

# WhatTheyTh!nk

ISSUE TWO 2024 | Display Graphics & Textiles

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## THE STATE OF DISPLAY GRAPHICS

+

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# WELCOME TO THE Display Graphics and Textiles Issue!

**A**s we point out in this issue's feature story on "The State of Display Graphics" (see page 20), "don't call it 'wide format'"—and for a couple of reasons. First, print customers not steeped in industry jargon don't know what it means, but, second, the technology used to produce wide format display graphics has been increasingly adopted for other kinds of printed materials, including packaging, décor, and even various kinds of textiles. So, in this issue, we look at how the display graphics and textile market segments have been evolving.

No one perhaps exemplifies the various trajectories display graphics can play more than Enhance a Colour, which David Zwang profiles on page 14. Despite the spelling of "Colour," they are a Connecticut company that has evolved to be able to produce any number of a wide variety of high-value print applications—the most recent of which is custom-printed carpeting. David also looks at how Agfa is expanding into display graphics-adjacent areas, such as single-pass packaging (see page 38).

And no one perhaps exemplifies the creativity and problem-solving of the winners of the annual FASTSIGNS Project of the Year, which Richard Romano and Amy Noble profile on page 54.

Our issue sponsor is swissQprint, and the Executive Q&A with Erik Norman and Michael Voight on page 30 looks at how the versatility of today's display graphics printing equipment is helping customers expand further into specialty and industrial printing applications.

By the time you receive this issue, the eagerly anticipated drupa 24 will be hot upon us, and, on page 50, David Zwang talks with drupa's Director of Print and Portfolio Sabine Geldermann, about why this year's event is not to be missed.

Joanne Gore and Kevin Abergel team up on page 26 to look at how companies can use embellishments to add new dimensions (physically and metaphorically) to display graphics, making them even higher-value print applications.

Décor printing is a growing part of the display graphics ecosystem and on page 42, long-time industry consultant Debbie Nicholson offers commercial print businesses some tips on breaking into décor printing.

In other important topics, Pat McGrew takes a sobering look at how data privacy laws are impacting the printing industry, and why printers would be well-advised to keep on top of new legislation that is starting to be enacted (see page 46). Likewise, Cary Sherburne looks at how new sustainability regulations coming out of the European Union (EU) have the potential to impact textile and apparel manufacturers (see page 62). Cary also provides a reality check on the current state of sustainability in the fashion and apparel world (see page 64).

In offset printing news, Patrick Henry looks at print businesses' rationale for offset press replacement—not with digital presses, but with new offset presses, whose new features can be a game-changer for these businesses.

And, as always, we have our Tales from the Database series that shares some recent display graphics and specialty printing-related data from our latest Print Outlook 2024 report, as well as some historical trends.

**All that and more in the Display Graphics & Textiles issue.**



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**Cover image:** Enhance a Colour achieves a stained glass effect by printing on an acrylic substrate.





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FEATURED ARTICLE

# The State of Display Graphics: Don't Call It "Wide Format"



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# TALES FROM THE DATABASE

## These Are Not the Applications You're Looking For

BY RICHARD ROMANO

**D**rawing on six years' worth of Print Business Outlook surveys, our "Tales from the Database" series looks at historical data to see if we can spot any particular hardware, software or business trends. This issue, we turn our attention to specialty printing—or any printing beyond traditional offset or digital commercial work.

These surveys form the basis of our annual Printing Outlook reports, the most recent of which (2024) is available now. In every survey, we ask a broad cross-section of print businesses about business conditions, business challenges, new business opportunities and planned investments.



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In our Business Outlook reports, we tend to focus (obviously) on the most recent survey data, occasionally looking back a survey or two to see how these items have changed in the short-term. Plumbing the depths of our survey database can give us a better sense of how these trends have changed since the mid-2010s.

This issue, we rounded up a few opportunities and investments related to not only display graphics, but also textile printing, packaging, other types of specialty printing and even traditional signage. Let's see what history can tell us.

### NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

As we have chronicled in many other places, if we had been conducting these surveys between 2010 and 2015, it's likely that "adding wide format printing capabilities" would have been higher than 20% for





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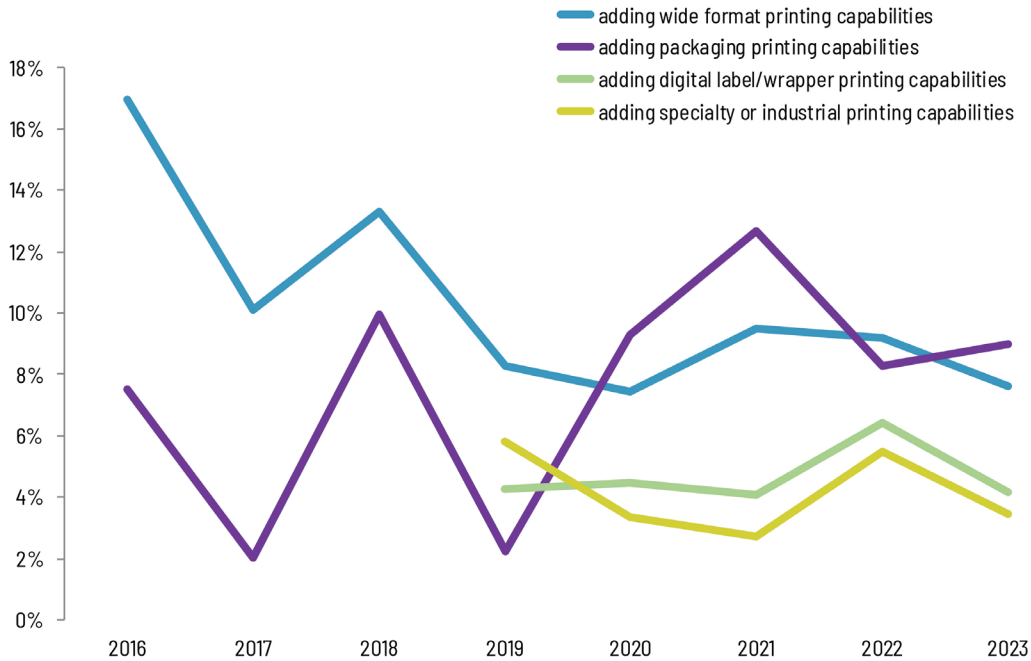


Figure 1: Wide format, packaging, labels and specialty printing-related business opportunities.

at least some of that period, as that was the “golden age” of expansion by commercial printers (and other businesses such as photo labs and service bureaus) into display graphics. The mid-2010s is when we started to see all the print businesses that were likely to expand into wide format already having done so, which is why the wide format opportunity has not

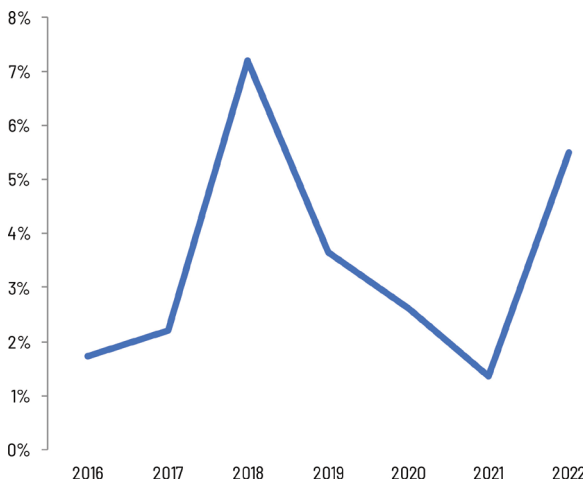


Figure 2: Adding textile/fabric printing capabilities as a business opportunity.

exceeded 10% since 2018. In our most recent survey (Fall 2023), it is at 8% of respondents.

What, then, do print businesses see as the hot new area to expand into? It doesn’t appear to be any one thing; the choppiness of “adding packaging printing capabilities” suggests some ambivalence, although in 2021 it did chart the highest in the history of our survey, and in 2023 is at 9%. We added “adding digital label/wrapper printing capabilities” in 2019 and it had been slowly climbing, but dropped from a high of 6% in 2022 to 4% in 2023. “Adding specialty/ industrial printing capabilities” has also hovered in the single digits for much of this period, so not much excitement there. (See Figure 1.)

We had “adding textile/fabric printing capabilities” as a new business opportunity from 2016 to 2022, which was cited as a business opportunity by 7% of survey respondents in 2018 and 6% in 2022. (See Figure 2.)

In 2022, we broke out the catchall “adding textile/ fabric printing” into “adding textile/fabric printing for apparel,” “adding textile/fabric printing for soft signage,” and “adding textile/fabric printing for décor/furnishings”—none of which have tracked very high. (See Figure 3.)

In 2020 and 2021, we added some other signage and wrapping-related opportunities to the list of

potential new business opportunities, which are still in the lower reaches. (See Figure 4.)

Interestingly, in the 2023 survey overall, “diversifying print product/application offerings” was a top five opportunity—but these data (and other findings in the most recent survey) indicate that these are not the products/applications they are looking at. We suspect some variations of commercial print are where respondents see the opportunities, rather than in commercial-adjacent specialty printing. Which I think is a bit of a lost opportunity.

