COLOR ME FRUSTRATED: ADOBE/PANTONE RIFT

> Designers and others who were accustomed to hearing Adobe's creative software natively speaking Pantone's language of color are now listening to a dialog that comes with an unanticipated price tag. As a service to its members and to the industry in general, Printing Industries Alliance presents this overview of the situation and its consequences for end-users.

COLOR ME FRUSTRATED: USERS REACT TO ADOBE, PANTONE RIFT OVER PMS LIBRARIES

By Patrick Henry, Liberty or Death Communications

As far as graphics professionals are concerned, there probably never was a more inspired pairing of technologies than Adobe's Creative Cloud software and the Pantone Matching System (PMS) for color specification.

When designers, prepress specialists, and printers use these industry-standard tools synergistically, they know they can count on getting predictable color output and consistently acceptable results in whatever combinations of inks and substrates they choose to work with.

The Adobe/Pantone synergy still exists, but achieving it has become more complicated – and more costly. Changes set in motion by the two companies earlier in the year are in full effect now, obliging many users to make hard choices about how they will handle their design and color quality management workflows going forward.

This has happened because most of the PMS color libraries – the digital equivalents of Pantone's universally used printed color swatch books – are no longer built directly into the newest versions of the Adobe Creative Cloud applications InDesign, Illustrator, and Photoshop. Users who want to go on working with the libraries must now access them through a Pantone plug-in that adds a subscription charge over and above the licensing fee paid to Adobe.

Welcome to the Dark Side

Nobody is being forced to install the plug-in. But from now on, users who try to open files in updated Adobe software without the extension may start to see, instead of the Pantone color tools in their usual place, a blacked-out box with a message that advises, "This file has Pantone colors that have been removed and replaced with black due to changes in Pantone's licensing with Adobe. To resolve, click 'Learn more.'"

The click leads to a Pantone page where the plug-in, called Pantone Connect, can be downloaded. Users who would prefer to resolve the problem in a different way have two choices. They can hold off making the Adobe updates, or they can opt for workarounds that will let them recover or simulate Pantone colors they have previously used. Neither is a fully satisfactory solution.

At Macmillan, says Amybeth Menendez, the publisher's assistant manager of print workflow, "we had to stop our deployment of Adobe Creative Cloud at 23.3, which is not the latest version of Photoshop, InDesign, or Illustrator. If you turn back the clock and you don't update your Adobe software applications, that version of Creative Cloud still supports all of the Pantone libraries, and they're all there."

But, updating can't be put off indefinitely. "That's basically just putting a Band-Aid on for next year until we can figure out what exactly we're going to do," Menendez acknowledges.

Others never had the option of waiting, such as the printer friend of Menendez's whom she says the change took completely by surprise: "All of his applications just automatically updated, and all his Pantone libraries were gone."

> One difficulty with relying on older versions is that their color libraries are, in Pantone's words, "significantly out of date and missing hundreds of new Pantone Colors."

'We've Got to Play It Straight'

There's no debate about updating the Adobe software and in-stalling the Pantone plug-in at OTTO Brand Lab, according to David Kohler, principal of the brand consultancy.

"We've got to play it straight because sometimes our files are used with many different printers, and there's no room for delays or problems with anything we do with our clients," he says. "We're going to have to pay for it and do it the straight way because we've got all kinds of brand libraries. We work for a lot of our clients on a long-term basis. We've got legacy work that comes back, so there's just no room to mess around."

The bind that users find themselves in stems from the phasing out of pre-loaded Pantone color libraries from Illustrator, InDesign, and Photoshop in software updates released after August 16, 2022. These include Pantone's basic spot color matching system, Pantone + Solid, as well as the libraries for metallic, pastel, and neon colors.

As of November, the only libraries remaining are Pantone + CMYK Coated, Pantone + CMYK Uncoated, and Pantone + Metallic Coated. According to Adobe, all versions before August 2022 will continue to have all previous Pantone Color books pre-loaded and available.

Gaps in the Shelves

One difficulty with relying on older versions is that their color libraries are, in Pantone's words, "significantly out of date and missing hundreds of new Pantone Colors." Users who want up-to-date libraries can access them through the Pantone Connect plug-in – but only in post-August updates to Illustrator, InDesign, and Photoshop.

Subscriptions to Pantone Connect will cost consumers $14.99 monthly or $89.99 annually; businesses pay $89.99 or $149.99 per user per year, depending on the number of seats. These prices, which represent a significant increase over what Pantone originally announced in January, could add up to serious money in some environments.

"Now that it's going to be subscription-based, the customer who has one or two computers might be looking at $30 per month," says Richard Rossi, manager of prepress and premedia for the Zenger Group, a commercial printer in Tonawanda, NY. "But a company this size has a dozen licenses or more, and we could be looking at $150 or $200 per month just to have access to these things."

