Taking Their Output Off-line

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THE VARIABILITY of work is the wild card element when it comes to finishing in-line, off-line or near-line in a digital printing environment. More and more, it seems some in the printing community are leaning toward off-line finishing, which could be a long-term trend as opposed to fashion du jour.

As printers become more specialized, it makes the in-/near-/off-line decision making process clearer. Turnover times and run lengths continue to shorten, but the need for quality hasn't been compromised, prompting many printers to take their finishing functions off-line.

One printer with a focused specialization is Arvato Digital Services, with a division that specializes in supply chain management for the healthcare industry, especially pre- and post-enrollment materials, which are saddlestitched or perfect bound and combined with various other printed collateral.

"Our page counts fluctuate dramatically from piece to piece," notes Todd Potrykus, director of print-on-demand for Arvato Digital Services. "We take care of a lot of the production management by systematically setting them up for gang runs based on similar page counts. We have to make sure, from our saddlestitching needs, to our perfect binding needs, that the equipment we have is able to change quickly or change on-the-fly to handle the variable page counts."

Among Arvato's finishing gear are three Standard Horizon StitchLiner 5500 stitchers, a Standard BQ-270C perfect binder and a BQ-470 perfect binder. The company recently acquired a Muller Martini Sigma perfect binder, which is actually a near-line machine. Their commonality—the ability to bounce back and forth from page counts of 100 to 300 to 250, wherever the customer need takes Arvato.

"A big advantage of (the Sigma binder) was the ability to change on-the-fly," Potrykus says.

On the digital printing end, Arvato Digital relies on four Océ continuous-feed machines—three VarioStream 7650s and a DemandStream 8090—along with two cutsheet Océ 6250s.

Arvato's is extremely thankful for the level of technology now available on the finishing end, as there was a period where the company relied on a different stitching platform that was "quite painful," according to Potrykus. It had trouble processing the daily output of 60,000 to 70,000 personalized books with varying page counts.

Can't Afford High Waste

"When we went to the StitchLiner, our waste numbers decreased dramatically," he notes. "Every book is very unique, so we're not in a position where we can run overs because they're all personalized to the end user."

Off-line is the finishing of choice for Publishers' Graphics of Carol Stream, IL. The company, which bills itself as a "book of one" print-on-demand (POD) production facility, is another print provider where zero waste and zero defects are givens. It caters to large, small and independent publishers, with a sweet spot of hardcover and softcover academic books, and a newer focus on yearbooks and photo albums. It even offers clients an online bookstore and an electronic book repository.

While standardization is not as prevalent for Publishers' Graphics, which opened its doors in 1996, the company has taken great pains to streamline its processes. Publishers' Graphics recently added polyurethane reactive (PUR)—a popular adhesive option known for lay-flat book capabilities—to its binding arsenal. It tapped Standard Horizon for its BQ-470PUR perfect binder.

"Any time you're dealing with PUR for hardcover binding, you have to make sure that it cures properly," notes Nick Lewis, president and owner of Publishers' Graphics. "It's a little shift in philosophy as opposed to EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate) glues."

Quick Turns Necessary

Speed to market is paramount for Publishers' Graphics due to its "book of one" workflow; the sell-and-print model has an average turnaround time of three to five days from order to delivery.

An operator at Publishers' Graphics keeps pace with a Standard Horizon BQ-470PUR perfect binder, which produces lay-flat books.

Publishers' Graphics uses a number of digital printing platforms, including Konica Minolta, Xerox, Canon and Océ. Lewis notes that when the company debuted, the biggest obstacle was finding sufficiently vigorous finishing equipment.

"When we first started, the smallest equipment wasn't built as strong as the large Kolbus and Muller Martini lines," he notes. "We opted to go with this short-run philosophy in 1996. In doing so, we had to redo a lot of things with the machine to make sure the glues, the milling units, and the bonds were as strong as the publishers had been accustomed to."

Mark Mader has long followed the progression of digital printing, and jumped at the chance to be an Indigo digital press user at the time the company was acquired by HP, which helped seal the deal for Aptech Graphics. The North Providence, RI-based company has enjoyed much success as a provider of digital labels for the food, home goods, private labeling, consumer products and promotional products sectors.

Aptech's off-line laser diecutting capabilities, a Cartes 350, provide the face for products ranging from beer to seafood and surfboard wax. "Because of the laser diecutting and our ability to do so many different shapes and sizes without any cost, we tend to work well in the short-run arena, anywhere from 100 to 100,000," Mader says. "We've actually done in the millions, too, just not as often as we'd like."

Mader prefers commonality among the substrates that churn through his Indigo ws2000, as there isn't a viable volume of specialized materials to justify the resulting time and expense. Many of the more typical jobs are done for fellow printers, who then perform their own specialized converting to produce items such as hanging cards mounted on extruded vinyl.

Going forward, Mader hopes to update his press to the Indigo WS4500 or WS6000 press, as well as converting with a traditional servo-driven diecutting system to match speeds. "We want to have machinery that matches so there isn't a bottleneck," he adds. ***PI***