Imagesetters Pave the Way for the Future at HM Graphics

HM Graphics operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This is an impressive statistic for a company with two facilities comprising more than 130,000 square feet and employing over 250 full-time workers. Founded in 1969 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, HM Graphics has grown from a 5 million dollar company in 1970 to a company that did 27 million dollars in sales in 1996. It is now the largest sheet-fed printer in Southeastern Wisconsin and one of the premier printers in the United States.
A Commitment to Quality

When asked what the key to their success was, Mike Sandstrom, second generation co-owner along with his seven siblings, said, “It’s our commitment to quality. We don’t almost get there and run. We get there and run.” With an array of national and international awards, including eleven Printing Industries of America “Bennies,” no one is going to dispute that HM Graphics’ commitment to quality is genuine.

HM Graphics specializes in high end, high image printing. They serve many high profile clients in the software, pharma-ceutical and consumer product industries, such as Harley-Davidson and Allan Edmonds. They also serve a large number of major ad agencies in the Midwest and throughout the country, such as Laughlin/Constable and Leo Burnett U.S.A. They print a diverse range of products from annual reports, brochures and catalogs, to CD-mailers, video boxes, pocket folders, pop-ups and point-of purchase displays.

Adopting New Technologies to Lead the Industry

To handle such a high volume of diverse work with the quick turnaround times and superior quality on which they have built their reputation, HM Graphics uses state-of-the-art electronic prepress equipment, six Heidelberg presses (three 25”, three 40”), and an array of die cutters, folders and gluers for specialized printing projects. Sandstrom noted with pride that they were the first American company to install a Heidelberg CD Speedmaster two and a half years ago.

In keeping with their commitment to technological innovation, HM Graphics purchased a Dainippon Screen DT-R3100 film recorder and a TaigaSPACE workstation nine months ago. Like many other commercial printers, HM Graphics added imagesetters to their production equipment in order to gain more process control and to automate their workflow processes and increase the efficiency of their presses. They have been very pleased with the increase in quality consistency as well as the ability to keep their presses busy around the clock.

When we asked Sandstrom why he decided to go with Screen he said, “I listen to my employees.” HM Graphics employees had seen the TaigaSPACE system in action and recommended that Sandstrom take a look. One demonstration convinced him that the TaigaSPACE system and the DT-R3100 would provide the flexibility and throughput he needed to keep his six Heidelbergs running 24 hours a day.

Anticipating continued growth for the company, with projected sales estimated at over 40 million dollars for 1999, Sandstrom wanted fast, reliable equipment that could keep pace with his company’s needs.

The DT-R3100 and TaigaSPACE: A Terrific Combination

Sandstrom found that using the DT-R3100 in combination with the TaigaSPACE system made his operation more efficient and flexible, and provided better quality output. For example, HM Graphics prints an enormous variety of small items such as register toppers, table tents, and cards, and all of this work had to be done by making multiple exposures of the same film using a step and repeat machine. Their stepper was running 15-16 hours a day. By incorporating the electronic imposition capabilities of the TaigaSPACE system and the DT-R3100’s A1 wide large format film output into their workflow, they were able to dramatically reduce turnaround times, produce much sharper plates and ease the load on their single stepper. Employees in the press room have been extremely impressed with the quality and reliability of the DT-R3100 output.

Another reason why the combination of the DT-R3100 and the TaigaSPACE system is so effective for HM Graphics is that it affords them flexibility in their production that they never had before. Scheduling is now easier because they no longer have to wait for films to come back from outside suppliers for every job, and they can juggle their equipment so that everything is in operation all the time. In addition, a
greater choice of imposition templates can be output onto the large format film supported by the DT-R3100. This allows them to more easily output films for a variety of unusual sized items, such as boxes and POP displays.

As a specialty printer, HM Graphics also does a lot of five- and six-color work, and they found that using the DT-R3100 and the TaigaSPACE system eliminated time-consuming workarounds. Because spot colors and special finishes such as varnish can be handled fully automatically on TaigaSPACE, Sandstrom said that jobs that used to take 5 hours to output could be now be output in just an hour.

That kind of speed increase has made a big difference to the bottom line at HM Graphics. But not at the expense of quality. Most work is output with a 200 line screen at 4,000 dpi. Why? “Because of our commitment to quality. Our customers are image-conscious. And let’s face it, the higher resolution does look better.” The truth is that the DT-R3100 offers both high speed and high quality. Even at 4,000 dpi, it is still one of the fastest recorders on the market. Not only that, the repeatability of the DT-R3100 with its internal punch is so good that for jobs requiring text changes only, there is no need to output any other films besides the black plate, which saves both time and materials.

The Future is Here — Earlier than Expected

HM Graphics has also very recently purchased a Dainippon Screen TrueRite digital color proofing system, a PlateRite digital plate recorder and another TaigaSPACE workstation. Sandstrom claimed that initially they weren’t interested in moving into computer-to-plate so soon, but with the dramatic increase in their volume of work, they needed new production solutions to shorten turnaround times and help them stay competitive in their rapidly changing printing market. “Even cutting make-ready times by an hour or half an hour will give us more breathing room,” Sandstrom explained.

Sandstrom had expected the transition from a conventional to a fully digital workflow to involve a steep learning curve for his staff. Incorporating the first TaigaSPACE workstation and the DT-R3100 large format imagesetter represented the first step and was so successful that Sandstrom does not expect the next transition to computer-to-plate to be all that difficult. Now that his employees have become used to the electronic trapping, imposition and other auto prepress functions on TaigaSPACE, the move to digital proofing and plate output should be smooth. The TrueRite and the PlateRite are scheduled to be fully integrated into HM Graphics’s production system by September, 1997.

Another challenge for Sandstrom is convincing clients that the quality of fully digital output will be as good or better than their current level of quality. Proofing is of particular concern. Sandstrom said that he has already begun to show clients sample proofs from the TrueRite and the response has been very positive. While he currently receives films for nearly 50% of his work, he hopes in the near future to convince his clients that they no longer need to supply films at all. Sandstrom believes that when customers see that they are getting better looking products in less time, they will be enthusiastic about the new technology.

Partnerships for the Future

In the future, Sandstrom’s goal is to have a fully digital production system. In the meantime, he has taken all the right steps for making a smooth transition from traditional printing to new technologies. And in the process, he created a strong partnership with Screen that he expects to last a long time. “Partnerships are important,” Sandstrom said. “I’ve had a 26-year relationship with one of my other suppliers and I expect to have a 26-year relationship with Screen too.” We at Screen expect the same. By working to create the products that users like HM Graphics need, we are laying the foundations for partnerships with all our users around the globe for years to come.