

DI Press Brings New Opportunities

A new four-color direct imaging press has brightened the future at this Georgia in-plant.

LIKE MANY states, Georgia has been experiencing a budget crunch in recent years. To cope, the state mandated a 6 percent budget cut and banned all equipment purchases.

So how, then, in a penny-pinching environment like this, was Columbus State University Printing Services able to install a four-color Presstek 34DI digital offset press in July?

"We were able to justify the DI press...because it could pay for itself," explains Manager Randall Bramlett. "More than a third of our print volume was going outside at commercial rates, and bringing it back in-house stood to quickly pay for the press and then save the university money going forward."

As a result, University Printing Services now handles about 97 percent of the printing for this 8,000-student university in Columbus, Ga. Some 40 percent of the shop's income is

generated by the 34DI. This is a far cry from the way things were just a dozen years ago

"When I started here, if you were talking about color printing, you were generally talking about one-color spot printing," Bramlett says. And he should know. He was hired as a press operator 13 years ago. He eventually became pressroom supervisor, and last year was promoted to manager of Printing Services, overseeing a staff of six full-timers and a part-time student assistant.

At that time the shop had four two-color ABDick presses, along with two color and two black-and-white copiers. The in-plant was using its two-color presses, along with an ABDick DPM platemaker, to produce some four-color work, but was unable to keep up with the demand.

"We had issues with quality and turnaround



"In the first two months, the 34DI press was already paying for itself."

— Randall Bramlett

time, as well as general capacity," Bramlett says. "The university was outsourcing about \$150,000 annually in color printing we simply could not handle."

The Columbus State University print shop operates on a break-even basis, with materials marked up slightly to cover overhead, as well as a modest print charge; the in-plant basically delivers services to its customers at cost.

"Previously, we were producing about \$20,000 in printing services annually," Bramlett says. "Even considering that our work is produced on a non-profit basis compared to the for-profit outfits we outsource to, I could see that we were not on the right path to be able to survive long term, and we needed to update our technology."

Meeting A Challenge

Bramlett knew that getting approval for an investment in a four-color press would be a challenge under the current economic climate. As he looked at various options, he had several objectives in mind, including:

■ **Ease of use.** "It is especially difficult to find experienced press operators in Columbus," he says. "I wanted to make sure we had an automated system that could be effectively



Printing Services Manager Randall Bramlett explains the advantages of the Presstek 34DI to customers at a recent open house.

operated by a less experienced operator, if necessary."

■ **Environmental sustainability.** Bramlett wanted to minimize the use of chemistry and purchase a system that could operate with a minimal amount of waste.



Press Operators Nick Hayes and Julian Harper.

■ **Quality and fast turnaround.** "In order to bring outsourced work back in-house and increase our value to the university, we needed a solution that could address the speed and quality requirements of our customers," Bramlett says. "We also wanted something that could open up new application opportunities for us."

It took Bramlett eight months to get his request for a four-color press approved by the university, between the paperwork, specification and bid development and the actual procurement process. As a result of his work, the shop was able to install the 34DI in July.

"It was not an easy sell," Bramlett points out. "But now that it's in, it's been doing wonders."

"We have been able to bring virtually all outsourced four-color print back in-house," he proclaims. "In the first two months, the 34DI press was already paying for itself."

He says he's very happy with the quality of the 34DI's printing.

"We had issues before with trying to run four-color work on our two-color presses," says Bramlett. "Now, with the on-press platemaking capabilities of the DI press, the registration is perfect and the quality is excellent."

In June, Bramlett was able to hire an experienced press operator who had been out of the industry for a time.

"We were lucky to get him," he says. "He ran one of the original DI presses from the 1990s for more than 10 years, and he was amazed at how far the technology has come with the 300-dpi quality and automation features of the current generation of DI presses."

Bramlett and his team conducted an open house to educate university staff about the new capabilities.

"People were delighted with the environmentally friendly aspects of the press," he recounts. "Chemistry-free platemaking, virtually no paper waste, and a significant reduction in the use of water all adds up to a reduced carbon footprint

for us. Everyone came away impressed with the new capabilities, and saw our shop from a totally different perspective. There was a real ‘wow’ factor. We were also proud to be the first Georgia university to purchase a DI press.”

The ability to cost-effectively produce high-quality short runs is also opening new doors for the university and its Printing Services department. At the open house, the Athletic Department was very excited about the ability to produce projects that would otherwise have been unaffordable.

“We can produce printed materials at about half to two-thirds less the cost than our commercial counterparts,” Bramlett states. “The Athletic Department is thrilled with the ability to step up the quality of their media guides, pocket schedules and other materials without stepping up the cost.”

Growing School, Shrinking Staff

Bramlett also points out that the university is growing.

“When I started here,” he says, “we had 3,500 students. Now we have topped 8,000 students for the first time. We have to keep up with demand. Recruiting is going at full speed and we have to meet those needs. With our updated shop, we are well positioned to do so.”

Recently, one employee retired, and because of the budget situation, Bramlett has not been able to replace him.

“We are moving to four 10-hour days,” he reports, “with two press operators backing each other up on the Presstek DI press. That way we are able to achieve 50 hours of production time in a week instead of 40. However, I am looking forward to the time when I can grow head count, at least a little, especially in bindery. Bindery becomes a full-time position with the volume of four-color work we are now generating.”

The new press hasn’t taken over all the shop’s work, though.

“We have one ABDick 360 set up for business cards and one for envelopes, both using the university’s two-color logo,” Bramlett says. “We also produce envelopes on the

ABDick 9835. Our copy department handles quick copy for things like stationery and exams.”

In general, the DI press produces any full-color work in runs of more than 300 to 400, with average runs being in the 1,000 to 2,000 range.

When asked what advice Bramlett would have for other managers in his position, he was quick to say, “You have to stay current with the technology and be creative about how you justify the investments. Had we not made this move to efficient

four-color printing, I don’t know where we would be today. Maybe we would still be open; maybe not. Yet, with the university looking to cut spending, we might have been one of the first to go.

“We had basically turned into a glorified copy shop,” he says. “Now, with our new Presstek DI press, we are providing competitive printing services, and actually saving the university money. We are part of the solution, and that is a good place to be.”

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