### PLANNED INVESTMENTS

As for planned investments, digital label equipment seems to be where it’s at, relatively speaking, with only folding carton printing equipment ticking up (less than one percentage point) in 2023. (See Figure 5.)

As for textile printing equipment, they are even less sanguine. (See Figure 6.)

We also added a new item to the 2023 survey: direct-to-film printer (like Mimaki or Epson), which came in at 2%.

It also bears mentioning that 2023 was a lousy year for capital investment across the board, largely because interest rates have been elevated (ostensibly to conquer inflation), and we did indeed see “financing costs of our equipment” as a business challenge at a record high in 2023.

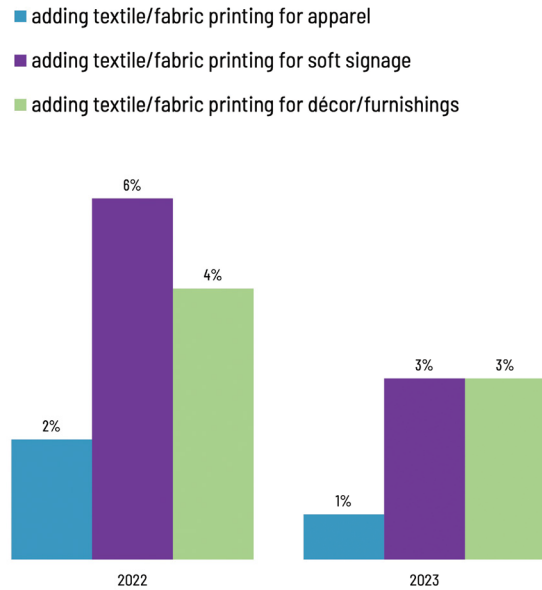


Figure 3: Detailed textile/fabric printing capabilities as business opportunities.

Printers continue to look for new products to offer, but not in these specialty areas. Some are exploring packaging, fewer are exploring textiles, but digital label printing looks the most promising at the moment.

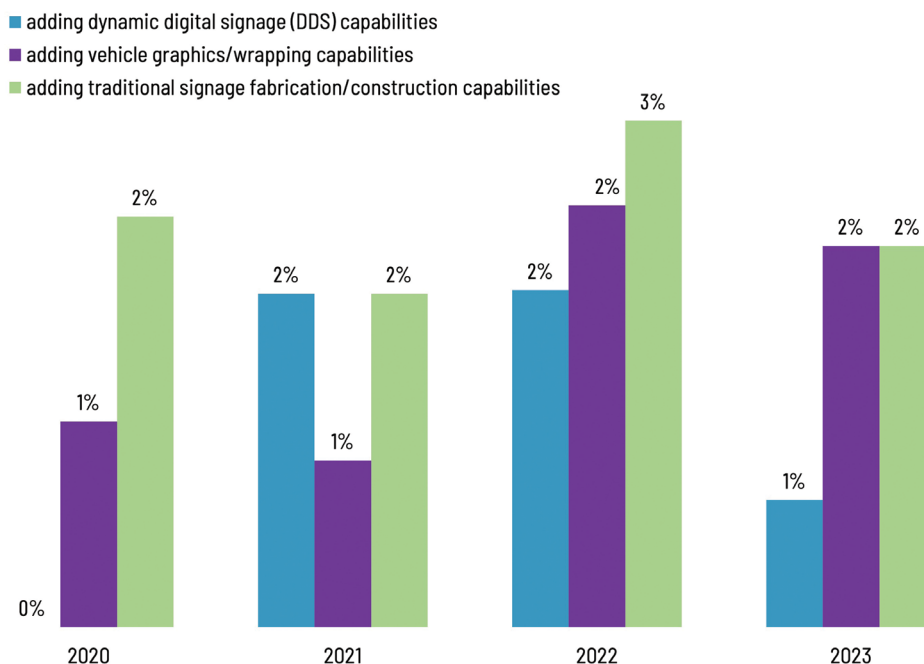


Figure 4: Adding new signage and wrapping business opportunities.

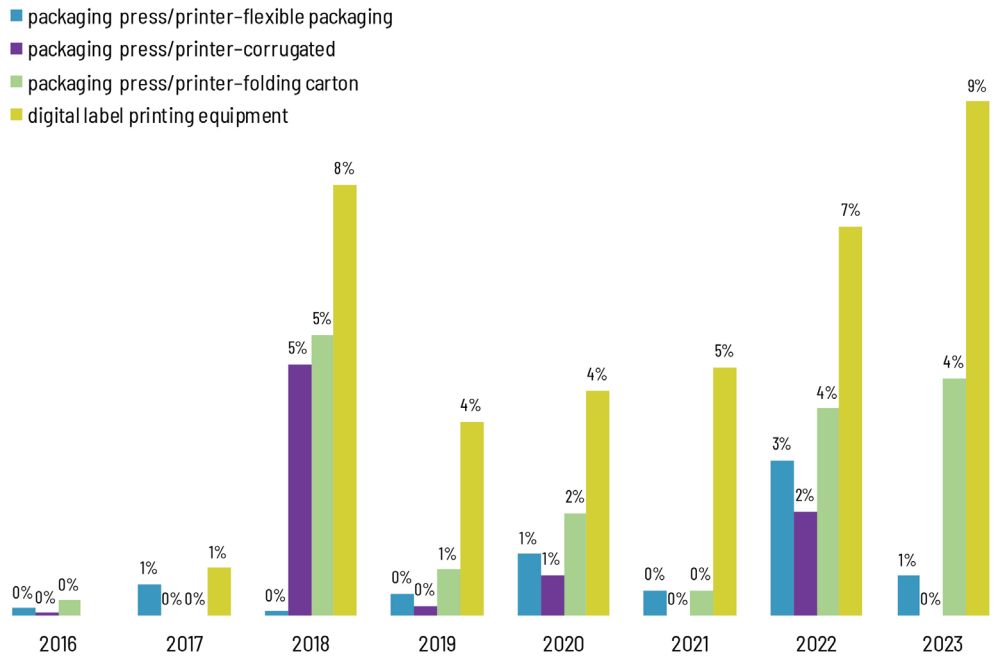


Figure 5: Label and packaging printing-related investments.

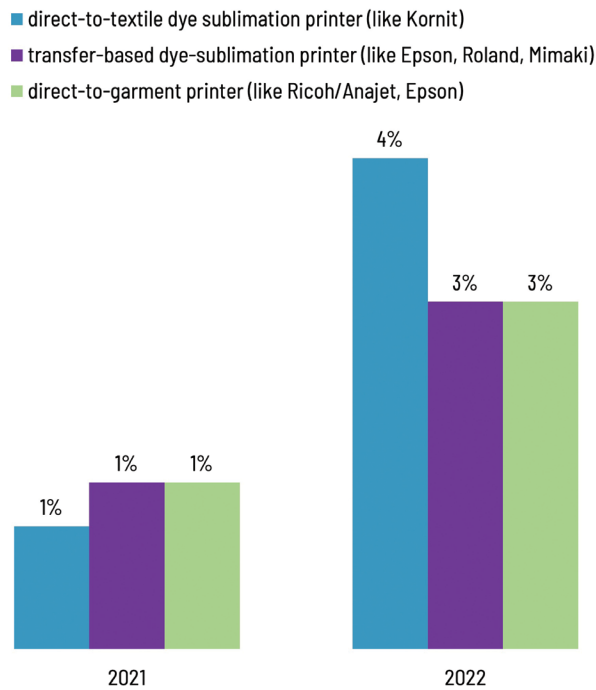


Figure 6: Textile printing-related investments.

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# ENHANCE A COLOUR: Masters of Complete Visual Solutions

BY DAVID ZWANG

## BACKGROUND

The global signage market in 2022 was \$35.4 billion and it is projected to grow to \$63.1 billion by 2031 at a rate of 6.3%. To say that this is an opportunity for those PSPs in that space is an understatement, especially since packaging is projected to grow at rate of about 3.9% during that same period. The growth can probably be attributed to the shift to online business, where signage acts as a silent salesperson. New sign and display technologies have also helped drive the increase as more players look to find differentiators to capture audience attention. This combined with a solid business ethos, a long history and good margins is what drives the growth of Enhance a Colour. I spoke with Kevin O'Connor, CEO, Enhance a Colour about his mastery of visual solutions.

## THE BEGINNINGS

In 1974, Kevin O'Connor was selling Addressograph Multigraph machines to corporations, small businesses, schools, etc. His territory was in NYC from 46th Street to 51st Street from Fifth Avenue to the river (minus ad agencies). One of the accounts he had was Colgate Palmolive, and he made some friends there. O'Connor told one of them about a cousin of his that was a disabled vet just back from Vietnam. He couldn't find a job because he was injured, and had a wooden leg, and told his friend that he thought he would start a little black-and-white copy shop in the city to help his cousin out. His friend at Colgate introduced him to administrative VP who purchased about \$300K in outside printing services there. This VP told him that he too was injured and had a bum leg from Korea, and told O'Connor to let him know when he started the business, because he would call him first if he had any printing to do.

