

Spreading Digital's Gospel

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DIGITAL PRINTING is in need of a press agent, or a PR firm that can boost its image and explain to the masses exactly what it is capable of performing. But John Roberds, founder and president of Tulsa, OK-based Odyssey Digital Printing, knows that the role of educator, promoter and cheerleader falls squarely on the shoulders of his venerable sales staff.

Circumventing misinformation and bringing clients up to speed on the many applications, including sophisticated color variable data printing, that await them is an ongoing battle. But it's one Roberds believes Odyssey Digital is capable of winning.

"Digital printing is not just about direct mail. So, we're doing a little missionary work to get the word out."

Odyssey's "missionary" work began in 1996, when Roberds, Fairless and a third person operated a Xeikon digital press out of a modest space in a strip mall, producing short-run brochures. The company, which celebrates its 13th anniversary this month, has grown to become a 48-employee, \$6.7 million business operating out of a new, 33,000-square-foot facility.

These days, 80 percent of Odyssey's business consists of point-of-purchase (POP) materials—indoor and outdoor—as well as product

the spring of 2007 that addressed its needs for POP kitting customers. Roberds was in search of a solution that could handle heavy ink coverage and heavier stocks. His two existing DI press workhorses had logged more than 25 million impressions apiece. For his evolving needs, Roberds opted to obtain a Presstek 52DI digital offset press.

"Though it was a little bigger format and a little more money than other machines on the market, we liked the way it ran and thought it output better quality than the small-format machines," Roberds explains. "Unlike a lot of printers who buy a Presstek DI to produce their short runs, we bought it to do our long runs. We're not going to run a quarter million pieces on it, but we might run 50,000 or 75,000 if the right job came along. We migrate business up from our toner/ink-jet devices to the 52DI when the quantities merit."

Fairless adds that the digital offset press can handle the versatility of the product range found in the POP kits. The printer is also enjoying consistent color across multiple output devices, quality imaging and minimal ghosting.

"The kits may contain anything from banners to window clings, to handouts and any number of items," he says. "The Presstek 52DI allows us to fill that niche in the kit for larger quantities that we couldn't do economically with our toner-based machines."

Odyssey reaps a size advantage from the landscape-format press. Roberds and his team found they could produce CD/DVD display cards six-up on a sheet for a major chain store retailer, where previously only four-up could fit, a major boost to throughput and productivity. The larger format is also perfect for the "bottle necker" labels Odyssey provides for the wine/spirit space, allowing anywhere from six-up to 14-up per sheet.

In the past few years, Odyssey has also picked up a large-format HP TurboJet 8300 ink-jet printer and a Xeikon 5000 digital web press. Naturally, the growth in

technology dictated a move to more spacious accommodations. While Roberds had been able to expand within the strip mall twice, a

standalone facility with environmental controls was in line with his changing needs.

"The digital machines required an air conditioned production space," he notes. "To find that, we'd have to find a warehouse and do a lot of retrofitting. That can be pretty expensive, so we ended up building our own facility."

Quite Convenient

Going forward, one goal of Odyssey Digital is to expand its presence in the convenience store market. Roberds notes there are a lot of relatively small operators of convenience stores, in the 25 to 200 location range, that could benefit from high-quality signage at a reasonable price. Also providing a high upside is short-run label production, courtesy of the one-year-old Xeikon 3300.

"We were ahead of the curve in terms of the market, but we didn't get a lot of notice," Fairless says. "People didn't understand why they should buy small quantities at a higher unit price. Now, the market is shifting in our direction by understanding printed material obsolescence, cost of inventory and the ability to vary the message by customer base."

Perhaps the greatest obstacle confronting Odyssey is gaining market penetration and the opportunity to convey why it is an ideal fit for particular vertical markets. "We have a completely integrated approach to digital printing, not only from a manufacturing standpoint, but from a sales standpoint," Fairless adds. "It really distinguishes us from the conventional printers that have added one piece of digital gear."

"It's about our ability to put kits together with five or six different types of products, and manufacture the products that go into the kit, under one roof. The variable data printing capability of our Xeikon presses truly impacts the retail message at the store level." **PI**



Odyssey Digital uses its new Presstek 52DI digital offset press, shown here, to handle longer runs of up to 75,000. The printer finds it ideal for producing various materials for point-of-purchase (POP) kits.

"We're trying to get our customers and prospects to understand what they can produce with digital machines that they can't do otherwise," he says. "It's not just personalized mailings. There are a lot of different aspects to communicating with people. We're building the message, enabling them to understand how they can use that in their own marketing efforts."

The quest to enlighten and inform is a long and arduous one, adds Jan Fairless, co-founder of Odyssey. "What we come up against, as we prospect, is the notion of how people use digital printing," he says. "Many times, they'll say they use a digital printer, but what that really means is they have somebody that provides simple one- and two-color jobs, prototypes and proofs.

labeling, shelf labels and shelf strips. Brochures and newsletters are still produced, but they represent a smaller percentage of business, along with folding cartons.

POP Customer Base

Odyssey's client roster includes typical POP recipients: retailers, convenience stores, wine/spirit distributors and food manufacturers. In the fall of 2008, the company acquired what was said to be the first Xeikon 3300 press in the western hemisphere, which utilizes 1,200 dpi LED imaging technology. It is being used by the printer to churn out carton stock and labels for various clients, including a large golf ball manufacturing company.

In addition to the Xeikon 3300, Odyssey made a key acquisition in