

Printing Signs of the Times

By Erik Cagle
SENIOR EDITOR

IN AN age where electronics have done an effective job of dehumanizing the interpersonal experience—be it through smart phones, social media and other outlets that have transformed the face-to-face encounter into the face-to-LCD screen—there is still something to be said for the value of relationship building by picking up a phone or getting together over coffee.

Fortunately, the business-to-business world still reaps great benefits and value from relationships. Case in point is Marketing Services by Vectra, a multifaceted digital, screen, sheetfed and web offset printer based in Columbus, OH. As recently as 1992, the company focused exclusively on fulfillment services while its president, Craig Taylor, sold printing for Central Dayton of Dayton, OH.

Vectra has been growing exponentially over the last 20 years largely due to Taylor's penchant for seeking out opportunities that can address his customers' needs, and put a few bucks in the company's pocket at the same time. Like many printers, Taylor has found great value in industry peer groups. It was through the Joe Becker BBL venture that he met Joe Ostreicher, COO of Edison Lithograph & Printing in North Bergen, NJ (and January's *PI* cover subject).

Taylor and Ostreicher both seized on opportunities. When another Columbus company, Amerigraph, went out of business in 2007, Vectra acquired Amerigraph's screen printing assets. Ostreicher flew out to Amerigraph to inspect (and later purchase) an 81" KBA Rapida press. The two men touched



The newest members of the Vectra equipment arsenal for signage production include a pair of eight-color EFI VUTEk GS3200 superwide-format UV printers.

base and talked about how they could forge a mutually rewarding relationship.

"We put together a joint agreement where we sell their large-format, 81" output to our customers and we provide some digital work for their clientele," Taylor explains. "It's been very good for our clients, because they (Edison) produce a quality product."

Wide Array of Offerings

Taylor knows a thing or two about quality products. His 211-employee company services the needs of the retail (big-box stores), fashion, quick-service restaurant, financial and communications markets—many of which include brand-sensitive organizations. Vectra provides an exhaustive array of products and marketing services, including commercial printing, direct mail, point-of-purchase, kit packing and fulfillment, inventory and database management, premiums and promotions.

Its digital capabilities include small- and wide-format printing for signage, canvas and vinyl banners, variable data printing, test store concept prints, custom store displays, mock-ups and high-end photographic signs. Six HP units grace the digital department, including the wide-format CoreJet (126") and TurboJet (145") models, a Z6100 and a 5500 (both 60"), and two 18" 5500s. Rounding out the 18" division is a trio of Kodak Digimaster EX150s.

The G7 Master Printer's sheetfed arsenal (led by two six-color, 40" manroland Roland 700s; one conventional, one UV) produce sales

collateral, signage and direct mail collateral, among others. A pair of web offset presses—a Komori System 20 and Harris M-110—tend to the long runs of brochures, inserts, coupons sheets and direct mail, to name a few.

It pays to be fully equipped. Taylor pounced on another business proposition in 2010 when he learned that John Childers, the owner of Westland, MI-based Childers Printing & Graphics, was seeking to transition out of the business. After going over the company's financials, and taking a long look at

“ I BELIEVE THAT THE DETROIT MARKET IS GOING TO BE A TURNAROUND AREA IN REGARDS TO AN INCREASE IN SALES...WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS. ”

—Craig Taylor

how Childers' products and services complemented those offered by Vectra—many of the services that Childers Printing outsourced were being performed by Vectra—Taylor pulled the trigger on the deal, which was completed last summer.

The transaction wasn't just beneficial to Childers' clients; Vectra reaped the benefits of gaining higher-speed mail inserting equipment. "I believe that the Detroit market is going to be a turnaround area in regards to an increase in sales," Taylor



Above, action is fast and furious in Vectra's kit packing and fulfillment area. Below, examples of large-format signage printing are everywhere as workers prepare a screen printing job.



predicts. “The integration has gone well. Customer relationships have also been strengthened because of the additional services. We’re excited about what the future holds.”

The Childers acquisition was the largest that Vectra had ever consummated. Taylor won’t rule out another deal in the future but, frankly, he wasn’t even considering making any moves until he heard about John Childers’ plans.

Never Say Never

“I hesitate to say no,” Taylor remarks. “We weren’t even looking, but the industry is changing rapidly, and you have to be aware of what’s happening. Then, you can support your existing customer base and continue to grow the business.”

