

With its 75DI full B2 unit construction press **Presstek** underlines its commitment to DI

JEFF JACOBSON is a great believer that the tide is running in favour of DI. He ought to be. As CEO of Presstek he is expected to fly the flag for a technology that the company invented, developed and still dominates.

But DI, the idea of imaging a blank plate while it is in the press to save on the step of imaging in a platesetter and then processing, has constantly failed to achieve a real take off.

There was the Heidelberg Quickmaster DI, launched at Drupa 95 in response to the Indigo introduction two years previously, the Scitex and then KBA Karat press and a trickle of machines from Komori, Heidelberg, Sakurai and even Xerox that flirted with the technology but never made any commercial impact. The sheer efficiency of CTP and make ready advances on litho presses on one hand and developments in electrophotographic digital presses on the other combined to squeeze DI into a very tight niche. Within that, adherents of DI have been exceedingly loyal and committed to the process. Jacobson points to research where average margins of DI users are around 40% per job and a customer can say that "DI saved my business". However, these are among the smallest printers around, where an investment in DI is going to set them apart from less forward thinking printers. It may be this attitude that is crucial to the extra profitability, but for these printers DI delivers.

This is not enough for Presstek. Two years ago it launched a 52cm version of the press, opening up the prospects



Presstek CEO Jeff Jacobson's optimism should be transformed into sales as his company is running with the tide of print on demand and web to print.

of larger printers looking at the technology and then added an aqueous coater and UV capability. It has worked. "A company as technically proficient as QuadGraphics would never buy a press like this unless they saw a clear benefit. In this country Potts the Printers is a larger company that runs a Presstek alongside its more conventional Heidelbergs and Rolands.

And now there is the Presstek 75DI, a full B2 unit construction press based on a combination of Ryobi mechanical engineering and a new imaging system that is faster than previous systems and can be cost effective enough to have one head per print unit. Amid a relative dearth of new litho presses at Ipex, the Presstek 75 certainly drew the crowds, being put through its paces on six minute changeovers from job to job and delivering almost dry sheets thanks to waterless offset printing.

For Jacobson the development

is a landmark and positions Presstek right in the mainstream of the industry's evolution. For Presstek each B2 press will also consume vastly more of its plate material. For the industry this is a machine that suits the zeitgeist where production runs are falling, where automation is needed to eliminate process steps and labour, and where customers still want litho quality.

It is intended to be competitive from runs of 500 sheets to 20,000, though the real sweet spot will be at 8,000-9,000 where print costs, says Jacobson, will be a penny a sheet. While conventional litho presses are quite capable of printing at this level, to do so continuously is stressful on staff and production systems. Digital presses are not suited to this run length and the advent of inkjet machines is making the whole area even more fluid. "I think that as inkjet arrives, it will appear that electrophotographic has missed

its window. Printers must ask why would they want two technologies capable of variable data print when what their customers want is offset quality print. I see the ideal technology spread for a commercial printer as an inkjet device for the short runs, a standard offset press for the longer runs and DI in the middle."

Those that look closely at the Presstek 75DI in the coming months may agree. It is certainly worth doing the calculations and running the tests to see whether the claims stack up. The press will be shown at GraphExpo in the US later this year followed by beta testing and full commercialisation next year. It will not be easy, the history of DI printing is a litany of relative failures. "The hardest sell is to people who knew the old DI when resolution and quality was limited," he says. But there are the good stories to counter this. "Every time a printer buys a DI press they become the most productive company in their area and we get calls from their competitors that then want to know about it.

"Selling DI is a still a slow one-to-one process where we have to explain the benefits of DI. As a result of this we realise that DI is still the industry's best kept secret."

That will change – it will have to – for Jacobson's optimism to be transformed into sales. But he is running with the tide: as well as print on demand, web to print and distributed print play to Presstek's strengths. Jacobson cannot afford to let the opportunity slip. ■