

Musings of a Carolina Print Curmudgeon - II

This is the second in a series of printing industry observations designed to alert printers to emerging industry trends and profit opportunities by analyst and consultant Bill Lamparter. More detailed commentary from the On Demand Digital Printing Show 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 Print Growth and Capability Accelerates

By William C. Lamparter, PrintCom Consulting Group

Clearly evident at last month's Boston-held combined AIIM¹ and On Demand Conferences and Exhibitions was digital print's continuously improving software versatility and ease of use along with print engine improvements in speed, image and color quality, cost effective output and end-to-end production control. The combination of these process improvements is the catalyst for digital print's capability to replace offset in a growing number of applications and to create unique high value new products through variable imaging capabilities.

¹ AIIM (so-called because it was once the Association for Information and Image Management, which was originally created in 1943 as the National Microfilm Association) emphasizes content software and the management of documents, content, records, and business processes. The organization now known as the Enterprise Content Management Association (ECM) focuses on the technologies and tools used to capture, manage, store, preserve and deliver content and documents related to organizational processes. Print-on-demand is a phrase broadly describing digital printing created by Charles A. Pesko, President of InfoTrends (formerly CAP Ventures), a widely known digital printing industry consulting group. While there is some software overlap, On Demand focuses on digital presses and binding/finishing.

How to cost effectively improve old print and to create new print was what the almost 25,000 combined show attendees saw 422 exhibitors present and heard discussed in over 50 conference sessions. What were once two separate shows have now effectively been combined in one, although each has its own separate seminar sessions. The combination spans the digital print world from creation to delivery.

Toner-based digital print products dominated the On Demand segment of the show floor while ink jet presses were a harbinger of digital presses that some analysts, including this one, believe will catapult digital printing into a leading industry-wide role in the mid-term future. Bindery equipment was prominent, both in the booths of digital press manufacturers as well as from standalone postpress suppliers.

The only offset presses on the show floor were two Direct Imaging (DI) models from Presstek and the Screen TruePress 344. Although sometimes mis-categorized as a digital press, DI equipment is a highly automated offset press with onboard computer-to-plate and no variable imaging capability.

The ink jet harbinger that could disrupt toner's dominance of digital production printing was unveiled in a seminar session by Bill McGlynn, CEO of Memjet Services. McGlynn is the former HP executive who played a major role in HP's purchase of Indigo. Memjet is an ink jet development from Australian research company Silverbrook Laboratories that does not manufacture products but licenses its developments. No equipment using the Memjet technology was shown at the show and the technology has not yet penetrated the production digital color market. The Memjet technology promises the high resolution, throughput and economics necessary for high volume digital print markets. Meanwhile, in the not-yet-commercial wings are new improved strains of ink jet technology from Hewlett Packard and Kodak.

Highlighting the potential of ink jet technology was a keynote panel moderated by Charlie Corr of InfoTrends with representatives from Xerox, IBM Printing Systems, HP and Kodak, debating the pros and cons of toner-based systems versus ink jet. The debate

conclusions: toner will continue to dominate in the short term; watch ink jet for the mid-term; in the long term both will play an important role in the marketplace. A more detailed technology analysis of toner and ink jet development trends will be found on PICA's web site (www.picanet.org).

Quietly discussed but generally under the radar was the increasing quality capabilities and speed of digital printers, both toner and ink jet designed for the office including the office-in-the-home markets. As the capability of this equipment has increased, short run print jobs previously sent to commercial digital printers are being self-produced in the office. The net result is an erosion of commercial digital print volume. The remedy for the commercial printer is to emphasize longer runs, more sophisticated variable imaging, and value-added peripheral services.

Although the shows provided an avalanche of technology, perhaps the most interesting trend was the increasing emphasis on the business and 'how to make a profit' sides of digital printing. For more about the technology as well as business issues, go to PICA's web site www.picanet.org, News/PICA Scanner/Article Name.