

## Webcom re-engineers publishing

LOCATION Scarborough (Toronto) SIZE 180,000 sq. ft. ANNUAL SALES more than \$50 million EMPLOYEES 250 in Canada and U.S. SERVICES offset and digital soft-cover book printing and binding, including covers, inserts, jackets, bookmarks and other collateral; one-third of business is exported to the United States  
www.webcomlink.com



CEO Mike Collinge records the new book line installation

### CHALLENGE Reduce costs of short-run book products by adopting a digital manufacturing platform

In late October, Amazon.com reported that e-books for the Kindle are outselling physical books across its top 1,000 bestsellers. For the Top 10, digital downloads are outselling their printed equivalents at a rate of “greater than two-to-one,” said a company news release. But don’t hold the presses just yet because its print sales are increasing, too. The notion that digital book sales are starting to “club traditional printing to death,” as one tech blogger put it, is laughable to Mike Collinge, CEO of 45-year-old book manufacturing specialist Webcom.

Collinge acknowledges that e-book sales are growing fast but notes that they represent only a small portion of publishing revenues. Amazon doesn’t rule the retail bookstore world, he points out, adding that figures at Barnes & Noble paint a different print picture. B&N’s digital division currently accounts for slightly more than 10% of overall revenues (but plans to generate \$1 billion in e-book sales by 2013).

Far from being blinded by E Ink and e-reader LCD/LED screens, Collinge is well aware of his publishing customers’ do-more-with-less print reality: smaller and

fewer press runs; the need for lower costs and better responsiveness. Yet, Webcom still inventories some 20 grades of text paper, half of which are recycled brands. Specializing in one- and two-colour soft-cover production, it produces more than 40 million books annually. The firm’s four-colour cover printing capabilities employ the coldset process to avoid harmful VOCs while still providing customers with a competitive edge.

### STRATEGY Identify a finishing solution that keeps pace with digital print output

Earlier this year, Collinge put his firm’s money where his mouth is, to the tune of \$12 million—one of the largest reinvestments by a Canadian book manufacturer in the past 10 years—in what Webcom calls its BookFWD production platform.

We’re talking workflow enhancements, a brand-new 36” colour HP T300 Inkjet Web Press—the first in Canada—a seven-colour HP Indigo digital sheetfed press that has been producing book covers for several months, and, most importantly, says Collinge, state-of-the-art digital finishing technology in the bindery.

For example, the firm’s in-house cover



Flex Book bolts onto the HP T300 and keeps up with the press to produce book blocks

## Finishing fast with Flex Book

Magnum Digital Solutions in Barrie, Ont., has worked closely with HP to develop the Flex Book system, which bolts on to the T300 Inkjet Web Press. Flex Book provides an efficient method for producing fused, easy-to-handle book blocks. Using cut-sheet technology, it produces a book block sans the common shingling and bottling problems found in folding technologies that employ signature solutions.

“Low or no makeready is key,” notes Mike Collinge, CEO of book printer Webcom, which at press time was installing the Book Flex-T300 combo. Simotion software enables Book Flex to do automated, zero-makeready changeovers for same-size, same-paper formats. Webcom marks only the second installation of the revolutionary book-block system worldwide. (CPI Quantum installed the first, in France, earlier this year, and three other machines have since been sold.)

Book blocks are made durable utilizing Flex Book’s digitally controlled fusing technology that ensures smooth repetitive oscillation. Blocks can be fed inline to a binding system or offline. Plus, cut sheets minimize standard trim waste requirements.

Magnum Flex Book is engineered for 24/7 use and was designed with the future of digital printing in mind. It is capable of a web width up to 43” (up to eight-ribbon processing), speeds up to 800 ft. per minute, and features size flexibility ranging from 4” to 10.5” wide and 6” to 12” long.

Timson, in the U.K., is developing a similar technology, which it calls the T-Book finishing system, while Kodak and Muller Martini have partnered on an advanced finishing solution for the Prosper 5000XL inkjet web press.

## Gear on the floor

- the latest Prinergy prepress workflow ■ HP T300 Color Inkjet Web Press (for text pages)
- 7-colour HP Indigo 7000 digital press (for cover printing) ■ Magnum Flex Book finishing for collated blocks ■ 7 Goss and 2-colour Timson heatset-web book presses ■ 2- and 6-colour Heidelberg sheetfeds (for covers and inserts) ■ 2 Muller Martini PUR adhesive binding lines
- 2 new, highly automated saddle-stitchers



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coating department tripled its capacity this year. Publishers can choose from more than 20 “FX” applications, such as OnDesign Spot UV enhancements. Conventional perfect binding and lay-flat Otabind are available for softcover, adhesive binding. Post-press retooling also includes a pair of new highly automated saddle-stitching machines. Scheduled for a January 2011 installation, the new binding lines will add the latest in PUR gluing technology and automation to reduce makeready times and spoilage by more than 90% on each book project.

**✦ Keeping books with small demand in print increases revenues, and publishers like the ringing of all those cash registers**

The problem with digital printing isn’t the printing; it’s that the post-press department usually can’t keep up, slowing production via the dreaded bindery bottleneck. And this is the issue with which Webcom has wrestled, says Collinge. How does inkjet printing integrate into book manufacturing and publishing, especially with the T300’s output capacity of 70 million pages per month? The Webcom management team did research for 18 months before opting for the HP and Magnum Flex Book combination (see sidebar).


About a year ago, Webcom also introduced WEBview, a PDF-based e-publication product for mid-sized publishers. Still, Collinge contends that the lion’s share of digital editions are funded by publishers’ “cash cow” print products, which “are declining,” he explains. “That’s why we need

to become an efficient [print] survivor” for customers in the educational, reference, higher-ed and trade-book market segments.

Webcom is banking that its BookFWD operation will curb flat to declining sales by helping to transform the way publishers print and distribute. “Book publishers are challenged in many ways—from demanding time constraints to evolving environmental considerations,” says Collinge. “The most critical determinant of a publisher’s ability to successfully navigate these challenges is improving the financial returns of their printed product.” Translation: Large inventories of unsold books are no longer viable.

Webcom’s BookFWD comprises several modules that are customized such as STEPfwd for shorter print runs, FASTfwd for quick turnaround and STRAIGHTfwd for simplified pricing models. Each application is integrated with a BALANCEfwd program that addresses workflow, longer print runs, online complements and environmental impact.

Another reason for the growth of digital printing is profit margin: 20% to 40% compared with 1% to 4% for offset. Webcom sees another potential, too: “Of the billions of book pages printed annually in North America,” says Collinge, “less than 6% are printed digitally,” leaving plenty of room for growth.

That’s why book publishers are drawn to digital printing. “Keeping books with small demand in print increases their revenues,” says Collinge, and publishers like the ringing of all those cash registers. 

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