

Investing in a Large-Format UV Printer: Business Realities and Opportunities

By Christopher Howard

The momentum among commercial labs and other imaging enterprises to make a capital investment in large-format, UV-inkjet printing devices is growing every day. Need proof?

Consider the number and variety of companies attending the latest round of imaging trade shows—including the recent DRUPA show in Europe—and the number of inkjet printers introduced at these gatherings. Industry statistics also show that large-format, UV-inkjet

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printing is one of the fastest growing—if not *the* fastest growing—category in professional imaging. It is not hard to figure out why so many commercial print providers are taking a closer look at this technology. Deciding whether and when to invest takes a little more time.

Market-Driven Realities

Clearly, many commercial labs are looking at utilizing new print technologies to build additional revenue streams and profit centers. Durst is a living example of this new trend. For decades, we concentrated on professional photo-imaging

equipment; however, in recent years we have added large-format UV-inkjet printers to our product portfolio. Businesses looking at this particular technology come from many of the traditional large-format print segments—mainly commercial photo labs as well as screen printers, sign shops and digital imaging service bureaus.

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Another factor in this market shift: All these imaging enterprises are increasingly making sales calls to the same client base. A purchasing agent at a corporation typically will have multiple contacts with commercial labs, screen printers, offset printers and sign shops. This print purchaser ultimately will award business to the print provider who best fulfills the requirements of the particular job to be done, so a growing number of labs and other professional imagers see diversifying their offerings as more of a necessity than it might have been in the past.

Understand Client Needs

Understanding the needs of today's clients becomes paramount in deciding whether to make a capital investment

in a different type of output device. These needs generally center on:

- Price of output.
- Quality level of the output that best matches or suits the application.
- Turnaround time to fulfill the job.

In addition, there are other value drivers that new printing technologies like large-format UV inkjet may provide that the print provider must consider—particularly if it is looking to differentiate itself in the marketplace. These value drivers enhance the lab's ability to gain business from the client through workflow-based efficiencies or unique products that trump the competition and deliver additional profit. Examples include the ability to provide "comps" in a very short time frame. Shorter run just-in-time inventory is another value driver that can help secure additional business from the client, as is the ability to offer longer production runs that accurately match the "comp" that was approved.

New Ideas—New Business

One clear benefit of large-format, UV-inkjet printing, and one of the key enablers that this technology offers, is the ability to bring clients new ideas such as product and brand promotion. In a growing number of cases, labs and other print providers are using UV-inkjet printing to produce dynamic new images and displays on more non-traditional materials from textiles and plastics to wood panels, ceiling tiles and fencing with out-of-the-ordinary, eye-catching "looks." Because these applications are unique, they tend to be in a higher profit category than standard print jobs.

These new capabilities can equate to more than just additional specialty-printing business, as many clients will have an entire campaign to produce that includes higher-volume print runs as well. If a professional imager bidding on a job can fulfill the most critical

aspects of the campaign, the rest of the work tends to follow.

Invest in Opportunity

Somewhere along the line, based on today's market trends, clients' evolving requirements, and needs and opportunities specific to the business, professional imagers should decide what type of operation they want to run. This vision of the business must then be reflected in the output equipment currently on the floor and the output equipment to be acquired. The central question then becomes: "Does the equipment I have or want to purchase get me from where I am to where I want to be?"

The rapidly growing interest in large-format, UV-inkjet technology allows a lab to enhance its abilities to meet primary requirements for price, turnaround times and productivity. In addition, a lab can offer new products to its clients as well as meet a greater range of needs, thereby differentiating itself in a very crowded and increasingly homogenized market.

The print provider must determine whether the equipment it invests in will best address today's print production requirements at appropriate quality levels, for both long-run applications as well as "one offs" and "comp" work within their workflow. The printer also should evaluate whether the equipment will allow for new capabilities—both now and in the future—in order to extend the value of the capital investment as well as that coveted marketplace differentiation. For a growing number of labs, the answer has been large-format UV-inkjet printing.

Commercial labs and other professional imagers who currently find themselves and their operations at this critical juncture would do well to follow these steps:

- Acknowledge changing dynamics in the marketplace.

- Identify and zero in on the best opportunities.
- Build their ability to attack those opportunities with the right equipment.
- Pursue today's clients based on current needs *and* new capabilities.

By and large, the professionals who already have put themselves through this process have found that an investment in large-format, UV-inkjet printing has provided them with a broad variety of new business opportunities and profitable business growth. ▀

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