

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

”Alternatives inks”



If you are considering using alternatives inks in your printer and are about to start talking to some suppliers, we'd suggest that you put your tin hat on. You are about to enter a war zone!

You see, the alternative ink market is arguably the most difficult to navigate. It is an ugly market absolutely rife with misinformation, hidden agendas and one where myth is often sold as fact.

The root of these problems is the highly competitive nature of this market. Manufacturers and their agents want to retain your ink business. Alternative ink suppliers want you to switch to their inks. And never the twain shall meet.

Let's break the above problem down into bite-sized chunks and arm you with some information that will stand you in good stead while you try to separate seller fact from seller fiction.

Firstly, the divide that exists in this market is not between Good Ink vs. Bad Ink, as it rightly should be. It is more typically between OEM-branded ink and alternative inks. This does neither side any good.

This scenario does not exist in other sectors of the print market. For example, buying media - branded or third-party - will not open you up to anywhere like the levels of near-hysteria you will have to deal with when considering an ink swap.

In fairness, it is not usually the printer manufacturers at fault here. Very rarely will you hear a manufacturer rubbishing the competition. More typically it is the agent or reseller - protecting their ongoing revenue stream - that will have a hatful of horror stories to tell you.

“Put alternative ink in your printer and it is going to explode into a million pieces and no one is going to help you, because it will be your own fault.” Sounds dramatic? Well, if you don't believe it, feel free to make a few phone calls to some resellers and you're bound to hear some stories approaching that level of silliness.

It would be much better if both manufacturers and alternative ink suppliers could work together to rid the market of the rogue products that are clearly second-rate, clearly made of inferior ingredients and that exist only to make a fast buck on the back of the customer's desire to make some cost-savings. The recession has been great for the alternative ink market, but at the same time it has also opened up the market to some inks of questionable quality.

There are some very good alternative inks out there

Manufacturer ink is your default position. It's usually more expensive, but high levels of competition between the various resellers help to keep the price competitive. Because the ink has been developed specifically for your printer, it is obviously covered by warranty and should be completely trouble-free.

However - and this an important point - *very few* printer manufacturers actually make their own ink. So it's fair to say that *nearly all ink is alternative ink*. In many cases, manufacturers buy their inks in from an outside source, with notable suppliers including Nutec, DuPont, Nazdar, 3M, Toyo and Sun Chemical, to name a few.

Now the majority of those ink suppliers are huge operations, with huge R&D budgets and more scientists than you can shake a stick at – and they're all beavering away to create reliable high-performance inks for your printer.

But – crucially – not all inks are created equal. Product X from supplier A might have an improved colour gamut; product Y from supplier B might have excellent compatibility with a broader range of media; and product Z from supplier C might have better outdoor durability. Point being, it is not guaranteed that the ink carrying the same brand as the printer is superior.

There are good alternatives out there, and anyone that tells you otherwise is being a little conservative with the truth. Further, given that inks can deliver different benefits for different applications, you might well find that an alternative ink product actually offers better performance for your particular application.

A good example of this is in the field of UV-curable inks. There are some manufacturer-branded inks that do not lend themselves well to edge-to-edge printing or for use in graphics that are cut to shape, because the inks chip at the edges. In this particular instance, there are definitely superior alternative inks available.

Ink choice is not as clear-cut as Manufacturer Ink vs. Alternative Ink. It is about Good Ink vs. Bad ink and you can buy good ink from a number of different sources and under a number of different guises.

Think of it like petrol; you are comfortable buying your petrol from any one of a number of reputable petroleum companies and you do so without any concern whatsoever. The problems would only come if you started buying your petrol from a chap who was metaphorically mixing it up in a bucket in his garage from poor quality ingredients.

Reputable is the key word, buy from a reputable supplier, with a known pedigree, and you should

avoid problems.

So what about the bad inks - and how do you avoid them?

The easiest way to avoid problems is to stick with the manufacturers branded ink. It's your failsafe position. But - as detailed - some alternative inks are actually better for particular applications.

The first thing to avoid when sourcing a good ink for your printer is to buy on price alone. If you buy with price as your only criteria, you are far more likely to end up with a costly printer repair job on your hands. For every horror story you hear about alternative inks, the probability is high that you are being told about a problem caused by an ink that was purchased on the basis of price alone.

Nothing is for nothing, there are no free rides, and you get what you pay for. If you pay a ridiculously low price for your ink, you are probably going to be using an ink with lower grade ingredients, badly ground pigments, colours that fade more quickly and chemicals that are quite possibly dangerous.

If you want to put a good ink in your printer and be safe going forward, then due diligence is necessary. Ask the would-be supplier for customer testimonials and talk to the customer cited in the testimonial. It will only take you a few minutes and you'll get genuine hype-free feedback.

Secondly, ask about the levels of warranty available. Is the ink manufacturer prepared to stand fully behind their ink with a warranty that will match or even exceed the warranty provided by the printer manufacturer? If not, why not? Reliable ink does not cause breakdowns or printer failures and therefore can be safely backed up with a comprehensive warranty. Honestly, if you take one piece of advice only from this feature let it be this: No Warranty, No Sale.

And make sure you get that warranty in writing, because the inane witterings of a pushy salesman are meaningless and indeed worthless if you have not got written confirmation.

What ink *should* you buy?

In a nutshell, there is no easy, catch-all answer. It depends on the printer you have and the types of applications you are using it for. With some printers, you'd definitely want to stick with the manufacturers' ink to achieve optimum results. However, there are other printers within which you could happily use alternatives ink solutions and would – as well as save money – even improve performance in certain areas. The point is, the good ink is out there - and it comes wearing a variety of labels...