After that O'Connor started to look for a location that could work and some equipment. One of the customers where he had recently placed some new AM presses, had an old platemaker and presses that he was willing to sell him cheap. So with an old platemaker and two Multis he started his printing business, without any real business experience. Fortunately, his soon-to-be wife Barbara had the business expertise and has been by his side ever since. They started their company on the 14th floor of a building on East 45th Street, and then as they grew, they continued to expand down to the 12th floor

and ultimately the to the 10th floor. As they continued to grow, Kevin and his brother Jim purchased two 29-inch Miehle presses and brought them in with a crane through the 10th floor windows. After a three year period, they were doing about three and a half million dollars.

Around that time, Xerox introduced their 9700 laser printer, and they realized that the B&W print market was going to shrink. About the same time, his landlord decided he didn't want printers with all of that skid activity in the building anymore anyway, so he and his brother Jim picked up and moved to a 30,000 sq. ft. space in Yonkers where he could get more space for less money.

An old business friend in State College, Pa., called and told him he wanted to start a color printing business and needed a press. O'Connor made him a deal to sell him all of his offset presses, and sell printing for him in NYC. His friend took him up on it, and they then decided to focus instead on a burgeoning color separation and typesetting business. They moved to an office in White Plains near the train station and hired some couriers so they could service the New York market. That was working fine until the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, when the bottom fell out of the ad market. After that, they only did about 29% of the business they did before 9/11 through February of the following year. Instead of a round of layoffs to recuperate the loss of business, they decided to reinvent themselves. They still had offset strippers and could ship the film, so they started doing predominantly prepress work for agencies and his friend in Pennsylvania. It was time to move again, but this time they moved to Pleasantville, further north of White Plains but still near the train station to service whatever separation business they still had in NYC.

## SIGN AND DISPLAY

Enhance a Colour bought their first 39-inch inkjet printer at the photo show at the Javits Center in NYC. Not realizing that the dye ink would fade if they used it for outdoor signage, they had to buy a laminator. That was one of many important lessons they learned as they entered their new business and markets. They had to fully understand how and where their work was going to be used. They also realized that the substrates and the work in process were going to be bigger and they were going to need more space to manage it all, so they needed a bigger building. Time to move again and they found and leased a building around the corner from where they are located today in Danbury, Conn.

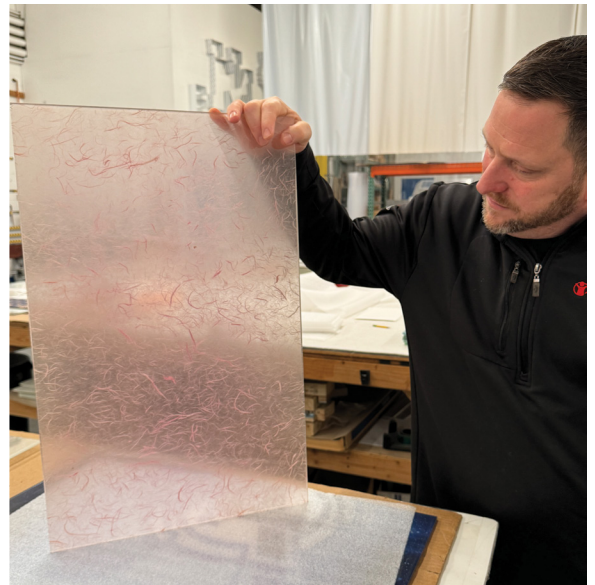
Enhance a Colour is like a big toy store for anyone who produces or purchases sign and display. Their equipment list is what most sign and display companies dream of.



Today, Enhance a Colour is like a big toy store for anyone who produces or purchases sign and display. Their equipment list is what most sign and display companies dream of.

They work in a 145,000 sq. ft. facility and have well over \$10 million worth of visual production equipment of all types. They are staffed with “50 great teammates that have got hundreds of years of combined experience,” including six full-time designers. The shop floor has so many printers, construction bays and machines, it makes your head spin. With abundant inks, substrates and finishing options at their fingertips, it’s easier to ask EAC what they don’t do rather than try to explain everything they’re capable of. And to be honest, it’s hard to even do that.

Their equipment includes printers that cut and print to glass, wood, metal, acrylic, carpet, cardboard, Styrofoam, etc., including, UV-reactive fabric that glows in blacklight; tactile wallpaper with raised contours you can touch and feel; plastic made to look like wood or metal; and foam that’s carved to resemble marble. I’ve been in there twice in the last six months and there is always something new and



cool. At last count, they have flatbed printers for rigid and flexible substrates; UVgel and Latex printers for vinyls, meshes, canvas and pressure sensitive vinyls; dye-sub printers for fabric and carpet; textured wallpaper printers; and a decorative printed glass line.

In addition, they have numerous 3D structural fabrication systems for both subtractive and additive 3D printing as well as wood and metal fabrication stations. They have digital routing, CNC die-cutting and waterjet die cutting machines; laminators for

liquid film and UV lamination; sewing and finishing machines and more. Their latest 'toy' is a 16-ft. deep pile state-of-the-art printer that prints carpet, with the capacity to produce unlimited dimensions and tiling options.

They also added a water-based Latex printer for textured print in 63-in. wide x 164-ft. long rolls. Coming soon is a swissQprint UV unit for blacklight, and a couple more UVgel printers. While having a lot of equipment is great, it's only great if you find ways to support the creative thinking and applications for the clients. For example, "the greatest part about the latex flatbed is when you want do thermal forming. That stretches like no tomorrow."

## DOING BUSINESS

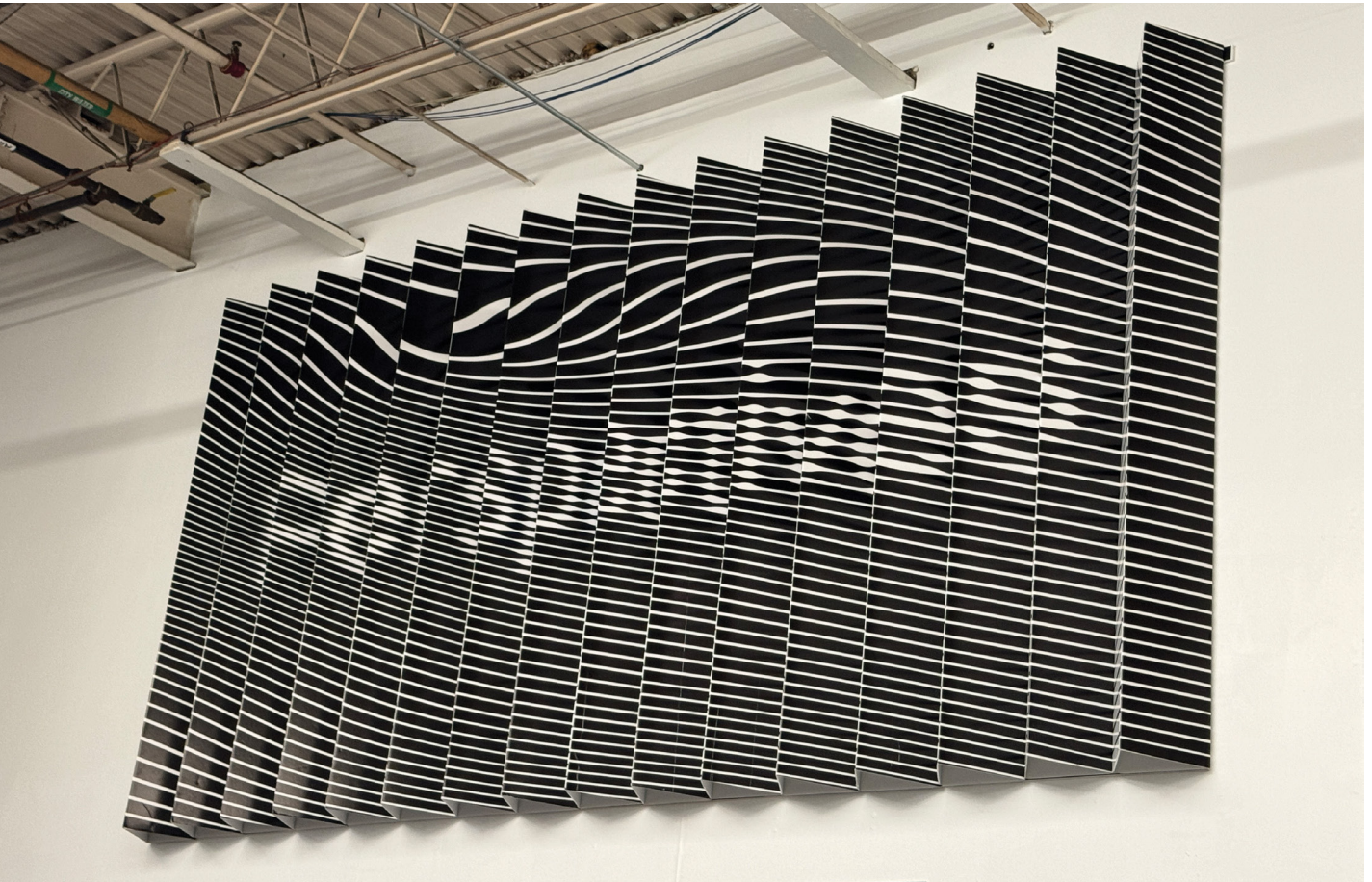
Kevin and Jim like having all of the "toys" that allow them to perform creative magic for their customers. However, they are very particular about purchasing equipment, entering markets and selling solutions. "At this point, we're selling so many different things," but they emphasize that it's all about the consultive relationship. "I get people that say to me, well, what are you selling? I said, I don't sell a blessed thing. And they look at me like I have three heads. I sit there and tell them, here's the advantage of what I bring to you."