Further proof that Taylor & Co. are intent on growing their own business is evidenced by a recent superwide-format acquisition—two eight-color EFI VUTEk GS3200 flatbed and roll-to-roll UV printers. Vectra was in need of added capacity, and the faster productivity (up to 2,400 square feet per

hour) helped seal the deal, as did white ink capability and high-end quality.

According to Sam Shaffer, vice president of operations, Vectra went through a formal evaluation process, weighing cost variables such as ownership, ink, service and maintenance. Vectra also performed some head-to-head tests against similar offerings on the market; gauging uptime comparisons for actual throughput versus theoretical throughput.

“The ink was a big factor; we did

a real-life test with the ink,” Shaffer recalls. “There was also the quality aspect of the wider color gamut, a 12-picoliter dot, 1,000 dpi. We’d had a long-standing relationship with EFI and its entire print management system suite. So, that gave us a lot of confidence, as well.”

Chris Snyder, vice president of sales for Vectra, echoes Shaffer’s sentiments. “For us, the biggest reason we went with EFI was because the GS3200 was the best machine for the jobs we produce,” he says. “It was the right solution to meet the needs of our customers.”

The GS3200s enable Vectra to raise the bar in a highly competitive signage arena, particularly with big-box retailers, financial institutions, quick-service restaurants, fashion—virtually any brick-and-mortar environment. Shaffer also notes that the 225,000-square-foot operation will soon be beta testing VUTEK’s new MediaMaster automated

material conveyor that’s designed to further boost the GS3200’s productivity.

As for future capital expenditures, he sees the company looking at faster, more efficient in-line inkjet printing equipment. In addition, Vectra is in the market for software aimed at bolstering its cross-media/e-commerce offerings.

“We’re also keeping an eye on some disruptive technology from Memjet,” Shaffer adds. “It’s very fast and high quality; they stitch print heads together in a different way than is done now. It’s pretty exciting.”

Taylor sees the path to continued growth being paved by selling more services under one roof. That has enabled Vectra to maintain customer share even though its product offerings have evolved over time. A good experience, and a fair price, will continue to win clients’ hearts and business, regardless of the marketing services of the future.

“Our logo says ‘Vectra: Listening,’ ” Shaffer concludes. “That means listening to customers, coming up with creative solutions for what we hear and see, and always wearing our thinking caps. Our customers also like the fact that we never lose track of where we came from and how we got here.” **PI**



Vectra executives (pictured from the left) include Jeff Harmon, Chris Snyder, Craig Taylor and Sam Shaffer.

Getting a Head in the Game

By Mark Smith

TECHNOLOGY EDITOR

INKJET STILL is used as a generic label for the latest class of digital production printing systems, but as the number of products in the market continues to grow, so too does the range of imaging technologies employed. This is a marked change from the decision potential buyers have been presented with in the electrophotographic (EP) press category. While there are competitive differences in toners, fusing systems, paper paths and more, the imaging technology is fundamentally the same.

In this aspect, inkjet is more akin to traditional offset technology than other digital printing solutions. Choosing between the standard, UV/hybrid, waterless, heatset and non-heatset variations of offset carries implications for the capital and production costs, stocks that can be run and applications produced.

Differences in the inkjet imaging systems now being employed can have an impact—to varying degrees and relative to each other—on head cost, failure rate and cleaning/maintenance requirements; substrate flexibility; print resolution; color saturation; print width; and more. It doesn't quite rise to the level of an apples to oranges comparison, but the technology has very distinct flavors.

Thermal and piezoelectric drop-on-demand (DOD) inkjet imaging systems were at the heart of the first web inkjet presses to be commercialized. Examples included the HP T200/300/350 series of thermal machines and, on the piezo side, the Océ JetStream family, Truepress Jet520/EX/ZZ line (as well as Ricoh/InfoPrint Solutions' InfoPrint 5000 implementations of the technology), and the Kodak Versamark VL-Series. Then came Stream continuous inkjet with the Kodak Prosper line, and now phase-change technology with Xerox scaling it up to a production-class implementation.

As a quick recap, thermal and piezoelectric inkjet both fall into the drop-on-demand category, meaning a drop of ink is only produced when needed for printing. DOD heads, particularly thermal, have benefited from a cost advantage because of their engineering

and mass production. The heating required for thermal units restricts ink formulations, while piezo heads are more mechanically complex.

Steady Stream of Dots

Continuous inkjet (CIJ) models produce a steady stream of ink drops, with only those drops needed for printing directed to the substrate, and the rest diverted into a capture system. Kodak originally brought this technology to the production printing category with the Versamark VX5000 press, which it continues to offer, but positions differently from Prosper because of the older technology's 300x600 dpi maximum resolution.

