Seattle, she had no such worries, thanks to Electronic Services Librarian Wilhelmina Randtke's discovery of fabric printing. Fang simply packed her poster in her suitcase with the rest of her clothes. No more wrinkled posters and no more headaches!

Fabric Printing: An Easy Alternative to Transporting a Large Paper Poster

After presenting at a number of conferences and encountering similar difficulties, Wilhelmina knew there had to be an easier alternative to traditional paper posters. This new option presented itself through Pinterest and craft blogs featuring adorable sewing projects using custom-printed fabric. Fabric is lightweight, washable, and, most importantly, foldable. Her discovery of custom-printed fabric led to a resolution to never again wrestle a paper tube through airport security or conference halls. And when two poster proposals by librarians at St. Mary's were accepted for presentation at the AALL 2013 Annual Meeting, a perfect opportunity came to test the fabric posters.

Designing the Posters: Text, Diagrams, and Academics in a World Meant for Sewing

To prepare the posters, we had to work within the constraints of a product designed around yardage, shelvage, bias, and grain. Standard fabric widths are 42 inches (3½ feet) or 52 inches (4⅓ feet), either of which would adequately fill a 4 x 8 foot presentation space. To determine which fabric would fold well and still allow enough detail for readable text, we ordered a book of sample fabric swatches and settled on a cotton fabric with high thread count. This fabric was only available in a 3½-foot width, and fabric orders could only be placed in fat quarters of 21 x 18 inches, which was much too small, or in multiples of 1 yard. So ultimately, the design to be uploaded had to be 3½ x 9 feet, with the extra foot to be cut off to make a 3½ x 8 foot poster in compliance with conference standards. Additionally, because Spoonflower, the fabric printing vendor (**www.spoonflower.com**), did not provide tools for resizing or cropping an image on its website, our images had to be sized exactly prior to being uploaded.

A 3½ x 8 foot fabric poster folds up as small as a T-shirt and carries on with no extra effort or expense.

We prepared the images to be printed using Microsoft Publisher, which allows paper size to be set to a custom height and width—in this case, 3½ x 8 feet. Starting with an exact size in Publisher to match the dimensions of the finished poster is important because resizing an existing image can be very labor intensive as we found out while attempting to modify a poster from a previous regional conference. After exporting the files from Publisher, we used Adobe Photoshop to add one foot borders to each image before uploading them to Spoonflower. This made our images 9 feet long so we could order our fabric by the yard. We also used Photoshop to rotate the image, choosing a fabric orientation where the sides of the fabric bolts matched the left and right sides of the images. After uploading the images and previewing what the printed fabric would look like, we placed our orders, which came to $54 per poster plus shipping. Since we were short on time and had to select expedited processing, the posters arrived about a week later for a grand total of $67 each.

Wilhelmina presents a 4 x 6 foot paper poster at ALA 2012. The poster cost $28 to ship and had to be delivered to a co-presenter's relative because the conference center did not receive mail on behalf of attendees prior to the conference.

How the Posters Looked and Traveled

Overall, we were very pleased with the final results. We printed our posters on Spoonflower's cotton poplin with a thread count of 133 x 72. This was almost twice the thread count of the cheaper alternative and provided a higher-resolution print. The smallest font we used in one of the posters (shown in the image on page 12) was 18-point Times New Roman, which printed well but is probably the smallest size that will still look crisp on fabric. Additionally, some of the colors in the posters came out a little different than expected: a bright blue background in one design printed as a very dark blue—almost black—background, and photographs came out darker or with slightly different coloring than expected. Solid colors, like lettering and the boxes used to frame the images, generally printed accurately. One way to get better color accuracy would have been to order a test swatch of fabric with just a small part of the image to see how it would print and then adjust the colors accordingly. The posters also arrived with unfinished edges where the fabric had been cut from the bolt, which could have been hemmed for a cleaner appearance had time allowed.

Packing the fabric posters was incredibly simple, and there were no worries about materials getting damaged during transit or leaving a poster behind while running to catch a connecting flight. The fabric can simply be folded up like a map and placed in a suitcase or carry-on bag like an article of clothing. Once folded, the poster is about the size of a T-shirt. It can also be carried around the conference center easily. While posters at AALL are left on display for the duration of the conference, many conferences display posters for short sessions only, and presenters must show up on time to hang the poster and then remove the poster immediately following the session, in which case being able to fold a poster neatly into a conference bag is incredibly convenient.

In addition to the hassle-free transportation, the poster session also went very well, with the poster material garnering just as much interest as the substantive information contained in the overall presentation. In fact, a number of attendees remarked on the poster's appearance and inquired about the ease with which it could be transported. After the session ended, we simply folded our posters back up and packed them for the trip back to San Antonio, where we now plan to display them in our library. ∎

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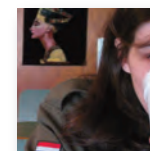
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