They focus on many different markets—exhibit designers and producers, hotels, trade shows, hospitality, restaurants and casinos, sports areas, Broadway shows, etc.—since they have such a wide



range of solutions. It's almost unlimited. With their new acid-based carpet printer from Zimmer Austria, they saw the potential opportunity and Kevin said to his brother, "I know one thing, we won't have a lot of competition because it's so freaking expensive." Case in point: imagine a hotel or a cruise ship with 1,200 rooms and you want each room to target a different theme. Enhance a Colour can do the wallpaper, carpeting, fabrics and other décor pieces and each room can be different. Or on a smaller scale, you could have 10 different themes spread around all of the rooms.





Their focus is on the top third of the available market, and they do that with quality and service. They are primarily in the New York City market, and he reminds the salespeople of that all the time. It's a big market with lots of opportunity and market visibility they wouldn't get in many other places. For example, they purchased a 16-ft. thermal printer. The problem is you don't have a lot of places to go with 16-ft. fabric, yet they use it on Broadway. "We will use it all over the place when people want it. Is there a tremendous market? No. But when there's only maybe eight or 10 in the United States, you have opportunities, and you aren't fighting head-to-head on pricing."

Recently, they've opened their service area up. Now they go from Washington, D.C., up through New England to Boston. But that's the core of where they want to be. They also have some new relationships that have brought them work out of the area, but they are very careful to ensure that in those areas they control the installation, for a few important reasons. First, it ensures that the work is displayed as intended and without any after effects, but there are others.

As an example, they made some carpets for a social media event, and went to the location to install them. The owner of the event space stopped them when they were about to roll out the carpet and said, "You can't do that. All you large graphics people do is wreck my place constantly." He had a polished concrete floor. The owner put a piece of the vinyl produced by a competitor down on the floor and when they picked it up, while it wasn't colored, you could still see the graphic on the floor. The owner then showed him the same issue where they had put vinyl on his wallpaper. Kevin explained that all of that vinyl that went should have all been low tack repositionable vinyl so that when they took it off, it didn't leave a mark.

Kevin then showed him how the carpet can be put down on the concrete so that no one trips and there will not be a mark after picking it up. The carpet tape went to the edge, but not on the floor. The carpet went down on top of it. Now nobody trips, so you don't get sued. After the owner showed him other past problem installations, they went back and picked up the carpet, and there were no marks left. After that he told the owner, "The problem is that

you are dealing with people who don't understand your business and they don't understand the event business. You see this gray here? This is 40 years of battle scars doing this. Would I have made that mistake? Probably when I was in my 30s. I said, the problem is now I'm in my 70s, and now my installers all understand what they're doing."

When you control the installation you can also better serve the customer. One of their financial services clients selected two display houses to support a major partner event. The other display house used third-party installers and when the Enhance a Colour crew came to install their part, the customer was not happy about how the partners were displayed on the floor; he felt they should be displayed on a dais. He asked the other install team if they could go into the basement get the dais units, bring them up and clean them. They said this is how they were instructed to install the partner banners and they were done. He then asked EAC's salesman if his install team could help solve the problem, and he would be happy to pay them. They did, and now they have a very satisfied customer and Enhance a Colour is a very valued provider.

"When I go to New York City, I want to be able to work with the flagship stores on Fifth Avenue. That's what New York City is, it's flagship stores. Recently I saw that Gucci just paid \$900 million for a building that was on Fifth Avenue, almost three times the value of the building and that all the realtors said it wasn't worth \$390. Somebody else said, ah, but in the eyes of the beholder it was because it gave them the Fifth Avenue address. We'll do those all flagship stores all day long. A rollout of chain pizza stores? Not us. That is marketing. Yeah. That's absolutely marketing"

As Kevin says, "We could go into retail store signage or political signage and compete on volume, but that is not the top third of the market and it really doesn't provide them with the margin or identity they want. They are as profitable as they are, because if you work the top of the pyramid there is less competition, especially if you do it right. Ultimately, it's never about me. It's about what do you need? What are you trying to accomplish? And then we'll show you how to do it. It's building that rapport. Now, once I help you on the first one..."

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# DON'T CALL IT "WIDE FORMAT"

## The State of Display Graphics

BY RICHARD ROMANO

In the printing industry—like just about any industry—we love us our jargon. Indeed, the idea of jargon, or industry-specific terminology, originated with the invention of printing, as scientists, engineers, naturalists and others were able to communicate (via books) directly with other scientists, engineers and naturalists using rarified terms that only those having expert knowledge would understand. And, of course, there is nothing wrong with jargon; it is a useful shorthand. The problem with jargon comes when we use it when talking with customers or other “lay” folks outside the industry.

The term “wide format” or “wide format printing” is very much a jargon-esque term that doesn’t mean a lot outside industry trade publications or print businesses’ service rosters. This has been a topic for many WhatTheyThink editorial calls, and we have made the conscious decision to wean ourselves off the term “wide format” in favor of the more understandable “display graphics.” Yes, this is an industry publication, and our readership knows perfectly well what we mean by “wide format,” but we aim to set an example for how to talk to customers without confusing industry terminology.

(In 1996, I assembled a massive reference work called The GATF Encyclopedia of Graphic Communications and I found that, not only did the industry have—to reference an old Steve Martin stand-up bit about French—“a different word for everything,” we often have more than one term for the same thing.)

So, regardless of what we call it, what is the state of it?

### BY THE NUMBERS

First, a couple of third-party analyses.

In December, our friends at Keypoint Intelligence released their Wide Format Value of Print Forecast, and they highlight that a key business opportunity for today’s display graphics producers is product diversity—specifically adding high-margin items that the competition doesn’t.

*“By providing unique applications that others don’t, wide format businesses can attract new clientele while also demonstrating a dedicated focus on high-margin offerings. According to Keypoint Intelligence’s newly published Wide Format Value of Print Forecast, high-value areas include ad specialty products (9.2% CAGR), wallcoverings (9.0% CAGR), indoor signage (7.4% CAGR), and window graphics (6.2% CAGR).”*

Display graphics is also starting to increasingly encompass certain aspects of industrial printing. Adds Keypoint Intelligence:

*"With the growing availability of smaller, cost-effective direct-to-object (DTO) printers in the market, the opportunity for PSPs to extend their printing capabilities to virtually any substrate has never been stronger. Depending on the specific application, the adoption of DTO technology can facilitate entry into novel market segments, diversifying revenue streams without disrupting the core business model. Based on Keypoint Intelligence's Wide Format Value of Print Forecast, anticipated high-volume areas include ad specialty (9.1% CAGR), wallcoverings (8.9% CAGR), and indoor signage (6.7% CAGR)."*

Flatbed UV printers have long been used for these types of applications, and the smaller "benchtop" UV units from the likes of Roland are ideal for these kinds of tchotchke printing opportunities.



Roland's VersaSTUDIO BD-8 is a UV flatbed printer designed specifically for printing on 3D objects.

Meanwhile, in its *The Future of Printed Signage in a Digital World to 2028* report, Smithers estimated that the global value for printed signage applications in 2023 reached \$40.99 billion, down around \$5 billion from its pre-pandemic value. The volume of printed signage had fallen from 10.81 billion square meters in 2019 to 8.92 billion square meters in 2020, although demand for printed signage did recover in 2021-2022.

## Have You Added, or Do You Plan to Add Wide Format Printing (Like Signs, Displays, Banners)

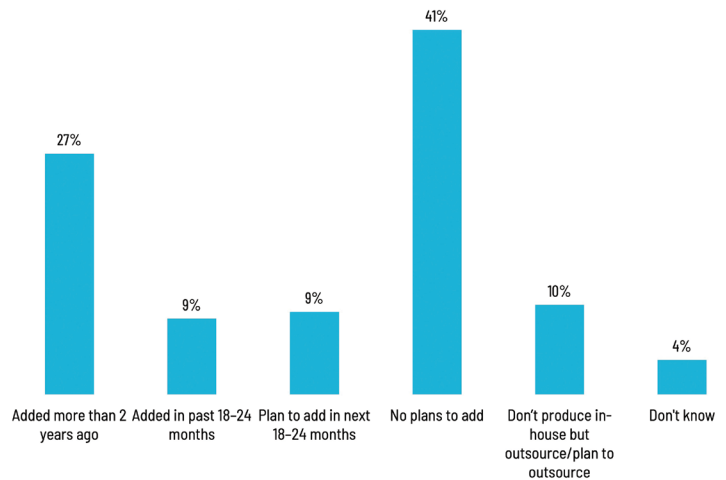


Figure 1: Interest in Wide Format Printing Capabilities, Fall 2023

They add that the demand for printed signage will only grow marginally, its value increasing at 0.2% CAGR to \$25.15 billion in 2028 and volumes will have a 0.7% CAGR to 2028. Global output will reach 10.43 billion square meters in 2028.

Smithers is a little more bearish than I would tend to be, but there it is.

