

The superwide perspective

At the beginning of May we went to Fespa in Amsterdam and underwent a curious and very stimulating experience: an annual trade show that was absolutely alive with excitement. Not a hint of lethargy, no sense of an industry talking to itself, no feeling that we were all just clinging to an expired reality fast fading into the ether. Fespa was a truly exciting show, but why? What was it that made this event such a resounding success?

Occupying two interconnected halls at the Rai centre in Amsterdam, Fespa Digital attracted nearly 10,000 people over three days, which was 25% more than the 2008 iteration in Geneva. The show was crowded and passage through the aisles was slow, just what you want for a trade show. Having recognised that digital technology was set to swamp the foundations of its members' businesses, the Federation of Screen Printers Associations used its Fespa Digital show to put into place some swimming lessons with a seminar programme, lunchtime debates, awards and a well-funded marketing programme.

Perhaps the most important reason for Fespa's success is that the organisers themed the show and worked consistently with a wide range of media partners to promote their message. The show's Join the Revolution advertising was splattered across billboards throughout Amsterdam and the trade press, and Fespa invested in market research to improve its understanding of what the market wants. Fespa found that 50.6% of those members it surveyed (334 companies) plan to invest in a large format printer in the next 12 months. For 38.9%, UV-curable inkjet will be the most likely purchase.

Whether you believe that revolutions tend to kill their own, or they are the vital fuel that drives progress, the numbers at Fespa speak for themselves. This was the third Fespa Digital and the most successful yet, with exhibitors reporting healthy interest from attendees. This show reflected Fespa's assiduous market education over the last couple of years. Superwide and wide format printing

technologies have broad, or even superwide, market appeal, so Fespa's newsletters, advertising and coordinated promotions through its members have steadily developed the knowledge base and the profile for wide format print.



The Fespa Digital show is fast becoming a must-see event, showcasing all the latest in the wide format world.

Many manufacturers have recognised the trends towards this type of print and gotten into superwide format technology, either through acquisition or their own development efforts. Often coming from totally unrelated sectors, such as developing RIPs and front ends, or desktop printers and proofers, the likes of EFI and HP have great ambitions for this market. And everyone's on a mission to lead the analogue to digital transformation.

Scenic Vuteks

With over 1200 installations worldwide including over 500 QS and QSR engines, EFI Vutek is the current market leader in the superwide printing business. EFI president Fred Rosenzweig said at Fespa: "We have by far the largest market share in UV printers", and announced various new engines. The €450,000+ Vutek GS2000 used for two metre wide printing of banners and signs can now support applications requiring more details such as point-of-purchase (POP) displays on rigid and flexible substrates. The QS3220 now uses QS Series 2 UV inks (EFI has sold over one million litres of EFI UV ink), which are more durable and flexible. EFI has improved the QS3220's input and output tables with increased vacuum pressure for more flexibility in media choices and offers an optional heavy-duty unwinder.

There is also a 3.2 metre version of the QS3200 UV hybrid machine which outputs up to 223 square metres per

hour, and the five metre roll-to-roll Vutek GS5000r which prints at up to 288 sq.m/ hour. This machine can also produce photorealistic image quality at slower speeds. The redesigned entry level Rastek H650 is now supplied by a Chinese manufacturer on an OEM basis and has an end user price of €55,000. EFI plans to introduce the T1000 UV flatbed device at the end of the year. This is a 1.2 x 2.4 metre device that can print 55.7 sq.m/hour and will cost €100,000.

Rosenzweig also said, without a hint of irony, that because of the QS3200's "overachieving performance" EFI would "pull back on the DS" flatbed UV printer previewed at drupa and go straight to version 2, so that it's ready when the market improves.

...and coming up fast on the inside...

EFI Vutek has a strong lead but HP, Durst, Agfa and others are hot on its heels. HP has invested very heavily into this market, acquiring Scitex, Colorspan and Nur within a few short years and carefully nurturing its customer base for many more. HP intends to focus on environmental innovations, new applications for superwide format and analogue replacements throughout the rest of this year and next, and through 2012 wants to do its bit for the analogue to digital transformation.

At Fespa HP introduced the new Scitex FB7500 flatbed printer. This 500 metre per hour printer was developed following consultancy with the 'Screen Printing Advisory Council' made up of the world's leading screen printers. The machine is now shipping, with one of the first installed at Fair Play BV in Amsterdam, which uses it to print POP signage and exhibition graphics.

HP claim that the Scitex FB7500 reduces production time for a typical job from 148 hours with traditional screen printing to 76 hours, and the costs from \$144,000 to \$124,000, because of reductions in prepress complexity as well as printing efficiencies. Quite what constitutes a typical job wasn't clear. The Scitex FB7500 produces 105 1.2 x 2.4m, sheets per hour and has semi-automatic loading and fully automatic unloading. It prints on paper plus other flexible and rigid substrates up to 50mm thick, with UV inks and print modes to suit different applications.

Based on the X2 MEMS piezoelectric inkjet head it can produce high quality output using up to six colours. The machine's design borrows from the TurboJet concept plus HP's thermal inkjet research and development.

The FB6050 is a new 100 sq.m/hour device that prints on up to 50mm thick substrates for POP applications. It costs between €250,000 to €300,000 depending on the configuration as either a four or eight colour machine. It has an enhanced white point mode and according to HP is "the only machine in its price range to print four, eight and white colours". It is ready to ship.



HP's Scitex FB7500 installed and running at Fair Play in Amsterdam.