Xerox's generically named "Production Inkjet System" is said to build on its existing solid ink technology, which extends back to Tektronix color printers and is now used in the Xerox ColorCube office line. The granulated, resin-based ink is liquified for jetting through the piezoelectric heads and then immediately re-hardens around the fibers on the surface of the paper. The company is stressing the "waterless" aspect of the printing process and says it produces vibrant, consistent color on untreated offset paper with no curling or ink soak-through.

Pigment inks have been introduced for most inkjet systems as an alternative to dye-based formulations as a way to boost color saturation and density. The diffusion of dye inks into the paper fibers contributed to the washed-out look that had hindered broader adoption of inkjet printing.

Since stitching together multiple heads is the basic design concept of every inkjet press, the imaging technology employed, theoretically,

SINCE STITCHING TOGETHER MULTIPLE HEADS IS THE BASIC DESIGN CONCEPT OF EVERY INKJET PRESS, THE IMAGING TECHNOLOGY EMPLOYED, THEORETICALLY, DOESN'T LIMIT PRESS WIDTH.

doesn't limit press width. Relative costs and other factors do impact the decision to go wider, however.

Piezoelectric models and now Xerox's solid ink product cluster around the 20½" width size. HP was able to capitalize on its thermal technology to establish a point of difference in the market by first introducing a 30" model, but has since announced the T200 with a 20½" width. Kodak split the difference with the 24½" width of its Prosper line.

The "press" part of the product category label also has some give in it. As an alternative to an all-digital machine, the option of placing heads in-line with a traditional offset press is seeing renewed interest as technology advancements have expanded the color imaging and resolution capabilities of such systems. RR Donnelley is among the companies that have made recent investments in this area, while simultaneously being in the select group of printers taking the "roll-your-own" inkjet press approach.

Until now, the latter usually involved having an all-inkjet printing platform custom-built on top of a traditional offset press frame. That press development path is being opened up to the mainstream of printing companies with the recent signing of an agreement between Donnelley and KBA.

Under the terms of the agreement, the printing behemoth will license its Apollo and other digital imaging technologies to KBA for incorporation into the sheetfed and web press manufacturer's product offerings. While specific details are still to come, the companies said they are teaming up to "develop, manufacture and sell next-generation piezoelectric inkjet printing solutions," with KBA's new digital press(es) to be introduced in May 2012 at the Drupa exhibition.

To an extent, the same dynamic exists with putting the "inkjet" label on printing papers. There are similarities and differences in how characteristics of a paper formulation will mesh with the absorption/adherence requirements of a specific imaging technology. One

"inkjet" formulation may not fit all equally well, so testing on the various makes of presses is required to guarantee paper performance.

In cooperation with the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), HP has made an attempt to standardize the performance of inkjet papers by introducing ColorPRO Technology. It establishes a set of quality specifications for papers that are verified by RIT's Printing Applications Laboratory.

Coated Grade Challenges

The trend has been for press vendors to initially promote printing on uncoated papers because their fibers facilitate the absorp-

PIGMENT INKS HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED FOR MOST INKJET SYSTEMS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO DYE-BASED FORMULATIONS AS A WAY TO BOOST COLOR SATURATION AND DENSITY.

tion or adherence of the ink, as the case may be. Coated paper support continues to evolve, either via the application of a bonding agent on the press or the manufacturing of coated papers that are more receptive to inkjet inks.

One exception to this trend is the Fujifilm J Press 720 from Fujifilm's Graphic Systems Div., which has been positioned as an inkjet press for coated paper from the start. It uses piezoelectric heads to deliver water-based inks with a "rapid coagulation" formulation, according to the manufacturer. Of course, the other big difference is that it's a sheetfed device that prints up to a maximum 29.5x20.8" sheet at a top speed of 2,700 sheets/hr.