## THE GRAYING OF WIDE FORMAT, PART THE INFINITY

A common theme in the last few years has been what I call "the graying of wide format" (it's hard to dispense with the term entirely), or, in other words, that it's a mature market segment. There are still a lot of opportunities, but in terms of outside parties—such as commercial printers—entering the display graphics space, that migration is long over. As our own *Print Business Outlook Survey* found last fall, 41% of print businesses have no plans to add wide format printing capabilities and 45% already have added them (see Figure 1).

## DIGGING INTO DISPLAY GRAPHICS BUSINESSES

In our *Fall 2023 Print Business Outlook Survey* results, we can break out display graphics and signage producers and see what their trends are. Bear in mind, most of the respondents to our survey were general commercial printers, and those

that specifically categorize themselves as “wide format printers” is a small subset. So these cross-tabulations did not yield the most robust data set in the world, but we can get a general sense of what’s going on.

### BUSINESS CONDITIONS

In terms of business conditions, about 80% of display graphics and signage producers reported an increase in revenues in 2023 over 2022, most of that increase 10% or more. And they’re pretty optimistic about 2024, with upwards of 86% expecting revenues to increase in 2024 over 2023.

The only bearish sentiment concerns profits. Despite reporting an increase of profitability in 2023 versus 2022, fewer are expecting 2024 to be a blockbuster year for profits. And it’s not hard to see why. Consumables costs remain high and the last few years have made employee compensation more of a challenge than it used to be; as we have seen elsewhere in the printing industry, businesses have had to increase wages to attract new employees, which then causes a bit of a conundrum about what to do with current employees. Boost their salaries as well? Seems only fair—especially if you want to retain those employees. All of this—and other costs such as utilities, rent, leases, etc.—eats into profitability, regardless of how many new jobs a shop gets and how much revenues increase.

### BUSINESS CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The top business challenges display graphics and signage producers say they face are:

- increasing plant productivity
- managing workflow automation
- capabilities of sales personnel
- national economic conditions
- competition from other print providers
- finding qualified sales personnel

The two “sales personnel” challenges are telling: selling display graphics and other kinds of specialty print is different from selling general commercial printing.

The top new business opportunities these businesses see in 2024 are:

- hiring new salespeople
- diversifying print product/application offerings
- improving economic conditions
- using marketing automation for our business (like HubSpot, Eloqua, Marketo)

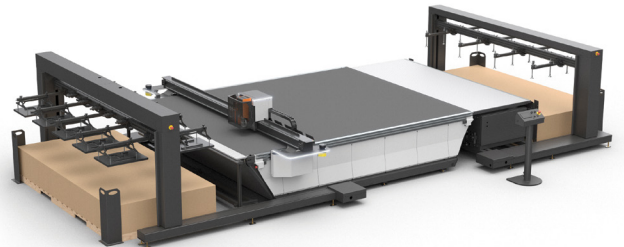
- adding wide format printing capabilities (that is, for these folks, adding capacity)
  - adding textile/fabric printing for soft signage
- As I’ll comment below, we’ve had a pretty spectacular macroeconomic environment, so when they say “improving economic conditions” I’m not sure how things could get much better.

### PLANNED INVESTMENTS

The top planned investments for display graphics and signage producers are:

- cutting table for wide format finishing
- other finishing equipment for wide format
- Management Information System (MIS)

These three items appear above “we have no planned investments.” So finishing is a top-of-mind issue for these businesses. We had seen them investing in flatbed UV printers over the past few years, so it make sense that they would see acquiring complementary cutting/finishing capabilities as a strategic move.



Kongsberg recently launched its new precision cutting platform, Kongsberg Ultimate.

### ADJACENT PRODUCTS

We also asked what other product areas they were interested in adding (the same question that yielded the numbers in Figure 1), and the top items (selected by about 20% of display graphics and signage producers) were:

- textile/fabric printing for soft signage
- textile/fabric printing for garment printing/ decorating
- direct-to-garment printing
- interior decor printing (wall coverings, pillows, etc.)

### AUTOMATION

Automation can mean different things to different people, whether it be “RIP and print” software,



Epson has long offered direct-to-garment printers, such as the recently introduced SureColor F1070 entry-level (under \$10,000) hybrid DTG/DTF printer, designed to help small businesses get into garment decorating quickly and inexpensively.

nesting optimization and job preparation, or even things like robots, cobots and robotic arms. For our display graphics and signage survey respondents, the top three forms of “automation” that they say they have implemented are:

- Web-to-print/online storefront
- software-based estimating
- software-based automatic processing of prepress files

There is also a small group that selected “hardware-based robotics (like mechanical arms).” I suspect this latter item will become more popular as the cost of entry comes down.

Still, the thing to remember about display graphics is that a lot of work is one-off, bespoke projects. Indeed, these are the kinds of jobs that display graphics producers love to promote to show off their creativity and problem-solving skills. Those are not the kinds of things that lend themselves to automation. And as for traditional signage, well, look at the FASTSIGNS Project of the Year winners on page 54 and ask yourself how much of those could be automated.

Still, those kinds of marquee products aren’t usually a shop’s bread and butter; highly templated

“commodity” products usually are (banners, posters, etc.) which do lend themselves to an automated approach. So the idea of completely “lights out” automation will not come to display graphics and signage production any time soon, but it’s not hard to see the majority of the workflow being automated, at least in part.

## NEW BUSINESS FORMATION

Switching gears a bit, I confess that I remain obsessed with a 2021 Economist headline, “New business formation in America goes bezonkers.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, during the pandemic years, new business applications reported by the Census Bureau were almost quite literally off the chart into the bezonkosphere and while business formation has become a bit less “bezonkers” since its peak, it’s still pretty high, at least in some business categories. While some of these new businesses replaced those that failed during 2020, one of the consequences of what has been called The Great Resignation/ Reshuffling/Rewhatevering was people taking stock of their lives and careers during the pandemic and pursuing a dream of business ownership, or at the very least of not being stuck in a job one hates.

(This is the M.O. of many print and sign franchise owners, many of whom I have spoken with over the years are more often than not refugees from the corporate world who got tired of “workin’ for the man.”)

Now, how much of this will persist remains to be seen, especially as the percentage of what the Census Bureau calls “high propensity applications” (those new businesses with a high likelihood of supporting a payroll) has dropped substantially.

It also bears mentioning that these new businesses aren’t just “work from home” writer and designer types. The Census Bureau breaks new business applications into specific NAICS categories (i.e., industries) and one of the top-level business categories for new business creation has been “retail trade,” which is a big vertical for sign and display graphics providers. Now, the trend line is pretty hard to discern, but for the time being, business formation in this category is still pretty high.

Why do we mention this here? New businesses need a lot of resources and other materials to get started, often involving various kinds of print, including signage and other kinds of display graphics, both interior and exterior. This presents opportunities for print businesses, so keeping track of new business registrations in your area can be a good marketing strategy. Obviously, different regions and even different states have different business formation dynamics, so your mileage may vary.

### AIA CONSTRUCTION OUTLOOK

One other data point I keep an eye on is the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Architecture Billings Index (ABI), which is a leading indicator for new commercial real estate investment and thus potential new signage projects, as well as the AEC market in general. According to the AIA, in December 2023, demand for design services had been soft for most of the fall and ended 2023 just as softly. Says the AIA:<sup>2</sup>

*“Business conditions at architecture firms remained soft to close out 2023, with an AIA/Deltek Architecture Billings Index (ABI) score of 45.4 for December (any score below 50 indicates declining billings). Billings at firms declined for eight months of the year, with the only growth coming in some spring and summer months.”*

There is some room for optimism:

*“However, clients largely remained interested in at least discussing potential new projects, since inquiries increased every month of the year except one. The value of new design contracts increased for only six months of the year, indicating that while clients were interested in new projects, they were*

*generally less likely to commit to them by signing a contract. In addition, backlogs at firms remained quite strong throughout 2023, despite declining from a record-high peak in 2022. Backlogs at firms stood at an average of 6.7 months in December, indicating that most firms still have a significant amount of work in the pipeline.”*



The rule of thumb is that this index leads actual commercial real estate investment by about 9–12 months, so commercial real estate development might also be a bit soft as we head through 2024. Sign businesses should keep an eye on construction activity in their area to get a jump on involvement in these projects.

### AT THE END OF THE DAY

As I write this in early February, the macroeconomic situation is as good as we’ve seen it in...well, decades, perhaps. GDP has been increasing quarter over quarter, unemployment remains near record lows, and the bête noire of 2023—inflation—has been tamed. As always, there remain some sticking points (real estate), but in general the economic landscape itself should not be a drag on business. Talk of a looming recession seems to have calmed, at least for the time being. At the same time, 2024 is a Presidential election year, which is always a boon for the graphic communications markets. It won’t be long before the lawn signs start to sprout like crabgrass.

1 Read the article at <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2021/06/26/new-business-formation-in-america-goes-bezonkers>.

