

Mix and Match Printing

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The Kennickell Group installed an HP Scitex FB6100 UV large-format printer to complement its standard-format digital and sheetfed printing capabilities.

HYBRID PRINT production, or the integration of digital and offset printing, can take multiple forms and be defined in different ways. Examples include digital imprinting of preprinted offset shells, running inkjet heads in-line with a web offset press or binding line, and building a common workflow for processing files output to a digital press and computer-to-plate system. While the concept may not be new, printers are finding ways to put a new spin on it.

MSP Digital Marketing, headquartered in New Canaan, CT, is making imprinting of static shells new again by inverting the usual workflow. The company recently added a Presstek 52DI-AC digital offset press to its all-digital press arsenal, which includes HP Indigo and Xerox iGen digital color presses. Part of its motivation was the ability to image variable data on blank sheets and then run them through the DI to print the static elements and apply a coating to add gloss and protection.

Jonathan Fogel, one of four partners, says the digital aspect of the press is what made the Presstek a fit for the company's DigitalXPress operation in Rockaway Township, NJ. "MSP was started with the specific objective of not being a traditional printing company," he explains. "We're working as a resource

for our clients to help them figure out the right way to communicate their messages in a digital format. We're really not defining ourselves as printers, per say, any more."

Playing the Shell Game

DigitalXPress now has the capability to run variable data in one color, potentially even on its HP Indigos, and then add full-color static elements on the DI, thereby saving click charges, Fogel points out. In addition, its sister company, TecDoc Digital in Hudson, MA, already has black-and-white variable data imprinting capabilities that can be leveraged. Similar capabilities are also under consideration for the New Jersey plant, he adds.

While the company's specialty is very targeted, highly variable pieces of communication in specific vertical markets, its clients also have a need for static printing. Doing that work on an all-digital press isn't necessarily the most efficient solution, Fogel asserts. "We have a couple of clients that have (short-run, static) work available that's a perfect fit for the DI."

Another aspect of MSP's digital foundation is having a common

workflow that extends not only across press platforms, but also across plants. Jobs, or portions of them, can be transferred between plants to take advantage of their different production capabilities and for load balancing, Fogel notes. The New Jersey facility also has a common pressroom, with the Presstek DI alongside the HP Indigos, and the operators are being cross-trained.

Putting inkjet heads in-line with a web offset press or binding line has been done for years. What's new is the resolution and color capabilities of the heads now being used by companies like Specialty Print Communications (SPC) in Niles, IL. SPC was one of the first installation sites for the CMYK configuration of the Kodak Prosper S10 imprinting system with a 600 dpi resolution. The web, sheetfed and digital printer also runs monochrome versions of the Prosper S10 and Versamark DS6240 heads in-line with its four web presses.

"We call it four-color, hybrid imaging," says Dustin LeFebvre, executive vice president of marketing. "We're combining the operational efficiency and functional versatility of web in-line printing with the variability and relevance of digital imaging."

LeFebvre sees this capability as an alternative to the fully inkjet production web presses now on

the market. The latest generation of imaging units produce four-color process printing at a quality and resolution level that customers accept

for printing variable content, he notes, while the web offset press and in-line finishing combination provides greater format flexibility "at a really good price point."

SPC needs to be able to meet its clients' demands for highly relevant, data-driven marketing communications on a very compact production schedule, according to LeFebvre. "We might receive a file with 500,000 to a million names or more on Wednesday, get the job ap-

proval on Thursday and then have the pieces in the mail on Friday."

In response to a customer request, the company recently has gotten into another application that combines its digital and offset capabilities. SPC was doing lettershop fulfillment for a program that included loyalty cards provided to it, then the client asked the printer if it would start producing the cards, as well. "So, we jumped into R&D mode, and we're now printing sheets of cards on our sheetfed presses (a Heidelberg Speedmaster XL105 and a 102P) and then leveraging digital technology to variably image the cards."

The card shells may be imprinted in black with personalized data and simple barcodes on up to full variable color, most frequently on one of the shop's three Kodak Nex-press color presses. The sheets are then laminated and diecut into the member cards that are tipped onto a base mailer printed via sheetfed or web offset.

One Workflow for All

Even with the wide variation of the work in terms of run length, format and production processes, SPC is able to efficiently process all of its jobs through a common workflow, according to John Gaspari, vice president of operations. It has had to beef up some of its resources to keep pace with the increase in customers' imaging demands spurred by the color and resolution capabilities of the Prosper S10 heads, he adds.

"Customers are very excited about it and they keep pushing us," Gaspari reports. "Rather than running one or two heads—mainly for name, address and maybe a barcode—with variable four-color, they are now looking at how to change more areas of their product. So it's four or five, up to even eight, heads of variable data for a job. With the quality of these heads, clients are also looking for ways to reduce plate changes by making black changes digitally."

Having added standard-format digital printing to the firm's sheetfed offset services some five years earlier, last year The Ken-

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for more on how these companies decide what's printed digital vs. offset, and to view a video of SPC's operation.

Hybrid Production*(Continued from page 24)*

nickell Group, in Savannah, GA, extended its capabilities to large-format digital printing by installing an HP Scitex FB6100 UV inkjet printer. Banners, retail signage and even vehicle wraps are the typical types of work it produces, but the device's flatbed printing capabilities open up opportunities to print directly on a wide range of substrates, notes Al Kennickell, president.

Since the shop's sheetfed presses top out at 40", there wasn't any potential for offset/digital crossover in the large-format arena like with its toner-based digital printing. However, Kennickell estimates that 80 percent of the company's customers were sending large-format work elsewhere. "We passed break even the first month we had the flatbed, just by capturing the

work that our clients were already doing and giving to other printers."

At the larger project level, though, the company has found opportunities to leverage even all three of its platforms. College hockey games are one example, Kennickell says, since they draw big attendance due to the lack of a professional team in the area. The shop has used its full range of capabilities to produce programs, tickets, posters and even under-ice signage. Trade show work and events like the fashion show staged by the local art college, for which it printed a 100-plus-page program and all the signage, are other good examples.

Jobs are processed via the same workflow, whether they are destined for either of the digital presses or sent to the computer-to-plate system. All of the devices sit on the network and receive PDFs from the prepress department.

Fulfilling Inkjet's Promise

Crossover of a different sort—between the company's extensive fulfillment operation and large-format digital capabilities—is what has Kennickell more intrigued at the moment. He sees potential in offering storefronts through which clients can order work produced on all three of the shop's platforms, either printed on-demand or inventoried and shipped out by the fulfillment department.

Kennickell is also excited about the opportunities afforded by the firm's latest digital addition, a Xanté Ilumina GT digital color envelope press. Capitalizing on the attention-getting power of direct mail pieces with variable images and data had been a challenge for fund-raisers because sending a donation via return envelope is still a popular option, he notes.

"We're going to start taking some of the really cool things we did on

postcards (variable images, personalized URLs, etc.) and print them on envelopes, so our fund-raiser clients can send an envelope that really jumps out when it comes in the mail," explains the company president. That makes it possible to include a return envelope and potentially other static pieces in the mailer.

As a final thought, Kennickell offers a completely different twist on digital/offset integration. His business recently invested in video equipment and training so it can include QR (Quick Response) codes and links in all of its offset and digital promotional pieces, which take people to videos on YouTube starring its sales reps. Its video production services are also be marketed to clients. **PI**