He adds that although Zenger keeps its Adobe applications fully up-to-date, the Pantone plug-in has not been universally installed across the copies. Partial adoption has not led to issues so far, but Rossi concedes that over time, adjustments may have to be made.

"Any software change like this does eventually affect us throughout our departments because as they further get implemented, it's something we have to deal with," he says. "We get work from a lot of different sources, and some people aren't using it. Some people are. We have to be ready for it and learn how to use it as we go – not just with this software, but with all software."

Now You See it...

Some good news for users waiting to see how the situation plays out is that the change should not put them at risk of losing legacy colors and files, says Dov Isaacs, who was a Principal Scientist at Adobe for more than 30 years.

"If you have an existing PDF file that was created with Pantone colors in the past, that keeps on working, because those definitions have been embedded into the PDF," he explains. "If you have a PostScript file that had those Pantone definitions in it, likewise, if you distill the PostScript into PDF, no trouble there."

"If you haven't upgraded to the latest versions of Illustrator, In-Design, and Photoshop, it's the status quo from before, because they're not taking things out unless you update," Isaacs says. "If you still have the earlier version of the Adobe applications, nothing's going to happen to take away those Pantone colors."

The same applies to Illustrator and InDesign source files that don't have links to Photoshop images that reference Pantone colors, and to files that contain Photoshop images saved as PDF in earlier versions of Photoshop (i.e., not in JPEG, JPEG2000, TIFF, PSD, etc., formats). Templates with Pantone inks as corporate colors can be

used to make new documents as long as there's no attempt to access new or different Pantone colors.

Isaacs adds, however, that the Pantone colors that were provided by the Adobe applications are "ancient." What's more, "if you're doing something in InDesign or Illustrator, and you have a mandate that you're supposed to use a certain Pantone color that isn't one of those still provided, you're out of luck."

Designers on the Spot

This indicates that projects making heavy use of spot colors will be more seriously impacted by the absence of the color libraries than those limited to CMYK.

"A lot of our jackets and covers are built with spot-color channels," says Menendez. "When you open them up in Photoshop to make edits or revisions, the spot channel appears black. For designers who aren't as tech-savvy as workflow people, it could be very intimidating."

The Adobe applications will continue to provide third-party color libraries such as Focoltone, Toyo, and Trumatch without plug-ins or licenses. But, these alternatives probably will be of limited use to creatives raised on Pantone.

As Kohler explains, "we work across many different substrates, all the way into vinyls, plastic, and lighting. The colors have to work all the way across. The Pantone standards work in theatrical lighting gels, LED lighting, plastics, and fabrics. You can use it across the board, and you can't do that with any other system."

As word about changes to the Adobe/Pantone relationship began to spread, participants in online forums for design and prepress started sharing ideas for workarounds to be used in lieu of updating the Adobe applications and installing the Pantone plug-in.

ADOBE/PANTONE RIFT CONTINUED

The two principal approaches are saving existing color libraries for importing into the Adobe updates; and creating project-specific color libraries that can be used as substitutes for the Pantone-standard colors.

Save and Have

Saving libraries consists of opening them in the Adobe applications, selecting the desired swatches, and exporting them as ASE (Adobe Swatch Exchange) files that can be brought into the updates and shared for projects with other users. According to Isaacs, it "absolutely" will be possible to work with saved libraries in the latest versions of the Creative Cloud applications. (Pantone says users can also save their palettes in Pantone Connect.)

The other approach, creating non-Pantone-branded substitute colors, involves scanning, measuring, defining, and saving colors in the exportable ASE format, typically with the help of software created for the purpose. According to developers of these solutions, the process lets users create alternative color specification systems with the exact device, ink, and substrate combinations their projects require.

Pantone's hold on the market for color definitions is so long-standing and secure that employing workarounds like these may never have occurred to some users. But Isaacs notes that nothing prevents anyone from defining a color with colorimetric L*a*b values and then working with it under a name that doesn't include "Pantone."

"If I were a company with corporate colors, I'd get the L*a*b numbers, create swatches corresponding to those, distribute them to anyone who works for me as a contractor or an employee, and I'd say, these are what you're going to use. Install these on your system," he declares.

'Dark Gray Area' to Avoid

However, Isaacs also urges caution in using any workaround that Pantone might regard as violating the legal protections with which it has always surrounded its products. He calls this aspect of the situation "a really dark gray area, and not Pantone-calibrated dark grey, either."

Nervousness about the legalities isn't the only reason why people in the industry might hesitate to go against the new rules of use that Pantone and Adobe have imposed.

As Menendez points out, Pantone continually introduces new colors that enterprises like hers will be called upon to provide. "When Pantone does roll out its new swatches, and designers start using the new different colors, we will have to figure out how we're going to get those colors," she says. "Somehow the files need to be able to talk to each other when they get handed off."

