

Digital vs. Digital – The big match

whitepaper

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As we move further and further into a digital age the question of “what is true digital print” keeps coming up and as the various technologies evolve, we need a better understanding of where we are heading in this digital world and how this will impact on conventional litho offset printing.

If we take conventional litho offset as ‘the standard’ in terms of quality and speed then as digital approaches this benchmark the narrowing gap between what is recognisable as digital print compared to Litho closes thus, opening up new applications for the digital press.

Direct Imaging, the answer to short run colour printing?

A few years ago, it was the belief that digital print was substandard compared to conventional offset litho. This lowered the buyers’ expectation of quality from the digital press and therefore, tarred some of the higher end technologies with the same brush.

The Direct Imaging press or ‘Di’ as it is known provided true offset quality and speed and yet was lumped under the digital banner and consequently, when marketed as a digital press, did not do the equipment any favours. I believed at the time that this technology was the way forward in the short run colour market however, it was the eventual step up of quality in the toner based digital print market and the improvement in the conventional presses make ready speeds which started to turn things around.

The Direct Imaging press still has its place after all, most nearly all conventional print arrives on a sheet in a similar way - computer to plate. And it’s this very same process, when coupled with a highly automated conventional press, which is now the main contender in the short run colour printing market. While the toner based manufacturers worked on ways of improving engine speed and quality, the conventional press manufacturers were busy making their machines quicker to make ready. All this has had an impact on the Direct Imaging press’ market. In the end it’s the mammoth rise of variable data printing which has left the static data, Direct Imaging press firmly fixed in the short run colour market place.

Toner Based Technologies and on-demand printing - a match made in heaven?

As the demand for colour grew, photocopier manufactures realised they could have a bigger share of the global print market if they could make their engines print in colour. These machines were largely ignored by printers who considered them to be nothing more than an office copier.

The giants of the copier market had other ideas and with the birth of the third generation of machines the ‘office copier’ tag was well and truly banished as the likes of Xerox, Kodak and Canon continue to produce some ground breaking equipment. These machines have all but dominated the print on-demand market and coupled with ever faster page per minute speeds and increasing quality have worked their way into other markets as a result.

Many traditionalists still view this technology as inferior to conventional print as the 'waxy' look and feel of the print does not conform to the preconceived norm. In my view, the vibrant results produced (particularly on uncoated stocks) are far superior to that of conventional offset and in fact, these machines produce some of the best printed results (aside from inkjet).

Digital offset - the Holy Grail?

Liquid toner - Indigo had the answer many years ago when it introduced its first offset digital press. Combining laser technology with liquid ink in an offset 'press' gave the versatility of a digital print engine with the look and feel of a conventionally printed sheet. From a printer's perspective this was dream technology and by the time the series 2 and then the series 3 machines hit the market place, HP Indigo press engines were well established as one of the leaders in digital print. Finally there was a true match to litho quality from a machine which could handle a wide range of conventional materials, coupled with the versatility to handle variable data print - The Holy Grail? Not quite. HP have a long way to go to even get close to the speed of a conventional press and as one of the most expensive engines to build, maintain and run, it will be some time before they can dominate any market. However, what the press loses to speed and cost per copy compared to other technologies, it gains in versatility and quality over the rest. I believe that until 'the next best thing' comes along then, HP Indigo will continue to set the standards in digital print. And until the death of printed media we can expect some exciting and innovative products along the way.

Market impact

The commercial printing market by and large has responded to the changes brought about by the digital revolution. At my company - Prime Group, we have employed this technology since the birth of the third generation machines nearly 5 years ago. And by keeping up the investment programme and constantly looking into ways we can make the technology work for us, we have succeeded where others have been less fortunate.

At Prime, we continue to use both digital and conventional printing methods but as the results are pretty similar as there is less and less to distinguish between the two in terms of quality. And whilst the litho market has been in decline for some time (being eaten away at one end by short run digital and at the other by over capacity in the industry), our digital department has grown beyond recognition.

I'd like to say that this was purely down to the hardware but in reality, it's the impact created when combining this with our powerful front end tools for personalisation. The production techniques used at Prime have also allowed us to enter new markets and by and large, we have concentrated our marketing efforts along this path. The upshot has been sustained turnover for the conventional side as the two processes have complimented each other and even crossed over on some projects. It'll be some time before we are in a completely digital printing environment but by the time that day comes, will there still be the need to print anything - who knows?

Adrian Tolley - Director, Prime Group.