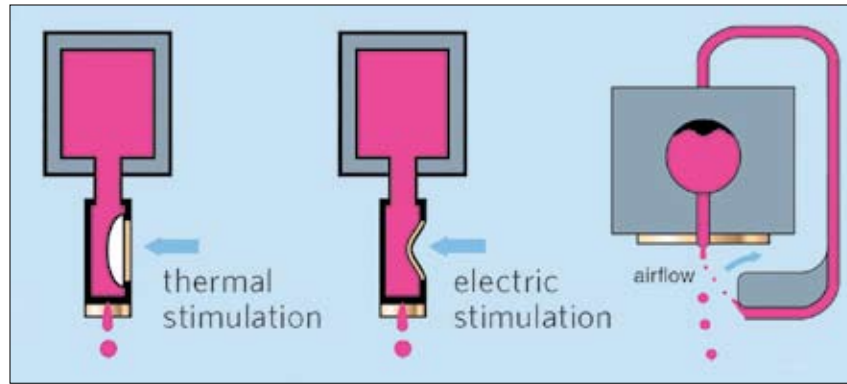
(It's worth noting that Screen has also shown a production-class cutsheet press, the 20.8x29.1" Truepress JetSX, and RISO offers the HC5500 inkjet printer with a maximum 12½x18½" printable area.)

For more on uncoated and coated papers designed to run on production inkjet web presses, see "The Paper Chase for Inkjet" companion article on page 28 in this issue.

Recyclability of materials printed

via inkjet has been raised by analysts as a potential consideration. The specifics, obviously, will vary depending on the consumables used with a given imaging technology.

All of the other due diligence that goes into any digital press buying decision—including weighing factors such as cost, vendor relationship, financing, servicing, etc.—of course, also apply to inkjet solutions. It's now more important to consider, however, that buying a press means betting on the technology that underpins it. **PI**



This conceptual diagram shows the basic process, in order, of a thermal, piezoelectric and continuous inkjet head.

Never Too Late for Profits

By Erik Cagle
SENIOR EDITOR

IN HIS song Beautiful Boy, John Lennon cautions, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” The same might be said for photo book production in the grand scheme of offerings for the printing community. It was never meant to be a cornerstone product but, as the digital printing era exploded during the past six years, it grew in popularity as an ancillary offering.

Ancillary? Well, that may be understating the truth for many companies. Manufacturing personalized photo books may not have been in the master plans but, for many companies, it has become the primary—or only—offering on the production menu. And, it promises to be one of the few markets for which explosive growth is possible for those graphic arts establishments with the right equipment, savvy marketing skills, partners and software. And, of course, golden customer service capabilities.

Ah, but not so fast, pal. Consumer demand for photo books has been gaining in popularity for several years, led by heavyweights such as Shutterfly and HP’s Snapfish. And, while our focus is photo books, there is a bevy of “social expression” products built upon this foundation—personalized calendars, key chains, mugs, posters, buttons, cards, calendars, mouse pads and countless other goods.

It’s as if promotional products married digital printing and gave birth to personalized, online Hallmark stores.

Beware, the photo book market is a finicky, moody, cyclical sector with a high customer dropout rate. The historic demographic is women ages 25 to 45, looking for that ideal gift to capture the precious memories of a birth, wedding, vacation or holiday. But, there is ample room for growth; even though most big-box stores offer photo book kiosks, research suggests that product penetration is less than 10 percent in the United States.

For those who believe the photo market is already oversaturated, a basic business tenant to consider: The first to market isn’t necessarily the best to market. Just ask Face-

book founder Mark Zuckerberg. The demographic has room for expansion beyond “life event” applications—organizations abound and those printers that are industrious enough to hammer out templates that cater to any number of social groups (scouts, youth sports, fraternities/sororities) can tap into virgin markets.

New Crop of Products

Take the case of John Arleth, CEO of Lifecaptured.com. His business, based in Minnetonka, MN, previously specialized in printing manuals for agricultural equipment. But about 10 years ago, his company took on a special personalized book project and recently began producing a personal favorite, “A Heart Apart,” which allows children to put names and faces to the experience of having a mother or father who is away from home in military service.

The text was written by two active military mothers and, by substituting the child’s names and photos, the resulting product is a very personal gift for children, as well as a coping mechanism to help them reconcile separation.

Arleth also produced a photo book specialization product called “World According to...” that entails the same personalization capabilities, where kids’ drawings and pictures are arranged to construct a story.

The printer didn’t need to acquire any new equipment to embark upon the photo book realm, though Lifecaptured.com has gone through three different digital printing platforms. Arleth finally settled on a four-color, 13x40” MGI Meteor DP60 Pro digital press, which was more economical due to no click charges and boasted production speeds commensurate with their workload needs.

Quality customer service—which sounds like a broken record—is a point of differentiation for Arleth, who has a blog (blog.lifecaptured.com) that provides tips and techniques for creating photo books. The books are 100 percent guaranteed.