2 <https://www.aia.org/resource-center/abi-december-2023-architecture-firm-billings-remain-soft-end-year>

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# The Expanding Horizon of Display Graphics and Signage

BY JOANNE GORE AND KEVIN ABERGEL

**D**riven by technological advancements, changing market demands and the increasing importance of visual marketing, the display graphics and signage segment of the print industry has evolved substantially over the centuries. What started out as wood, stone or metal signs featuring basic text and symbols, it was the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries that marked a turning point for this print industry niche—as the increase in commercial activity and urbanization led to a greater need for signage to advertise a wider range of products and services. This period saw

the introduction of more sophisticated signmaking techniques, from hand-painted signs to metalwork and, later, electric lighting for illuminated signs. The 20th century brought about rapid advancements in technology and materials, which had a profound impact on the industry. The development of plastics in the early to mid-20th century, for example, allowed for more durable and versatile signs. Screen printing technology also became popular, enabling mass production of signs and graphics with consistent quality.

It was the digital revolution that fundamentally transformed the print industry—taking signage, wide format and display graphics right along with it. The advent of computer-aided design (CAD) software significantly enhanced the design capabilities and efficiency of sign making. High-quality, full-color graphics could now be printed quickly and cost-effectively on a variety of substrates.

Today, the display graphics and signage industry is highly dynamic, characterized by continuous innovation. Digital printing technology has advanced to include large format printing, enabling the production of large-scale graphics for billboards, banners and wraps. Furthermore, the industry has embraced sustainable practices, with eco-friendly inks and recyclable materials becoming increasingly popular.

### DIGITAL EMBELLISHMENTS: REVOLUTIONIZING DISPLAY GRAPHICS, WIDE FORMAT AND SIGNAGE

The print industry is witnessing a renaissance, with technology that does more than enhance traditional print, transforming display graphics, wide format and signage, into highly engaging, memorable and valuable brand experiences. These advancements offer print manufacturers a never-before-seen opportunity to elevate their products beyond traditional visual appeal and create tactile experiences that forge a deeper connection between brands and their audience. In an era where differentiation is key, digital embellishments emerge as a powerful tool to add value—and profitability—to printed materials.

With a staggering 90% of users expressing a positive outlook on their digital embellishment business, it's clear that this technology is not just a passing trend, but a key driver of innovation and growth in the print industry—and represents a shift in how consumers interact with printed materials. This evolution from “ink on paper” to “experiences in hand” allows businesses to break through the digital noise with tangible products that captivate and engage.

The integration of digital embellishments into display graphics represents a confluence of art, technology and marketing genius. It offers a beacon of creativity and profitability in challenging times, proving that even in the face of adversity, innovation thrives. As we continue to navigate the post-pandemic landscape, digital embellishments stand out as a testament to the enduring power and potential of print in the digital age.

### THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE: A PANDEMIC-DRIVEN SURGE IN DEMAND

The pandemic served as a catalyst for innovation within the print industry, encouraging businesses to invest in new technologies and explore lucrative revenue streams. Printers specializing in display graphics and signage found themselves at the forefront of this transformation, adapting to meet the soaring demand for visually compelling and touch-friendly marketing materials. As the retail e-commerce sector exploded, the need for standout packaging and signage did as well, underscoring the role of digital embellishments in capturing consumer attention in a crowded digital landscape.



According to a study conducted by Taktiful<sup>1</sup>, digital embellishments have not only survived the pandemic but thrived, seeing an acceleration in adoption across various sectors. The “Digital Embellishment Trends in a COVID World” report highlights a pivotal shift in the industry. Despite initial setbacks, 75% of digital embellishment users reported a significant impact from COVID-19, with 33% experiencing increased revenues. This paradox of challenge and opportunity underscores

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.taktiful.com/product-page/report-digital-embellishment-trends-in-a-covid-world>

the versatility and appeal of digital embellishments, especially in sectors like packaging, where demand has soared. Further fueled by supply chain constraints, the pandemic underscored the necessity for adaptability, pushing brands towards shorter runs and on-demand production.

Yet, despite the proven effectiveness of digital embellishments in enhancing brand recall and engagement, a substantial portion of the industry remains unaware of its potential. This lack of awareness presents a golden opportunity for forward-thinking companies to lead the charge in educating their clients and the market at large about the transformative power of digital embellishments.

### BEYOND THE VISUAL: CREATING MULTI-SENSORY EXPERIENCES

In the realm of display graphics and signage, digital embellishments offer a unique proposition: the ability to engage multiple senses. By adding texture and dimension to prints, PSPs can create multi-sensory experiences that not only attract visual attention but also invite physical interaction, fostering a stronger connection between the brand and the consumer. The incorporation of 3D varnishes, textured finishes and metallics can transform ordinary displays into extraordinary experiences, compelling consumers to stop, look, remember—and buy. This approach can be particularly effective in retail environments, exhibitions and public spaces.

The flexibility and versatility of digital embellishments opens up a wealth of opportunities for marketing and customization for printers to create customized, high-value, niche solutions. For instance, automotive clients can benefit from embellished vehicle wraps that mimic textures

like carbon fiber or brushed metal, as a premium customization option. Similarly, the retail and event space can leverage digitally enhanced signage and banners to create immersive brand environments that captivate and engage attendees.

### STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS FOR FUTURE GROWTH

For printers to fully capitalize on the potential of digital embellishments, strategic investments in equipment and training are essential. All-in-one presses that accommodate a variety of applications, including wide format and signage, are becoming increasingly popular. Combined with finishing equipment designed for digital production allows for the seamless integration of digital embellishments into a printer's offering. Investing in sales and marketing strategies that showcase the unique value of embellished graphics can further differentiate a business in a competitive market.

Despite the clear advantages, the adoption of digitally embellished print comes with its challenges. The initial investment in technology and training can be significant. However, the potential for increased profitability and market differentiation makes it a worthwhile endeavor. PSPs must navigate these challenges by carefully planning their investment, exploring financing options and leveraging partnerships with equipment manufacturers and material suppliers.

As the print industry continues to evolve, digital embellishments represent a significant opportunity for growth and differentiation in the display graphics, wide format, and signage sectors. By embracing these technologies, printers can move beyond commoditization, offering their clients innovative solutions that engage consumers on a deeper level.



## 13 TIPS TO SKYROCKET YOUR DISPLAY GRAPHICS SALES

Selling display graphics involves a mix of strategy, creativity, and understanding of the market. As the industry looks forward, the integration of digital and physical marketing channels becomes increasingly important. The future of print lies in the ability to combine visual appeal with tactile experiences, creating brand interactions that are not just seen but felt. Emerging technologies like augmented reality (AR) and 3D printing are poised for new possibilities to enable even more interaction and engagement.

- 1. Showcase Quality and Creativity:** Use your showroom or client meetings to showcase the quality and creativity of your display graphics. Real, touchable examples can highlight the vivid colors, durability and innovative designs—while provoking the power of touch.
- 2. Offer Custom Solutions:** Emphasize the ability to offer custom sizes, shapes and designs tailored to your client's specific needs.
- 3. Bundle Services:** Offer bundled services that include design, printing and installation. This is ideal for businesses looking for a one-stop solution for all their signage and display graphics.
- 4. Leverage Technology:** Use augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) to show clients how the display graphics will look in their intended environment. This can help clients visualize the end product more effectively and make a more informed decision.
- 5. Highlight Embellished Print Options:** Emphasize the availability of custom embellished print options with a unique "touch" that enhances brand visibility and attracts business.
- 6. Embrace Sustainability:** Appeal to environmentally conscious clients and add a unique selling proposition to your offerings by adopting and highlighting eco-friendly printing options.
- 7. Create Flexible Pricing Models:** Accommodate different budgets by offering discounts on bulk orders or scalable solutions that allow businesses to start small and expand.
- 8. Educate Your Clients:** Conduct workshops or seminars on the importance of high-quality display graphics in marketing and branding. Educating your clients about the value of your products can help justify the investment.
- 9. Have a Strong Online Presence:** The Internet is where people turn to most when deciding what to buy. Ensure that your website and/or e-commerce site includes a portfolio of your work, client testimonials and clear, easy-to-navigate product offerings.
- 10. Follow-up:** Repeat business and referrals are invaluable for growth. Provide excellent after-sales service, including follow-ups to ensure customer satisfaction.
- 11. Get Seasonal:** Take advantage of seasonal trends or events by offering limited-time promotions or special designs for events like trade shows, holidays or local festivals to generate timely interest.
- 12. Network:** For a steady stream of referrals—and business—build relationships with event planners, marketing agencies and other businesses that may require display graphics regularly.
- 13. Offer Sample Kits:** Use the power of touch to sway decisions in your favor. Provide potential clients with sample kits that show off your print menu of textures, substrates, embellishments, color, finishing and more.

## THE FUTURE IS HERE

Throughout its history, the display graphics, wide format and signage industry has consistently adapted to the changing needs of society and advancements in technology. Its evolution reflects the ongoing importance of visual communication in the commercial landscape, demonstrating the industry's ability to innovate and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

With digital embellishments leading the way, the future is bright. By expanding your horizon, you can unlock new avenues for creativity, innovation and customer engagement. The key to success lies in understanding the market, investing in the right technologies and continuously pushing the boundaries of what print can achieve.

# EXECUTIVE Q&A:

## swissQprint's Erik Norman and Michael Voight

BY RICHARD ROMANO



Michael Voight



Erik Norman

**W**e spoke with swissQprint America President Erik Norman and Application Specialist Michael Voight about the company's display graphics product portfolio, top and emerging applications, customer expansion into adjacent applications and what automation means for swissQprint and its customers.

