

Musings of a Carolina Print Curmudgeon

This installment in the series of printing industry observations, designed to alert printers to emerging industry trends and profit opportunities by analyst and consultant Bill Lamparter, focuses on digital printing and Drupa '08 expectations. More detailed technological commentary as Drupa '08 approaches will be posted on the PICA web site.

Lamparter is principal of the PrintCom Consulting Group with an international clientele of printers and industry suppliers. He is well-known for 'telling it like it is' which is how he comes by the curmudgeon moniker. He often asks provocative questions. PrintCom's offices are located in Waxhaw, NC. He can be contacted at (704) 843-5350 or by e-mail at printcom@aol.com. Comments and questions about his observations are welcome.

Digital Innovation and Confusion Continue Drupa the Next Technology Superstore

Graph Expo 2007 was a digital print show with digital technology embedded into almost everything from prepress to platemaking, offset analog presses, bindery equipment with touch screen controls and, of course, both mono-color and full process color variable imaging-capable digital presses.

At Graph Expo there were more digital presses on the show floor churning out more print samples than there were conventional presses printing the ever popular posters and similar take-homes. Many of the newbies to digital print and the digital press manufacturers performed claims, which intermix resolution, speed, actual throughput --- one-sided or perfecting --- and paper weights to be downright confusing. Expect the specification obscuration to continue into Drupa and beyond.

Drupa '08 will clearly be a digital exposition and most probably will be christened the "ink jet Drupa." Drupa is expected to unleash a new round of both digitally controlled and monitored offset equipment as well as wider, faster, higher output quality digital presses including the Xerox just-announced xerographic 226 feet per minute web press and the much alluded- to Kodak Versamark stream technology ink jet equipment. IBM and Screen, both of whom use Epson imaging heads but different software, will be prominatly touting their ink jet approach. So will others --- toner, ink jet and analog offset as well as hybrids that incorporate both ink jet and offset in a single machine.

Digital ink jet wide format equipment that produces better than photographic quality will permeate the fairgrounds. It is anticipated that the number of manufacturers offering a proliferating variety of wide format brands and models will peak at drupa '08. As the market becomes saturated and gradually but globally becomes a replacement market subject to digital electronic and e-paper substitution, look for a shakeout starting in 2009.

Current progress reports from recent conferences on ink jet developments indicate advancements in product functionality, cost performance and print quality --- we have seen some samples of the future that are impressive! The PrintCom Consulting forecast is for major ink jet advances to be unveiled at Drupa, marking the beginning of a process battle between digital toner and ink jet.

During the four years between Drupa '08 and the global show's next outing in 2012, the two digital processes will offer often confusing claims and counter-claims as they fight for market share. By 2012, each will have claimed the market segments most appropriate for their capabilities while offset process share continues to be displaced and shrink.

Digital developments which make the process more universally applicable give rise to speculation about the future of traditional offset only press manufacturers. Can a

press manufacturer live on offset alone For how long? Drupa could well bring some new digital press entries including surprising offset-digital alliances or mergers.

For individual printers, digital developments give rise to a similar question --- can a printer who has not adopted some form of digital printing continue to survive without it? It is a question for each printer to individually answer --- but to do so requires an up-to-date education in digital printing developments. Drupa is the place to get that education. One caveat about Drupa is the fact that many of the products introduced at that show are not commercially available in the U.S. until Graph Expo in the Fall. A reason why some printers stay away from Drupa and focus on Graph Expo and its up-to-date educational sessions. The printer who is in jeopardy is the one who stays home all of the time and fails to understand the opportunities offered by new technology.