Templates can enhance the most common themes, including weddings.

Don’t like the product?

You’ll get a new one. You dropped the product in the toilet? You’ll get a new one. Lost in a fire? Ditto.

“People love that,” he remarks. “It’s the same way we treated farmers and the ag people back in the day, when customer service was much more focused, and the interaction among customers was much slower and quieter.

“Nobody takes advantage of it. (Reprints are) probably less than one half of one percent of our business. In one case, someone lost everything they had in a fire. It touches your heart, so you’re actually happy to do it.”

Why is this degree of customer service so integral for Lifecaptured.com? And why does Arleth rely on word of mouth? To get an edge.

“We’re facing people like Shutterfly, which is giving 50 percent off on a book every day,” he says.

With heavy hitters like Shutterfly and Snapfish unveiling hundreds and hundreds of templates, Lifecaptured.com has had to dig a little deeper. The firm recently contracted a designer to help develop more templates.

Other print-related industries have found photo books to be viable revenue streams. Consider Copy Control Management (CCM) Graphic Solutions, of Tampa, FL, which debuted 25 years ago as a facilities management company providing onsite printing capabilities for the legal industry. Following an ownership change that prompted a noncompete clause, the firm added digital printing to widen its scope. It began to “dabble” in photo books roughly two years ago, according to Don Cayo, CEO of CCM.

A Great Leave Behind

CCM’s photo book capabilities were, for all intents, initially used as a catalyst to showcase the quality of short-run color printing. The company used photo books as leave-behind gifts from an event it co-sponsored, and it enabled CCM to land an account with the National Hockey League’s Tampa Bay Lightning to provide all digital printing services. That segued CCM’s photo book status from dabbling to viable.

Getting the photo book bandwagon rolling wasn’t difficult, but the online storefront aspect provided its share of headaches. Its first entry point solution worked fine, but proved to be too limited in the long run, so the firm turned to a developer. CCM wanted to differentiate itself and have a greater variety of templates available. In the end, the company partnered with a photo book software developer that had the ability to embed and activate the unique templates that CCM and its affiliates require.

There were no real obstacles for CCM to overcome from a production standpoint. The company already had Xerox iGen3 and iGen4 digital color presses in place, and turned to Powis Parker to acquire the necessary bindery gear. “Other than the software, there’s really nothing needed to move into the space,” Cayo observes.

In taking on the business-to-consumer (B2C) segment, CCM found itself in foreign territory, according to Cayo. “It’s a whole different marketplace that requires a different approach,” he notes. “It

Photo Books

(Continued from page 29)

requires large investments in marketing through the Internet, pushing up through Google. It's a whole different ball game that we're still not totally comfortable with yet."

Cayo & Co. have been more in their element marketing B2B on a regional basis, building relationships with organizations such as the universities of Tennessee, South Florida and Central Florida. By white labeling affinity groups and developing custom sports templates for the universities, CCM can sidestep the crowded national market.

"We don't believe we can compete effectively with the five or six (national) organizations out there; they're buying up market share," Cayo adds. "Shutterfly spends between \$8 and \$10 a user to get them signed up. It's very expensive to go out and try to buy that business, so our approach is more toward developing vertical markets and targeting those marketplaces. That's why we're required to use different templates, to find an inexpensive way to build a landing page for the affinity group."

Have Book, Will Travel

Some companies rely almost entirely on partners to drive customers to their photo book solution. One example is Vancouver, British Columbia-based Contac Services, a business process outsourced solutions provider that specializes in single-source supply chain solutions. The firm takes care of distribution for 95 percent of Canada's travel-related marketing materials, according to Garry Gunter, associate vice president.

Contac relies on its travel agency partners to help promote its photo book offering, which is less than a year old. Once travel customers have booked their travel through one of Contac's agency partners, the customer is sent a personalized Website (PURL), generated based on their profile, that includes a link to create a photo book based on the holiday. Schedule a Hawaiian vacation and the PURL will include links that will enable the traveler

to assemble a memory book via the photos taken during the trip, enhanced by the Contac-created templates. Once the application is downloaded, it can be accessed for future use.

