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# Does Offset Printing Have a Future?

Of course it does! Taking a quick look back—and a long look forward—at the graphic arts technology that laid the foundation for an industry.

By Jeffrey Steele

**T**oday, some print service professionals may be asking if offset printing still has a future in the industry. When addressing that issue, it is essential to examine offset's recent history, said Bruce Leigh Myers, assistant professor, School of Media Sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY.

"Through the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, offset benefited from technological advances that allowed printers to improve productivity," he reported.

Improvements were most notably evident in shorter makeready. Shorter makereadies and higher overall productivity enabled offset printers to effectively accept jobs of lower run lengths, capturing more of the market. But the robust economy of that period came to an end with the recession toward the end of the decade, and the shrinking business climate adversely effected lithographers as well as the vendor community, especially traditional printing press manufacturers.

With the recession's sharp reduction in business, many companies went out of business or merged with other entities. The result was a glut of used equipment on the market, and press manufactur-

ers were dramatically impacted. Some markets are shells of their former selves, at both the sophisticated end of the market as well as the less complicated end. For instance, annual report printing once represented tremendous opportunities for the best lithographers, not to mention professional photographers and graphic designers.

"Today, many public companies eschew the expensive paper and high-quality imagery in favor of annual reports that are less flashy, almost purely functional in nature," Myers noted. "Printing of automotive brochures is another example of a largely diminished market at the top end of the commercial scale.

"At the other end of the market, offset forms printers and the smaller, fast-turnaround duplicator markets also have suffered, due to advantages in digi-

tal printing and copying functionality, even before the most recent recession," he explained.

In recent years, there have not been revolutionary technological advances imparting new paradigms, affecting widespread segments of the market. But the offset printing market can largely be considered stable and "right-sized," he said.

The most successful printing firms, he added, incorporate offset printing into broader communications solutions. Here, offset offers a diversity of products and a level of quality largely unparalleled among other technologies. "Not every job needs the extremely fast turnaround, nor does every job require personalization features offered by digital printing technologies," Myers said.

"Offset technology can be described as mature. Commercial lithographic printers can benefit from the inherent stability that enables more precise business models and planning, and enjoy more incremental technological changes as they are introduced," he continued.

In the commercial sector, offset offers quality and a wide variety of substrates that appeal to many segments of the creative community. These benefits, combined with mature workflows, mean offset will be viable in coming years. "While lithographic printing does not represent the primacy it once did, it is unlikely that electrophotographic digital printing technologies will take away greater portions of the present offset market," he observed.

"High-volume continuous inkjet technologies are in their relative infancy, as are nano-ink technologies. These promise to enjoy success in certain market



segments initially, but it will likely be some time before they mature to the point where they can replace litho on a wide-spread scale. These newer digital technologies will likely complement, rather than replace, offset lithography, most notably [in instances] where faster turnarounds are required."

## Markets for Offset

Among the market areas that can be served with offset, the packaging segment is a standout, Myers reported. A number of growing offset printers are very successfully competing with rotogravure printers in the packaging arena. (Read more on that trend next month in the December 2014 issue of *Quick Printing*.)

Other potential growth opportunities include hybrid technologies that retrofit high-speed inkjet technologies on lithographic presses.

That enables variable-data functionality to be incorporated with the benefits of conventional data, Myers said. "In looking at cost per page and duty cycles, emerging digital printing technologies can compete with sheetfed offset technologies and complement litho," he added. "I know of no digital technologies that can compete with web-offset in terms of duty cycle. It is unlikely that markets currently served by large offset web presses will lose share to digital printing technologies in the foreseeable future. Again, in my view, the most successful companies offer offset as a viable technology as part of an overall communications and marketing strategy that can include other media types."

Going forward, print service providers (PSPs) need to seize opportunities beyond packaging and longer-run work, Myers advised. He urged them to exploit the advantages print offers in terms of a tactile experience unmatched by any other media type. Complex printing jobs, including custom diecutting, spot finishing, embossing, and foil stamping all can enhance the tactile nature of print and help printers break through the perception of commoditization permeating the marketplace.

Of course, advanced finishing technologies are available in other types of printing besides offset. "But in educating buyers on what's possible and effective in communications strategies, all printing technologies will likely benefit, including litho," he says. "Offset printers need to take advantage of these and other inherent benefits to address opportunities."

"Due to its stability, offset technology in particular is poised to address a wide variety of marketing, publishing, and communications needs," Myers concluded.

## Offset, Industry's Commonalities

For his part, AMSP, NAPL, and NAQP chief economist Andy Paparozzi sees a future for offset. The question is, he said, who will share in that future?

"Certainly production efficiency, speed, and cost-effectiveness will be essential because, despite consolidation, the offset market will continue to be far too competitive for anything less," he noted. "But production efficiency will not be enough. Companies that win offset's future will also document their value to clients."

"They will know, for example, how much money they've saved the client, how much time they've saved them, how

much they've increased the return to their direct-mail campaign or traffic to their website," Paparozzi said. "And they will communicate that value to clients, never assuming they get it. Put simply, when there was a lot more work to go around, it was about our capabilities. Now it's about showing clients and prospects how our capabilities will make them more successful. That's the future of offset. And it's the future of our industry."

## What PSPs Say

Among the PSP community, there are operators who see a profitable future using offset as one of the arrows in their quivers. "It will be around," said Michael Brown, president of the AlphaGraphics location in Pineville, NC.

At one time, the shop was around 60 percent offset in house and is now down to 26 percent, with the largest drop coming in the last five to seven years.

"We're still doing some short-run brochures; it's mainly the brochure work," Brown said. "It makes sense in anything above 1,000. The break-even on our 14-by-20 [inch] press is 500 sheets... Being in the short-run color business, having the color offset press is very handy. The nice thing about it is it's paid off. We can still pull some margins out of it on lower quantities because it is."

Another AlphaGraphics location, this one across the country in Idaho Falls, ID, also has found a niche for offset. The company bought a Heidelberg Speedmaster with the Anicolor inking unit about two years ago, reported manager Walt Baker. "We were mainly getting larger orders that really didn't fit our digital equipment, larger than, say, 500 impressions, where we began to think

about going to offset," he recalled. "And we were doing runs much longer than that. The customer really expects to have a very high-quality piece. That suggests offset."

Having looked at several options, AlphaGraphics found the quality it sought in the Speedmaster with Anicolor. Baker and team get offset quality, and the Heidelberg allows the shop to produce runs as low as 500. With the same equipment, they're cost-effectively running 50,000 pieces. "There was a fit with a much broader gamut of applications by going with the Anicolor," Baker said.

He believes that if a shop's customers require a low-cost, high-quality product at greater run lengths of perhaps 500 to 1,000, offset is the solution.

Baker added that his shop is in a small enough town that its targets are anyone who needs a print product, and it has built its business on that model. "We're trying to build our equipment package and capabilities to meet any need," he said. "Greater run lengths -- we bought offset to do that, while keeping the digital for shorter run lengths and quicker turn times."

That said, Baker remembered there was a learning curve associated with the acquisition of the offset. "Coming from a digital model, we found there was a higher level of skills needed of the operator," he said.

"We had some growing pains," Baker admitted, "but we were able to lean on our vendors and Heidelberg, in particular, as a reference for any kind of problems." ▀▀

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