Agfa is another big name in the prepress and graphic arts getting into superwide format printing. The company wants 20% of a market it estimates is worth €500 million which is about twice the share they currently have. Agfa's turnover is €1.5 billion, 20% of which is still analogue and a small fraction of which comes from superwide format. Stephen Van Hooven, Agfa's president, said at Fespa that "we are very committed to the printing industry, notwithstanding the problems; we want to remain with our prepress products in addition to expanding into digital printing".

Despite its troubles Agfa has had a consistent and sustained investment strategy into inks and engines for the industrial UV inkjet market. Over 400 Anapurnas are installed worldwide for industrial indoor and outdoor displays and the company has seen continued growth in this business despite the recession. Q1 wide format orders were 10% up on the 2008 rate. Agfa is expecting a rebound by the end of the year with UV sectors recovering fastest

▶ to reach previous trading levels by 2010. The outlook for aggressive solvent-based machines is grim, however, and ecosolvent and aqueous are not expected to recover at all to previously forecast levels.

Although it wasn't at the show people could see the new MPress Tiger via bus at an offsite location. The Tiger is a second generation machine that is 300% more productive

There are also some new Anapurnas: the M family is to be more reliable, robust and user friendly. The M2 UV flatbed combo printers can do longer runs using Konica KM 1024 heads to jet smaller drops at 23 sq.m/hour, 720 x 144 dpi. Registration is tighter and therefore quality improved. The Mw hybrid UV printer, which uses Konica Minolta KM512 heads, produces quality wide format output for any print for pay industry environment. It now has a high-



This 5m wide GS5000 from EFI Vutek is a roll-fed UV printer targeted at the banner and billboard market.

and has a high quality mode. It also provides a lower cost of ownership and is backwards compatible with the earlier MPresses. Tiger has 64 new Agfa UPH2 heads and a printing base (the Thieme foundation) that can feed 700 sheets per hour, to print up to 770 sq.m/hour and can go further. According to Van Hooven: "We're seeing a step on the path". Agfa has sold eight of its MPresses and the first Tiger is due to go to SMP in London.

Agfa also sees the break even point moving from 500-900 to 200-400 copies with digital technology and is working hard to develop variable data software in anticipation of variable data output requirements for large format applications. Apogee Vibe is a workflow tool that adds variable data specifically to POP and signage files. And MPress Tiger is the only hybrid printing press with optional inline pre and/or post digital screen printing stations so it can print primers, varnish, spot colours, gold, silver and white, thermal or scratch-'n'-sniff inks with no loss in productivity. It also prints very small droplets in thin ink layers which Agfa claim requires 50% less ink than competitors do, for near offset quality and up to 42 lpi screens. Tiger costs the same as the original MPress (€1.8 million complete) and an upgrade a mere €300,000.

end white ink feeding system for the entry level market. Agfa has upgraded its whole Anapurna range and expects to make an LED technology announcement for Anapurna later this year. The plan is to replace UV bulbs used for UV curing with LEDs.

Durst has been steadily building up its market position since introducing the Rho 160 in 2002. The latest addition to the family is the Rho 800 HS UV flatbed printer. It has 2048 nozzles for almost twice the output speed of the standard version, outputting 216 125 x 800 boards per hour.

The new Durst Rho 500R is a 5m roll-to-roll UV inkjet printer that prints six colours at 600 dpi at 400m² per hour. Durst have enhanced its Quadro 30D Array technology in order to provide higher quality and productivity. This machine is designed for printing large format display items such as giant vinyl banners and mesh for building wraps.

The Rho 500R can also print three 1.6m rolls together. Like the new 800 HS the 500R has 2048 nozzles per colour for optimum print quality and high productivity.



▶ Durst claims that: “The precision and build quality of the Rho 500R is second to none.”

These are just a tiny handful of the announcements made at Fespa. Océ, Inca and many others all had much to say for themselves, keen to attract new customers. Printers and service providers should take this stuff seriously because it's one of the few bits of the printing industry that is growing. As conventional print advertising in magazines and newspapers declines, POP, banners, posters and so on could become a more desirable option for advertisers. Output quality is still the primary concern, along with cost and speed of production, but in all areas, developers are making great strides to improve. With the possible exception of Agfa, workflow automation and variable data management is still woefully lacking for superwide format applications. Web-to-print got barely a whisper at Fespa, but this too must surely provide printers and service providers with immense opportunities.

Show Us the Money

And without opportunities to change a business model, there can be no progress as is clear from the way advertising is changing. The media market continues to crumble under digital technology's onslaught, but opportunities abound for new ways to compete. Brand owners want their campaigns to be effective and they want to know what they are getting for their media investments.

According to various analysts, ad spend sales are expected to fall by between seven and 12 percent in developed markets in 2009. This may be because alternatives are available, as more dynamic signage applications emerge, particularly POP. These investments could well be at the cost of more traditional advertising. Markets for superwide on-demand production are also emerging as consumers start to appreciate what is possible: theatre backdrops, special event banners, carpeting, building wraps and so on. But this is an application that just cries out for web-to-print purchasing, for creating targeted short run colour work to meet the last minute needs of brand owners and their customers, and we heard far too little of that at Fespa.

Commercial printers and service providers with adequate digital infrastructures are well placed to capitalise on these

trends once GDPs start to rise and advertising budgets are less tight. While times are lean and markets quiet, now is the time to invest in superwide format market development, especially for on demand work and variable data. Put Fespa on the calendar for next year!

- **Laurel Brunner**