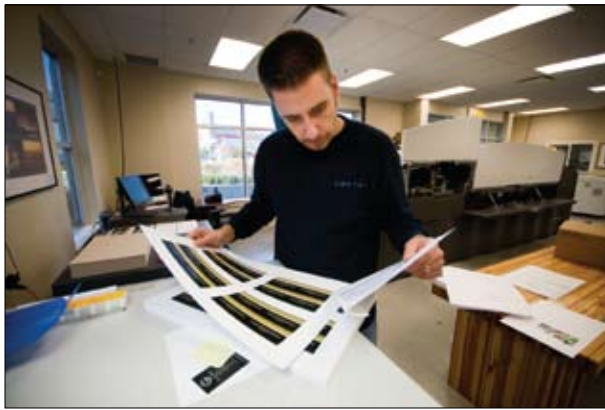
"We realized that through the distribution of this travel merchandise—and given our CEO's relationships with the CEOs and presidents of these tour operators—that it was the perfect platform upon which (our clients) could get to know their customers better," Gunter says. "We can create these photo books through (the travel companies') own Websites, and they can, in turn, engage their clients and bring them back more and more often."

Backed by Kodak's Prinergy workflow and the digital print production capabilities from Kodak NexPress and Xerox iGen presses, Contac found itself in need of some finishing solutions to get its photo book production in gear. Unibind came through with solutions for case binding and Duplo USA stepped up to the plate with its perfect binding solutions.

One of the key objectives for Contac Services has been maintaining focus. Given the deluge of printed personalized trinkets, Gunter recognized that it would be beneficial to stick to an area where consolidated runs could help them lead to better managed costs. Case covered and perfect-bound photo books—not mugs and key chains—speak to Contac's proficiency for producing quality products in a timely and efficient manner.

While Contac's clients drive end users to the photo book site, Gunter says the company still goes to great lengths to promote this offering. Contac also works with its partners to create discounts and other promotions around certain holidays.

While photo books certainly fall in the supplementary category for Contac, Gunter is encouraged by growth opportunities via non-travel outlets such as social media. Sites such as Facebook open themselves up to viral marketing potential. Users would have their hard copy photo book, as well as a shareable digital version online, which would



Once an ancillary offering, photo books have proven to be a lucrative cornerstone product, as well.

coax friends and family into creating their own books. Gunter also sees potential in securing the use of licensed images for intermixing with personal photos.

Getting Personal

Another interesting case lies with RPI of Seattle. The firm started out in 1979 as a commercial printer focused on software manuals and corporate prospectuses. But fate stepped in during the late 1990s. Ted Reischling, the owner's son, created a note pad with various pictures of his child to demonstrate variable printing capabilities that were being marketed to insurance and medical companies back then.

One person who got wind of the product worked at a large e-commerce company, and convinced Reischling to create a prototype to illustrate how to market the products directly to consumers. The prototype evolved into a full-fledged Website, named ipads.com, which powered personalized stationery for several photo sharing sites. By 2006, RPI had sold off the commercial printing operations and concentrated solely on personalized consumer printing products.

Today, RPI is a print-on-demand producer of private label, personalized photo books, greeting cards and stationery products for mass and specialty retailers. The company no longer runs the digital storefront in order to channel its efforts into the design, manufacturing and fulfillment of products as a B2B provider for retailers and online publishers.

"The decision to focus on photo products and turn the company

into more of a consumer products firm, and less of a print job shop, certainly has provided a beneficial platform for the business," RPI CEO Rick Bellamy says.

Peak gift-giving seasons are a double-edged sword for RPI; business quadruples during the holiday gift-giving season, and the company must both brace

and preplan for the seasonal peaks and valleys capacity-wise. But, as RPI continues to establish itself as a leader in the photo book realm, it continues to flesh out new avenues for growth, recognize untapped demographics and produce exciting, fresh templates that enable its retail clients to become more competitive in the highly crowded market.

RPI has formed a close relationship with HP, and that is reflected in the printer's press line, which consists of an HP Indigo 7200, a 5500 and a 6000p. The RPI production floor is also replete with On Demand Machinery gear, including ODM Stickers, Smashers and case-making lines.

Sure, the process of jamming 4x6" photos into a box or inserting them in an adhesive album is on the fast track to joining cassette tapes and typewriters. But, once the other 60 percent of Americans catch on and eventually the novelty of photo books wears off, the "me, too" book providers will give way to those companies that will devise techniques to reinvent and refresh the product as it matures.

"We're helping our partners to manage the category through trend data and innovative products," Bellamy says. "We are seeing various demographics, what they're ordering and not ordering, both in terms of products—books, stationery, calendars, note pads or note cards—as well as the graphic design templates in the background." **PI**

Visit the Current Issue section of



www.PIworld.com



for bonus coverage on advice for photo book neophytes.