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Varnish, Aqueous, UV...Which Should I Use?

There are many reasons to use varnishes. Gloss is the most commonly used varnish serving as a coating over a printed area to protect the printed surface and increase the gloss. Another use for varnishes is to protect ink films from rubbing and scuffing against adjacent surfaces. Varnishes and other coatings can also be used to avoid fingerprinting and to create visual special effects.

Varnishes are available in many finishes including gloss, satin, dull, pearlized, and specialty tinted. They can be applied in-line on press (wet-trap) or off-line in a subsequent pass through the press (dry trap). Varnishing in a separate pass when the underlying ink is dry produces higher contrast between the varnished and unvarnished areas. So a gloss varnish will look glossier and a dull varnish will look more dull. Varnishing in a separate pass also offers better rub resistance but can be more expensive.

Always assume that varnish or aqueous coating is needed when printing on coated soft-finished papers as a precaution against ink scuffing or ink transfer. This is especially true for web offset jobs. Coated glossy papers usually do not need varnish. Both varnish and aqueous coating protect ink films from scuffing and both are available as gloss, satin, dull, and matte for ink film protection.

Varnish can also be used for special effects by making printing plates to apply varnish as a spot, a dot-for-dot, or to create subtle patterns over printed or unprinted areas. Tints can be added to slightly color the varnish for added effect. The interplay of gloss, satin, and matte varnishes on different paper finishes can create another layer of visual interest.

A popular technique introduced only recently is to spot dull varnish shapes or type on your sheet and to then overall gloss UV coat the sheet creating a dramatic or 'strike-through' effect.

When selecting your coating, you might consider:

- Flood varnish gives maximum protection against ink rub, but also discolors plain paper areas slightly.
- Aqueous coatings do not discolor plain paper areas but still provide excellent ink film protection.
- UV-cured coatings provide the most dramatic print effects and the most durable protection.
- Discussing the environmental aspects of these various coatings with your printer.