

COMBINING LARGE AND SMALL

Mike Horsten outlines why the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts



Mike Horsten

Ever wondered why people like big things? Maybe it's just that we like to impress. The world of digital print has been impressing many of us over the past several years with faster performance, more colours and bigger sizes. The idea that every print can be different has been one of the most attractive additions digital printing has brought to the print world. In fact, digital has driven a significant revolution in printing, which has come a long way since Gutenberg and even since offset dominated in the last century as more capabilities in toner-based digital print were brought to the market. Now, the latest ink-jet technologies are set to take digital printing to the next level.

Many of the conventional suppliers to the printing industry have left the building or have embraced new digital technologies. But their heritage has caused them to approach these developments with the conventional processes always in mind. Creative thinking was never the objective; the objective was to find replacements for older technology, reducing the amount of chemicals required and the time required for producing printing plates. In effect, they have adopted digital technologies as a way of protecting their share of the global print volume, which is increasingly migrating to digital technologies, with or without their participation.

CYCLE TIME IS NO LONGER AN ISSUE

So what is the next step for printing? The wide distribution of these new systems has helped customers understand that cycle time is not an issue anymore. Delivery times are faster and the output is high quality. Still, there are many screen-printers in the world that have not yet embraced digital production methods. This has primarily been due to the price of the equipment investment, or their lack of understanding the business model around digital. But all of that is changing with the growing number of flat-bed UV-LED ink-jet printers, now available in the market.

The opportunities are almost limitless, and the time to produce small runs is less than the time it takes to even make the screens with old technologies. Plus, digital technologies don't require noxious chemicals, long set-ups and make-readies, and cleaning of screens between jobs. If the quality and speed of digital can surpass that delivered by screen-printing and, as the economic order quantities for digital continue to climb, we believe the writing is on the wall for screen-printing, just as it has been for some time for offset printing. Neither will go away fully, but their importance in the scope of things is declining. And print service providers in these segments must certainly take the leap and invest in digital technologies, if they have not done so already. It's becoming a matter of survival.

AFFORDABLE DIGITAL SOLUTIONS

At Mimaki, we have been able to produce an affordable digital solution that will help screen-printers move into digital. Our smaller format flat-bed printer with a size of 2.50 x 1.30m has been the right solution to replace a great deal of screen-print production. The use of a full colour printer means that there are no registration problems and the need to rasterise a 60-line screen has disappeared. We now even have contone printing at the size of a screen.

Not only that, we have been able to eliminate all the chemicals, meaning print operators can now have a clean and environmentally sustainable work space – no ink on the floor, no screens to clean, and the

space required to store screens can be put to better use. Now you can print on demand what the customer needs with no fuss.

But there is more! The big news is that you can also combine the two technologies in a hybrid model, just as is being done in the offset world. Just imagine pre-printing using screen and imprinting using digital. This would save even more time and money. An example would be supermarket posters. The logo and background can be printed in volume using the screen process and, with UV-LED white ink, you could digitally overprint to highlight the products on sale each week. This way you get exactly the amount of posters needed with no screen changes. It dramatically improves the cost model and reduces cycle time. This brings back margins and locks in customers. And it gives both you and your customers the ability to be even more creative.

THE TIME IS RIGHT

With the current affordable digital flat-bed solutions that start around 70,000 euros, there is no longer any need to wait for the right time to make that digital investment. The time is now.

We urge you to continue to think big, but also to look for the smaller advantages that can be added to your business by incorporating digital flat-bed printing. No chemicals, no smell, no hassle; just print and make profit. And, with hybrid production that combines the two technologies, you can continue to get value from your older screen-printing investments, extending their useful life while significantly expanding your range of offerings. This is clearly a case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. ■

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