

OPEN HOUSES, California Style

Three California in-plants discuss their successful open houses and offer tips to help other in-plants plan their own.

By Cary Sherburne

HOLDING AN open house is a great way for your in-plant to promote its capabilities and generate new business. All it takes is a little planning. To help you and give you some ideas, we spoke with three California in-plants that have held open houses. San Diego State University (SDSU), California State Polytechnic University-Pomona and California State University-Sacramento built on each others' experiences to make their events even more successful.

San Diego State University ReproGraphic Services' open house was well attended. Visitors checked out the HP Indigo digital press and the Presstek 43DI, then enjoyed a free lunch.



In all three cases, open houses were organized around the acquisition of new digital printing equipment. Leslie Rutledge, manager of ReproGraphic Services at SDSU, was the first of the three to take the plunge.

"We conducted our first open house in the fall of 2005 to showcase our HP digital press," she says, "and a second in 2006 shortly after we acquired our Presstek 34DI digital offset press."

Rutledge turned to the in-plant's vendors to help her subsidize these events. These included Presstek and HP, as well as the company the university uses for bulk mailings and some of the shop's paper vendors. While customers may be interested in learning more about the in-plant's services, what really draws them in, according to Rutledge, are food and door prizes. Both of her events featured these elements in abundance.

"This helps get people in the door," she says, "but once they are there, you have to wow them. I think we did a good job of both."

Preparing the Way

Another key to success is good marketing of the event. For one open house, Rutledge used the extension of a local trolley line to the campus as a marketing opportunity. The in-plant created promotional materials that read, "You Rode the Trolley; Now Jump on the Indigo." Invitations were 12x18" posters with this theme, mailed in tubes to all departments on campus.

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Cal Poly Pomona Graphic Communications Services held an open house to demonstrate the capabilities of its new Presstek 34DI digital offset press for the shop's chief supporters. Manager Daiken Fiore (left) was pleased to welcome Darwin Labordo, associate vice president of Finance and Administrative Services, and Kathleen Prunty, director of Procurement and Support Services.

“Everyone knew about the trolley,” Rutledge says, “but people wondered what an Indigo was. It was a good hook to get them in the door.”

For the Presstek event, the theme featured a rocket and the tagline, “Blast Off Into the Digital Age.” This theme let the in-plant tout its new capabilities in playful language, such as “Plot a course to online ordering,” and “Lift off to the next generation of digital printing.”

Showing Off for In-plant Supporters

Cal Poly Pomona also held an open house to show off its Presstek 34DI. Employees of the Financial and Administrative Services area, the group the in-plant belongs to, were invited to view the capabilities of the direct imaging press.

Open House Tips

- **Pick a theme.** Central Michigan University Printing Services is hosting a March open house with a St. Patrick's Day theme. The shop sent out “shamrock surveys” to customers, which they can drop into a leprechaun's pot at the open house to be eligible for prize drawings. Visitors will enjoy shamrock cookies and green punch served by green-shirted employees while hammer dulcimer music, supplied by an employee's band, sets the mood.
- **Invite the important people.** This includes top executives as well as prospective customers.
- **Provide food.** Nothing draws visitors better than free snacks. Place it strategically at the end of the tour to lure attendees through the entire shop. Expect attendance to surge at lunch time.
- **Supply giveaway items** that show off your capabilities, like personalized note pads, folders, calendars or framed wide-format prints.
- **Get your vendors involved.** Ask them to donate door prizes or paper for invitations. Enlist them to help you educate customers.
- **Get contact info.** Ask guests to fill out an entry card so you can follow up with them.
- **Provide transportation,** especially if your shop is out of the way.

“We wanted to show the press in action to our associate vice president for Finance and Administrative Services and the director of Procurement and Support Services who supported us in acquiring the press,” says Daiken Fiore, manager of Graphic Communications Services.

This demonstrates another key success factor: targeting the right audience. Fiore started with her own department and the leaders who had approved the investment in order to demonstrate the value of that investment to the university. Her second open house in the fall will target the campus print buying community with a goal of generating more business for the in-plant. Likewise, SDSU ReproGraphic Services paid special attention to departmental representatives who are responsible for placing print orders, as well as their directors and vice presidents.

Planning the Event

Over at CSU-Sacramento, Michael Kalstein, director of Reprographics and Mail Services, promoted his shop's September open house by presenting a 15-minute segment at departmental round tables. He used personalized presentation folders with information about the in-plant's services, as well as a flyer inviting them to the event, followed by individual invitations. Presentation folders were also sent to the president of the university and a number of vice presidents. As a result, the assistant to the president and several vice presidents attended the event.

“I have been here 18 years. The last time we did an open house was a couple years before I arrived, and I am told it was a disaster, largely due to lack of preparation,” says Kalstein. “Management has been extremely reluctant to try again based on that experience. However, I was finally able to hold an open house in September to mark the addition of our digital press.” That press was an HP Indigo 5500.

CSU's open house carried a theme of “You Are the Star.”

“We laid a red carpet on the ramp entering the shop, hung gold stars from the ceiling, and each station had a Hollywood theme,” he says. “The ‘You Are the Star’ theme was designed to let our customers know that we are here to make them the star of their department by producing the kind of work that exemplifies what the department does.”

A staff member was stationed in each production area throughout the print and mail facility, and was prepared to answer questions, supported by vendor representatives and su-

pervisors. Vendors also supported Kalstein by providing door prizes and food, strategically placed at the end of the tour to lure attendees through the entire shop. Many of the giveaways, including note pads, folders and calendars, showcased new services Kalstein wished to promote to campus clients.

Rutledge and Fiore also benefited from vendor support. According to Fiore, "It was great to have the Presstek folks here to answer questions and make presentations. I would definitely do that again. While we focused on our DI press for the first event, including its environmental benefits, our campus-wide event will also feature other aspects of our operation, including our design area, copy shop and electronic document imaging services."

Fiore, Kalstein and Rutledge also stressed the importance of having lots of samples available for visitors to take with them when they leave the open house.

"We also handed out vendor case studies, posters and reprints of articles about the benefits of digital and the environmental benefits of our solutions," Fiore says. "This helped open up people's eyes relative to our capabilities and what we were trying to promote."

"Samples really help to spark ideas when our customers can see what others are doing," adds Rutledge.

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—Michael Kalstein

After the Fact

All three in-plants followed up with open house attendees to further cement relationships. Kalstein, whose open house drew about 250 people, sent thank-you notes along with a school calendar that the shop had produced. Rutledge used a school calendar that listed the school's paydays as a thank you, as well as postcards that included a perforated bookmark with the individual's personal horoscope based on the birth date information they had provided at the open house.

Open houses need not be large productions. Rutledge also conducts mini open houses for specific departments.

"These events give you an opportunity to learn more about the customer in a more focused environment, and for them to see how you can address their individual needs," she explains. "As a result of a mini open house, we are now producing our library's newsletter internally on our Presstek 34DI press."

These California in-plant managers and their teams are creative and enthusiastic. They all agreed that the open houses helped raise their visibility and bring in new projects that might otherwise have gone to outside printers. And they all foresee more in their future as they continue to grow their businesses.

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