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**WhatTheyThink:** Let's start with where swissQprint positions itself in the overall display graphics market.

**Erik Norman:** We position ourselves as a manufacturer of high-precision, highly versatile, highly reliable and highly efficient flatbed and roll-to-roll UV printers predominantly within the mid- to higher-volume production segment. Our top-end device is capable of 3,229 sq. ft./hr., or 80-100 or so boards an hour in a practical sense. Our lowest-end device runs up to 969 sq.ft/hr. We have five models—four flatbeds and one dedicated roll-to-roll model, although all of the flatbeds will also do roll-to-roll or dual roll.

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**WTT:** What types of customers comprise your user base?

**EN:** The bulk of them would be traditional sign and display, and also companies producing a lot of interior décor, art reproduction and fine art. When I say "interior décor," the applications include wall coverings, commercial interior art, glass and other related décor for corporate, hospitality, hospitals, colleges and universities. And then we have clients that do true art reproductions, and also produce original art for retailers. We also sell into the industrial marketplace, where our products are being used for, say, membrane switches in the appliance market, the automobile market and then a whole host of other applications including printing for credit cards or even saw blades...you name it. This is where the versatility comes into play. Because of the robustness of our ink sets and the precision of the devices, they're well-suited to a wide variety of applications.

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**WTT:** The Swiss precision of the machines probably plays into that as well, especially for things like membrane switches.

**EN:** It does. And people in that space like the very heavy-duty build of the machine. They get long life,

they're very robust and they're really going stand the test of pretty much any environment.

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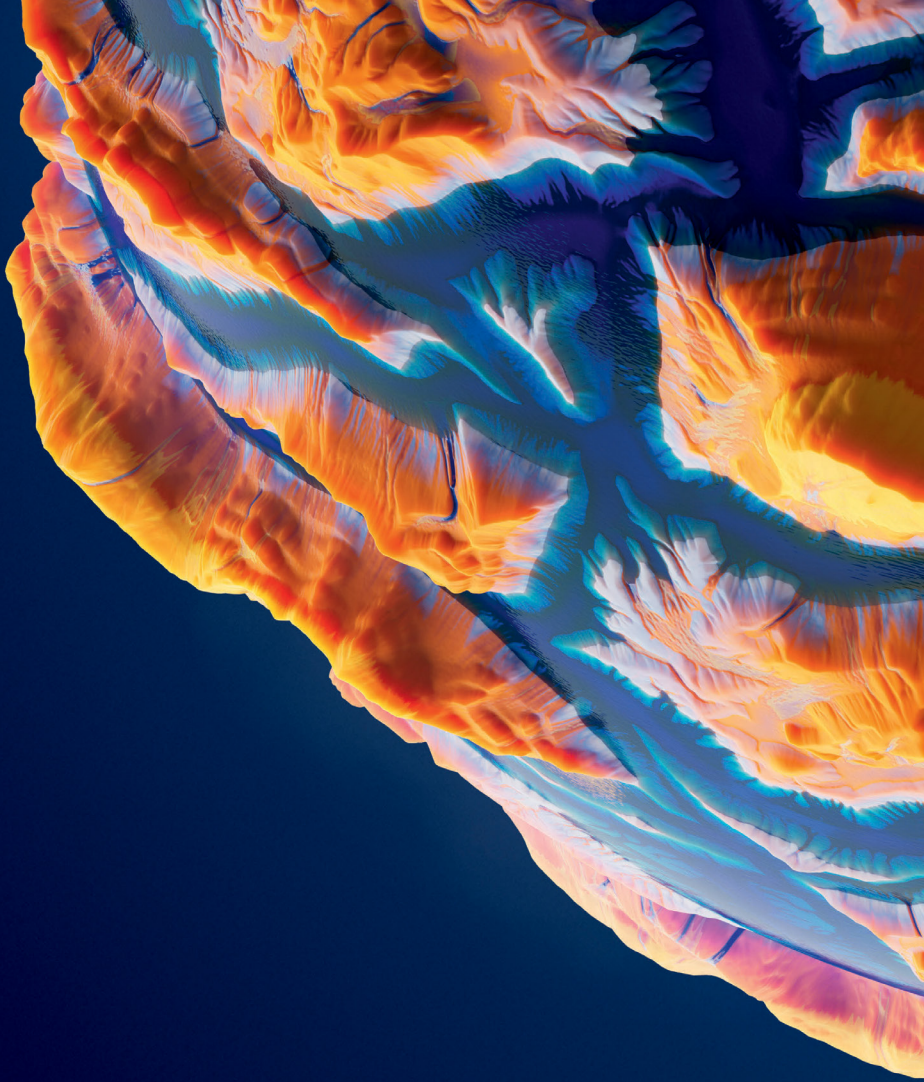
**WTT:** So provide a quick overview of the general portfolio.

**EN:** Our entry-level machine is called Oryx. It's a one-row, nine-color option device with a 98 x 80 bed and max output of 969 sq. ft./hr. Then we have Impala, also a 98 x 80 bed but offers two rows and nine colors, delivering 1,938 sq.ft./hr. Next is Nyala, a 126 x 80 bed size with two printhead rows and nine colors. It produces up to 2,217 sq. ft./hr. Kudu is our latest flatbed and has three printhead rows, and 10 colors—so 30 heads. It operates on a 127 x 80 bed and delivers 3,229 sq. ft./hr. Finally, we have Karibu, our roll to roll printer. Karibu has two rows and nine color channels and a 133-in. print bed. It delivers 2,282 sq. ft./hr.

**Michael Voight:** Kudu is the first printer within our portfolio featuring linear drives, which increases carriage velocity, and tighter droplet placement. With up to 10 color channels it gives our customers the freedom to configure with six additional channels. Our dedicated roll-to-roll printer Karibu features a light booth for viewing backlit prints, mesh kit for printing mesh without liners as well as full bleed prints and camera recognition for two-sided printing. The Karibu, like our flatbed printers, has the max of nine color channels. One of the big drivers supporting Kudu is that it enables companies to take the same square footage of space and make it more productive and versatile.



The swissQprint Kudu flatbed printer boasts 10 color channels and output speeds up to 304 m<sup>2</sup> per hour.



# Kudu

## Performer by nature

### High-end flatbed printer

3272 ft<sup>2</sup>/h output

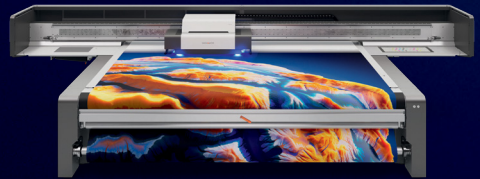
10 colour channels

Latest print head technology

126" wide roll option

Greenguard Gold certified ink

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April 10 - 12, 2024, booth 2308



Find out more



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**WTT: What are the resolution and the speed ranges?**

**MV:** We're currently able to achieve 1,350 x 1,350 as the max resolution and our lowest resolution is 1,015 x 450. Depending on the model, there's a speed difference based on print head configuration and table dimensions, with the possibility to mirror CMYK print heads for Karibu, Impala, and Nyala into speed models with the max print speed of our portfolio ranging between 2,217–3,982 sq. ft./hr.

**EN:** We give operators tremendous flexibility to manage the output speed and resolution that they're trying to achieve. Unlike some manufacturers that may just have a fixed resolution and then they just go from one pass, to two pass, to three pass, we can manage the resolution and the passes to give people flexibility to achieve the output quality and speed they require.

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**WTT: What are some of the hot new application areas and what your customers are getting into that they might not have before?**

**EN:** We're seeing a lot more attention to haptics through texture and other embellishments. And, we're seeing more use of print to replicate surfaces. Using a high-resolution scanner, somebody will scan a piece of tile, a piece of flooring, stone—whatever the object might be. We can then replicate that exact surface texture and color on a printed piece so that you can create a faux version of a wood panel or a concrete surface or whatever you want, and then apply that to a different type of material so you have a lower-cost alternative. We're seeing the use of our inline varnish for a lot more effects such as drop gloss or lenticular effect, or it might be a buildup of varnish to create different matte to gloss finishes to give it a specialty look. We're also seeing some trends

toward metallics—not metallic inks, but a metallic substrate or a high-gloss gold or silver combined with our inks to achieve a wide range of metallic color effects. Lastly, we're seeing bright, vibrant colors that leverage extended color gamut. That, and a lot more pastel ranges. Customers are using our orange and neon inks to extend the color gamut and produce thousands of additional color variations. You can get probably 94% of the Pantone spectrum.

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**WTT: That texture is created, I would imagine, by layering ink or varnish or some combination of both.**

**EN:** Correct. And managing curing time by optimizing our UV lamp settings.

**MV:** One of the biggest advantages of LED technology is all about targeted UV intensity compared to legacy mercury systems. LEDs allow the ability to adjust segments so that there's very minimal curing, to no curing, to back to full curing. This allows users to create a multitude of different effects based on curing. That was something that wasn't as easy to achieve with mercury systems.

