IMAGESmith in Arden, NC, is a small print shop employing 10 people that offers design and copywriting, print production, finishing, and mailing, along with large-format printing and E-commerce options. Known for offset printing, the company recently added digital color and black-and-white printing capabilities along with variable data printing (VDP) services.

Challenge
IMAGESmith entered new markets in on-demand, short-run and digital print production. It needed easy-to-use, affordable – yet powerful – variable data printing capabilities that would allow it to enter the VDP market and successfully compete with larger print operations.

Solution
IMAGESmith chose the EFI Fiery® Pi8500 Pro server and Minolta DiALTA850 engine for high-production black-and-white printing. For digital color printing, it chose the Konica Minolta bizhub™ C350 Color Printer/Copier/Scanner with embedded EFI Fiery X3e+ controller. Both systems include EFI Fiery FreeForm™ flexible variable data printing capabilities.

Results
Fiery FreeForm has enabled IMAGESmith to enter the variable data printing market quickly and easily with a powerful, cost-effective VDP solution. Ease of use, speed, flexibility, minimal training, advanced functionality, high quality output.
opening new markets with digital solutions and VDP

For two decades IMAGESmith has been known in the Asheville area as a full-service, quality offset printer. When the small shop added digital print production in November of 2003, General Manager Mary E. Smith was ready to exploit the market potential presented by the production of customized material.

“I was looking for software that could massage my data and not take forever to RIP and the Fiery had it. Fiery FreeForm, the VDP software that comes in the Fiery controller, is wonderful.

“I was also looking for equipment that was fast and affordable. The manufacturers who were touting variable data capabilities were offering very expensive equipment – very high-end machines that, in my opinion, did more than the customer was willing to pay for. Their cost was prohibitive.”

Smith chose the EFI Fiery Pi8500 Pro server and Minolta DiALTA850 engine for high-production black-and-white printing. And for digital color printing, the Konica Minolta bizhub™ C350 Color Printer/Copier/Scanner with embedded Fiery X3e+ controller. Smith was happy to learn that both systems include Fiery FreeForm, EFI’s powerful variable data printing technology.

quality and flexibility at a lower cost

Soon after the solution was installed in late 2003, Smith got a chance to compare Fiery VDP output with output from one of the high-end solutions she had rejected. One of her first VDP jobs was a letter, containing seven variable items, to alumni of the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

“We printers over think this VDP process... You have that ‘ah-ha moment’ and realize that it can be very simple.”

— Mary E. Smith, General Manager, IMAGESmith

“The university chose us because we could meet their mail date and we were cost-effective,” she says. Comparing Fiery output with previous job samples printed on equipment Smith had rejected, she found “a night-and-day difference in the quality. Their system required sapphire-coated paper, so it yellowed. My paper didn’t have any limitations. Theirs required 1-inch margins around each sheet. My Fiery/Minolta didn’t have those limitations. It was able to print very nicely on the page. We didn’t have one problem with the data. Not a hitch. We could compete because the printer with the high-end equipment had to cover the cost of that equipment. But to me, the Fiery/Minolta is a more flexible piece of equipment with a higher quality.”

Smith is impressed with the Fiery’s ease and functionality. “The Command WorkStation™ is a very friendly user interface.” She adds: “My fellow printers
“Over the next two years VDP could comprise as much as 40 to 50 percent of our sales volume,”

— Mary E. Smith, General Manager, IMAGESmith

who bought the high-end solutions bought a piece of hardware. But the software is what it’s all about. The Fiery software is excellent.”

Smith taught herself how to use EFI Fiery FreeForm, using the informative compact disk that accompanied the unit and the EFI website. “The website is excellent. We printers over think this VDP process. You just read the book and you have that ‘ah-ha moment’ and realize that it can be very simple.”

Staff training is “a piece of cake because the Fiery FreeForm is very user friendly. And Adobe InDesign®, which we use to design pages, works beautifully with the Fiery RIP.” With Fiery FreeForm, any front-end application can be deployed to create master templates and variable information decreasing the learning curve for new VDP users.

“The Fiery FreeForm is invaluable,” Smith says. “It fits right into our workflow and I’m getting the speed I want.” Fiery FreeForm RIPS master data just once, enabling IMAGESmith’s digital print engines to run at or near rated speed.

Excellent ROI

Smith believes that VDP capabilities will provide the greatest return on the company’s investment in digital print production. “The value of variable data printing is so high and the dollar is so good. The market for customers who want 1 million black-and-white copies at 2 cents each is gone. But I can sell 10-cent copies. I can sell variable data printing – black toner on white paper – for a greater profit margin. The customer is willing to pay for that value. They won’t pay much more right now because variable data printing is too new. But digital and VDP are our future.

“Printers like me will be combining offset capabilities with digital VDP. We may print a master on a printing press and use the Fiery solution to imprint the variable data, creating hybrid VDP. It’s the VDP portion that will make volumes climb.”

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— Mary E. Smith, General Manager, IMAGESmith

Fiery software isn’t the only EFI solution supporting business options at IMAGESmith; the company employs a number of EFI solutions, including PrintSmith™ – an integrated print management information system that helps small and medium size printers like IMAGESmith take control of their estimating, production, invoicing and accounts receivable needs. “PrintSmith has run our business,” Smith says. “Estimating, accounting, point of sale, job ticketing – everything. We live and die by it.”

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Over 15 years of use, PrintSmith has increased productivity for the company, helping fewer employees to offer a broader range of services. “PrintSmith has helped us with everything. We’re more efficient because of it; we can find jobs instantly. It manages all of our information.”

Smith has high praise for EFI and its products. “I admire EFI’s ability to see the future. EFI knows what has to be done and they have the ability to take us along with them into the future.”

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— Mary E. Smith, General Manager, IMAGESmith