

# Balancing The Books

BY DOUG PICKLYK

*Friesens Corporation in Altona, Manitoba, the largest privately-owned book printer in Canada, is retooling to meet all the needs of its publishing clients.*

**“W**e focus on books, all shapes and sizes,” says Curwin Friesen, CEO of Friesens Corp. in Altona, Manitoba, an \$80 million employee-owned business that, after celebrating its 100th anniversary last year, spent this year investing and expanding its printing operations in the midst of economic volatility and the dawning of the widespread digital media age.

Friesen has been the chief executive of the company since July, 2007, when David Friesen, grandson of the company’s founder, retired. Curwin (no relation), an economics major, has been with the company close to 15 years, serving as president and chief operating officer for six years prior to taking over the top job.

Friesens, which employs around 540 people, print every type of book in three dedicated divisions: one for high-end colour books, another for yearbooks and finally a division for black-and-white books. It’s the latter of the three—an area that targets the 6 x 9-inch trade paperback and hard cover marketplace in Canada and the United States—where the company has placed a lot of attention in the last year.

A new plant, commissioned in September, represents a leap into a Lean manufacturing philosophy. The company has four Lean-trained production employees and hired an outside Lean consultant for the project. The jewel of the streamlined operation is a new Timsons UV web offset book press, the first of its kind in Canada and one of only a handful in the world, says Friesen.



*“You can always afford a good book,” says Curwin Friesen, President and CEO of book printer, Friesens Corp. in Altona, Manitoba.*

The new press, lined up beside an existing 10-year-old Timsons book press, more than doubles the company’s black-and-white web offset printing capacity. To keep up they’ve also upgraded the bindery with the addition of a high-speed Kolbus perfect binding line behind the new press.

As part of the lean initiative, the company has also added a just-in-time box-making line to match its orders. “Once we know how thick the books will be, we make boxes that fit exactly,” says Friesen. “We reduce the amount of packaging and save time trying to find a box that fits the order.” They also have a robot that palletizes at the back end of the book line.

“We’ve developed this to be the most productive, efficient plant in North America from an energy standpoint, from an material movement standpoint and from an automation standpoint,” says

Friesen. Because the new Timsons press uses UV curing it doesn’t require a gas-fired oven—this also gives it a smaller footprint. And its UV inks release no VOCs into the atmosphere.

“It also runs faster, and we believe we’re going to have higher quality in the halftones off the press because it’s drying much more quickly than the traditional method,” says Friesen.

Still in its early days of production, the new press is proving beneficial in two ways: reducing time on long runs because of its 25% increase in productivity over the older press, but also because of its shorter makeready times it’s helping the business on the short-run job requirements as well.

It’s at this end of the business, the runs under 10,000 copies, even as low as 200 copies, where Friesens is also stepping up its

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*A new Kolbus high-speed perfect binding line keeps up with capacity at Friesens new facility.*



*Friesens new Timsons UV book press line operates with a small footprint and less environmental impact.*

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game. "Our mission statement is to be the premier short-run book manufacturer in North America," he notes.

To complement the offset production the company is using a mix of both roll-fed and sheetfed digital black-and-white printing devices in the new plant. "We have been doing toner on paper for awhile, but it's an evolution for us. We're moving up to the 500 to 800 books realm, to bridge that gap between the ultra-short run and the Timsons runs. We've put in equipment that we think will fit that zone so that we're really able to provide everything that a publisher requires under one roof."

Friesens also installed a Presstek 52DI press in the early spring to print covers for ultra short run books. They use Heidelberg sheetfed presses for longer-run colour covers.

The company's ability to improve its production efficiency, regardless of the size of the print run, also works to the benefit of its customers. "With this unprecedented volatility, it's so difficult for publishers to forecast what their selling price should be. What we're trying to do is help them decrease their cycle times on our end, so that they can put the price on the back of a book at the last possible moment."

He also compares the hit and miss nature of publishing to the

movie business, where one blockbuster pays for all the less than successful titles. Friesens helps publishers manage their inventory, while being ready and able to print whatever quantity the market demands. "We've really focused our attention on getting robust equipment, so that whether a publisher requires 200 books or 50,000 books, they all look high quality and represent the brand of the publisher in a favourable way. And that's no easy feat."

With respect to the threats of digital media replacing the printed book, Friesen is a realist and an optimist. "I believe the e-book will have a niche. Right now it's still in the very early adopter phase. So do we watch that? Certainly we do. But anything that encourages reading, anything that keeps people reading and being drawn to ideas in book format, ultimately is a good thing.

"I think that all of us in the printing business, or business in general, are in unprecedented times of change and uncertainty. We've shortened our planning horizons, and we're more demanding when looking at equipment purchases. The general retail market is a little disconcerting for book publishers right now. The expectation for all of us in the book business is that during these tough economic times people will stop spending lavishly, but you can always afford a good book." **CP**

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