Kohler notes that although OTTO Brand Lab understands workarounds such as importing saved color libraries and creating libraries of its own, it won't try to use them as a way to avoid upgrading its Adobe software and accepting the new terms from Pantone.

"I don't see it, because it's not worth the risk," he says. "So I don't really have a choice."

Another, more fundamental question is whether devising one-off alternatives to the Adobe/Pantone synergy defeats the purpose that the technologies were developed to serve in the first place: creating device-independent workflows in which digital data and a common language of color replaced craft-based guesswork and subjective judgment calls about print quality.

As Menendez expresses it, "People can develop alternate swatches, but are you going to have swatch books? What kind of ink are you going to be using? There need to be standards in the printing industry. People just can't make swatch books on different t ypes o f p aper, w ith d ifferent white points and different ink philosophies. That's just too many variants."

'It's Not About the User'

Isaacs sees some inevitability in how Pantone and Adobe came to a parting of the ways over the color libraries.

"Their business models and goals are totally opposite directions," he says. "I honestly don't know what they could do beyond what they did." The only other way around it, he speculates, would have been for Adobe to purchase the rights to all the libraries at a great cost that the company then would have had to pass through to Creative Cloud users.

In either scenario, the pain points belong to end-users. Pantone has said that the removal of its libraries from the Adobe Creative Cloud will have minimal impact on a designer's workflow. But, there will be misgivings even among those willing to go along with the new scheme for accessing them.

"It's just upsetting, because it's not about the user," Kohler says. "It's passing the cost onto the user. Even though we're paying a subscription, even though we have to update continuously, we get less value for it. It's kind of frustrating."

About the author: Patrick Henry, the director of Liberty or Death Communications, has covered the printing and graphic arts industry as a journalist for nearly 40 years. He holds numerous awards for his industry service and support of professional education. Contact him at pathenry@libordeath.com.

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WHAT NOW? AND HOW? FYI FOR USERS

The issues raised by the Adobe / Pantone situation are complex. Users of Creative Cloud applications and Pantone color tools should get all the information they can before deciding how to proceed. Following are some of the sources consulted for the writing of this article.

ADVISORIES FROM ADOBE AND PANTONE

❏ **Changes to the Pantone Color books**
https://helpx.adobe.com/creative-cloud/adobe-color.html

❏ **Find answers to commonly asked questions about the Pantone Color books**
https://helpx.adobe.com/illustrator/kb/pantone-color-books-illustrator.html

❏ **Pantone Connect X Adobe FAQ**
https://www.pantone.com/articles/faq/pantone-connect-adobe-faq

WHAT PROFESSIONALS SAY THE CHANGES MEAN

❏ **Pantone Color Libraries Are Leaving the Adobe Apps**
https://creativepro.com/pantone-color-libraries-are-leaving-the-adobe-apps/

❏ **Pantone wants $15/month for the privilege of using its colors in Photoshop**
https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2022/11/pantone-wants-15-month-for-the-privilege-of-using-its-colors-in-photoshop/

❏ **Online forum: LinkedIn**
bit.ly/linkedin-adobe-pantone

❏ **Online forum: PrintPlanet: Adobe to remove Pantone books from Creative Cloud**
https://printplanet.com/threads/adobe-to-remove-pantone-books-from-creative-cloud.291832/

❏ **Online forum: PrintPlanet: Pantone Color Libraries will be removed from future Adobe updates**
https://printplanet.com/threads/pantone-color-libraries-will-be-removed-from-future-adobe-updates.291824/

❏ **Creative Techniques #21: Adobe/Pantone Issues in 2022 (video)**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBs2-2KcN-w

STEPS FOR USERS TO CONSIDER

❏ **Discussions: Changes to Pantone Color Books**
https://community.adobe.com/t5/illustrator-discussions/changes-to-pantone-color-books/td-p/13076187

❏ **Adobe and Pantone to Part Ways; What You Gonna Do?**
https://whattheythink.com/articles/109501-adobe-pantone-part-ways-what-you-gonna-do/

❏ **The Adobe and Pantone Color Apocalypse: Frequently Asked Questions**
https://www.userlandia.com/home/2022/11/adobe-pantone-faq

❏ **The Adobe – Pantone Breakup: How Brand Owners, Designers Should Deal with It**
https://www.insights4print.ceo/2022/01/the-adobe-pantone-breakup-how-brand-owners-designers-should-deal-with-it/

❏ **Explaining and Resolving the Adobe/Pantone Color Quarrel**
https://tidbits.com/2022/11/02/explaining-and-resolving-the-adobe-pantone-color-quarrel/

❏ **Colour Confusion**
https://www.printweek.com/features/article/colour-confusion