Digital Economics

Two leaders in screen print discuss how digital wide-format printing has helped keep them on top of the industry.

When it comes to wide-format printing, transitioning from analog to digital processes is more than just a trend; it’s become a survival technique for many professional printers. Businesses are realizing that if they don’t make the move to digital, they will be left with rapidly aging technology, quality limitations and inabilities to recognize short-run efficiencies. In other words, businesses that don’t currently have plans to upgrade, or at least supplement, their analog printing devices to digital systems are betting on old technology.

EFI’s VUTEK® line of wide-format digital UV inkjet printers is a key player in transforming the way we print, as VUTEK printers offer the speeds and quality that print businesses need, as well as the potential for return on investment that makes the decision to go digital a no-brainer. EFI’s digital workflow solutions, leading this analog to digital transformation by providing innovative, customer-focused hardware, advanced workflow software and inkjet inks that help optimize businesses worldwide.

Ford Bowers, general manager of Miller Zell, Inc. in Atlanta, GA and Walter Dow, CEO of Screenprint Dow in Wilmington, MA are two EFI customers that have made the switch to digital with VUTEK UV printers. Here, they discuss their experience transitioning to digital printing systems.

What drove your decision to invest in a digital wide-format inkjet printer?

Bowers: Retailers are seeking increasingly shorter screen runs, lower inventory quantities and the ability to provide more regionalized offerings. It was time to invest in greater production throughout to meet our client’s short run, quick turnaround projects. We were initially wary of investing the amount of money required to print and finish digital projects at the scale we were considering. We were concerned that our models for ROI and profitability would be inaccurate – primarily because they seemed too rosy. We’ve found, however, that our modeling was correct and the results delivered thus far have been as predicted. As you can imagine, this is a desirable outcome.

Dow: Our sister company, Dow Industries, serves the prime label markets by printing on rolls for end-cap displays on store shelves, and we realized that with additional graphics, we could create an entire brand for a customer. So, as we approached to adding digital printing to our wide-format capabilities, we found synergies between the two operations. In order to produce these larger, more compelling graphics that would drive a customer’s shopping experience, we needed to step up to superwide digital printing.

For example, one customer has us print a product on 12” narrow web roll digital presses at Dow Industries. Now that customer wants the same product done on 56” wide rolls for a new application. With the VUTEK GS3200, this is a snap! Having the equipment in place that allows for maneuverability regarding production is an excellent competitive advantage.

What jobs are now being produced on your VUTEK(s), and what percentage do you see shifting to digital in the next 2-3 years?

Bowers: Our current capabilities allow any screen job that does not require specialty inks (such as metalic) or varnishes to be converted to digital. We envision converting up to 25% of our regionalized and variable screen runs to digital output over the next few months, and we should be able to bring virtually all of our digital printing for prototype projects in-house. In most cases, the primary factor in our decision to convert a job to digital is economic, and is directly related to the number of sheets off the press. Sometimes this is a handful, other times up to 100 or more. It is conceivable that within the next two to three years we will have converted 30-50% of our current screen runs to digital.

Dow: We probably have moved less than 10% of our print business to digital, and, at this point, it’s only four-color process jobs. Our entry into wide-format was more about generating new business opportunities for us, which speaks to the ability to use many different methods to resolve a customer challenge, be that lead time, size or color.

What challenges did you experience with digital printing technology?

Bowers: Increasing digital capabilities presented a number of other workflow challenges. It was important for us to be able to create seamless workflows between all screen, litho and digital outputs, while tightly managing color across the board. Fortunately, EFI’s Pace™ MIS could handle all of the workflow for our screen, litho and digital technology, and tie into our legacy system through its API—creating a seamless system and allowing bi-directional data transfer. The integrated system gives us tremendous efficiencies.

Dow: We’ve been into narrow web, roll-to-roll digital printing since 1995, so integrating wide-format was not a challenge for us. Where we needed to expand our expertise was regarding all the new wide-format materials. All of a sudden we had more substrates that we could print on, and, therefore, new products to offer our customer base. We not only utilized VUTEK’s application group but also received tremendous support from the suppliers of these new materials.

How long before you realize the return on your investment?

Bowers: At our current trajectory, our VUTEK GS3200 should be able to pay for itself in less than 12 months. We are running two shifts in our new digital department and are on track to continue expanding productivity.

Dow: Our ROI window is roughly three to five years when all factors are considered. One factor is how Screenprint/Dow merges wide-format printing into existing and new business. Another factor is giving more flexibility, resulting in shorter lead-times to our sales force to meet customer demands as they continue to change. Our future is based on what decisions we are making now, and we are leading the way to developing printing as we vision it tomorrow. These factors and being very creative demonstrate our position with wide-format digital printing.

How has your business transitioned with superwide digital technology?

Bowers: With EFI’s VUTEK GS3200 and Fiery® XF RIP solution, we are able to match the color produced on various substrates and come in at a substantially lower price-point than screen printing, which carries much higher make-ready costs. Additionally, the speed of the VUTEK is such that we can produce high-quality digital prints faster and cheaper than we could previously.

Dow: The versatility to print on both rigid and flexible substrates on one printer has given us the ability to offer our customers more creative, cost-effective ways of advertising their products. Our VUTEK printers translate their technological edge into lower costs per square foot via decreased downtime and increased print speeds. We are thus able to offer lower prices, more options and faster turnaround times, which in turn helps secure more business. Plus, the higher definition that we can achieve with superwide format inkjet printing is a great selling point.

What new applications and markets have you been able to add to your business with superwide UV printing?

Bowers: Miller Zell has been servicing a broad segment of the retail market in various industries for years – there is scarcely a niche we have not worked in. Our new digital capabilities are simply one more way of meeting our client’s changing needs.

Dow: The market for retail signage is much larger than we assumed. Business was increasing so rapidly that we almost immediately needed to purchase another VUTEK, which was installed six months later. Digitally printed signage is now a significant part of our business model.

EFI VUTEK – Leading the Print Industry’s Analog to Digital Transformation

In the printing industry, new digital technology has met and is now exceeding traditional analog methods of printing in both speed and quality, and EFI is creating this wave of technological advancement with its VUTEK digital UV inkjet systems. The bottom line is that digital printing is here to stay, and the question isn’t, “Should you invest in digital equipment,” but rather is, “Why haven’t you yet?” According to Walter Dow, “The industry is consolidating, and print businesses that have not already invested in new technology cannot afford to ignore the economics of digital printing or longer term growth.”

EFI measures its own success on the success of its customers, and, therefore, the company provides the solutions that print businesses need to thrive. A more recent example of EFI’s customer-first philosophy is the new MediaMaster for the VUTEK GS3200, a fully automated, hands-free material handling system that optimizes the digital production lines even further than digital alone.

EFI’s VUTEK GS and GS printer series, plus innovations like the MediaMaster, are the exact type of forward-thinking that has made EFI VUTEK one of the most respected names in the print industry for over 20 years. For more information about EFI’s VUTEK digital inkjet systems, visit www.efi.com/vutek.