**EN:** A differentiator for us is while many manufacturers let you modify your lamp settings and segments, we have a much more open system. We give an operator more latitude than other OEMs, generally speaking, to modify those settings to attain the output they want. So the three big trends that we're seeing are bright, vibrant colors, metallics and a lot of haptics. And we see a lot of it around interior décor. We see emerging markets in the print space for hospitality. That's moving upstream a little bit and we're seeing people trying to draw their customers in by creating more of an exclusive environment—meaning they want a higher-quality piece and they need a device to be able to do that. So you see less of the long high-volume runs of the same thing, and more small but individualized jobs. Fewer pieces per job, but with a higher quality level.

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**WTT: Is that the big hotel chains or more of the boutique hotels?**

**EN:** It's boutique hotels for sure, but even the larger hotels are upping their game based on the clientele they're trying to attract. And spas and retreats—vacation destinations—are upping their game. Even corporate art seems to be taking on a higher end versus a mass market approach. We're seeing a lot more specialty feature pieces versus mass corporate art. There is an emphasis on the corporate environment and making it more attractive for hybrid workers. And part of that is the aesthetic and how they're approaching design to make it more welcoming than they used to.

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**WTT: Have you found customers looking to expand into adjacent areas, whether it be certain kinds of packaging or corrugated or even textile production or even commercial print?**

**EN:** We still see commercial printers integrating large format. Some of that is the consolidation of print disciplines which is still happening. I recently talked to a traditional trade show display production facility who's now moving into the corporate hospitality space and also into a more boutique packaging space because they have the capabilities. If they're talking to clients about their display work, why not talk to them about some of the other aspects of their business? We are seeing companies being creative and offering more unique products. They're taking their skillset and trying to translate it into additional products to drive new revenue off of their core production capability.

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**WTT: So the watchword today is automation. If you ask 10 people what automation is, you'll get 10 different answers. What does automation mean to swissQprint?**

**EN:** Automation to us right now, and our R&D approach so far, has been to make our printers

friendly for third-party automation. If somebody is plugging in their feed or takeaway system or their own robotics, we have a device that makes it easy to integrate. At the same time, many printers today are small to midsize shops and are space-constrained. They don't have room for big front-end or back-end systems. If they're building something, it's customized to their facility or to the product they're trying to produce. So rather than us building an automated system to sell to them, they're bringing in a third-party automation integrator to build a system. Therefore, our device has to communicate with those devices. We do have some clients where we've collaborated in the development of their automated workflows. And we do have our own robotic system we call Rob, so if somebody wants a consistent robotic worker for a third shift, we do have a system that loads boards with a lot of precision or takes items off the bed. But we find that, for most people, it's not exactly what they're looking for. They have their own ideas in mind, so we help them integrate with third-party solutions.

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**WTT: And automation isn't just hardware.**

**MV:** One thing that we do with our customers is set up a lot of automation from the prepress side of things. We're creating modes, workflows and hot folders so that you don't need someone on a RIP station. Graphic designers can drop a file into a folder and it's sent to the machine automatically. Our big thing is limiting the time their employees spend doing tasks that could be automated without all the added cost of robotics or other things. We can set it up with anybody whether or not they're using Caldera, PrintFactory or other tools. We create a lot of benefits for our customers that way.

**EN:** Our devices, regardless of how good they are, are there to enable a printer to try to achieve a result. And our goal is determine if our device the right solution for them, but beyond the device, how do we help them leverage getting the most out of it? Can we help them on the pre- and post-printing side of that so that that process is smooth as possible?



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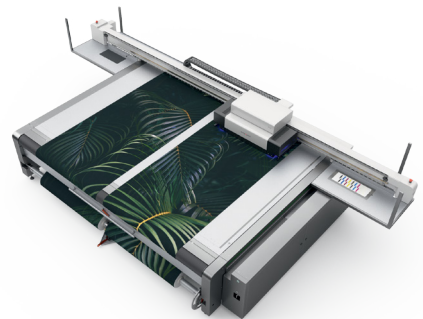
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# Selling Print Where You Live!

BY PAT MCGREW

**F**rom the time you leave your home to the time you return, you see printed products everywhere. Billboards, banners, wraps on buses and kiosks in transportation hubs in urban and suburban environments fight for attention. Real estate and store signs, end-of-aisle collateral and the myriad print pieces associated with government and educational communication beg for interaction. There is a lot of print, but it can be challenging to find a path to the institutional buyers.

Getting involved in those supply chains requires some detective work because most use bidding and buying platforms that may be outside of your usual selling pathways. The good news is that many

governmental and institutional buyers are required to buy some, or all goods locally when possible, but they can't buy from you if they don't have you on their list of suppliers. Here is how to get started.

## THE WEB IS YOUR FRIEND

Think about the large institutions and governmental entities in your area. Townships, towns, cities, counties, Fire Protection Districts, special project districts and a myriad other governmental departments hide in the nooks and crannies of government and large institutions. You may have a single large school district for primary

and secondary education, but in many places, there are a growing number of private and charter schools. Vocational schools, art schools and even unions running apprenticeship programs may also buy print centrally.

Navigate to their websites and look for pages that describe how to work with them. If you don't see one, send a note to the listed administrator. Ask how you get on their consideration list for print projects and describe a bit of what you can do. Don't send a price list; just inquire and see what process they recommend. Then, do another search using prompts like "Community bid lists near me" or "Community Purchasing Systems near me" to see what comes up.

The goal is to find the paths to the buyers. A common approach for institutions and governments is to use procurement and bidding platforms. It helps them reduce the inclination to reinvent the wheel and protects them from concerns about favoritism in awarding work.

Organizations use the platforms in many ways, so it's essential to review the processes for each. Some approach the process in an ad hoc manner, posting notices to the platforms and hoping companies will find them. Others send bid notices out to a known set of potential suppliers. As common as the bidding platforms are, getting to know the procurement teams is a good idea. Some print work might fall below their minimum requirements to use their platforms.

## WHAT ARE BIDDING PLATFORMS?

Companies like BidNet, BidClerk, Planit and BidSync operate some of the most popular bidding platforms. Then there are the procurement platforms that have bid and order management features like SAP Ariba, NetSuite, Basware and Workday. If your targets use any of these platforms and you don't have experience with them, head to their web pages and look for tutorials.

Most interactions with government institutions are considered public information so you should be able to learn what competitors are already on the bid lists. Just because someone is on a list doesn't mean they are actively seeking work, but that shouldn't stop you. Create your pitch so you have it ahead of any meetings, but also pay attention to how you build your profile on the platforms. Focus on the work you want to do and can be competitive with. Putting a call or note into the buyers is usually acceptable,

but remember that many are not professional print buyers. Ditch the print lingo and ask questions as plainly as possible. If you need to ask about specifications, use simple English and bolster with industry terminology.

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

Even if you decide not to get onto a community bid list, taking a step back and reviewing how you look from the outside is an excellent plan. Ask friends and family to look at how you appear when they come to your site, but also ask customers if they think your website reflects what they know about you. If you don't have sections promoting your community involvement, local businesses you serve and customer testimonials, add them. Make it easy for a prospective buyer or procurement professional to understand your value proposition.

Finding bid lists, procurement platforms and other avenues into institutional buying is a start but how you respond will be important. The reader of your bid response may not be a print professional, so keep things clear and concise. Answer every question because if you miss something you may not make it to the second round for consideration. Many institutional buyers use the platform bots to make the first pass and they are unforgiving.

While you might not win your initial efforts, the more you participate, the better your odds will be.





# AGFA: Reinventing and Reemerging

BY DAVID ZWANG

## BACKGROUND

**A**gfa was founded in 1867 as a color dye factory near Berlin. In 1894, Leiven Gevaert started making calcium paper for photography. The company he founded L.Gevaert & Cie acquired the Parisian company Blue Star Papers in 1895 which introduced a new gelatin paper. In the early 1900s, they became Gevaert Photo Producten NV and they moved to Mortsel, Belgium, where their current headquarters resides.

This was followed mid-19th century by the development of mass market color photography, X-rays, films and the first fully automatic 35mm camera. In 1964, Gevaert and Agfa joined forces to

continue imaging technology development. In 1982, Agfa-Gevaert acquired Compugraphic Corporation and began their journey into digital imaging. With the acquisition of Hoechst's printing plate and proofing business and Dupont's Graphic Arts Division in 1997, Agfa became the leader in the graphic prepress business with over 40% of all printed matter produced with Agfa products globally.

At the turn of the century, they started focusing on sign and display. In 2023, Agfa sold its printing plate and offset solutions business to the Aurelius Group, which now exists under the ECO3 brand.



## REINVENTING

Agfa has been leveraging its strong background in technologies and chemistry in strategic decisions as they refocus their business. Some of these paid off and some were a little too early. Agfa's first foray into production inkjet—the Dotrix in 2004—was a product that was ahead of its time and ultimately abandoned.

Their investment in sign and display printers has grown to include the inkjet Jeti Tauro, Jeti Mura, Anapurna, Oberon and the Avinci dye-sublimation soft signage printer. With Asanti software, Agfa offers a wide range of press technologies to continue to develop on and build market share. The recent launch of the next-generation hybrid Anapurna H3200, a six-color plus white UV LED printer that has been redesigned to increase throughput, exhibits the robust designs of their press platforms.





Agfa GREENGUARD Gold-certified inks deliver high color vibrancy and a broad color gamut, with Agfa's patented Thin Ink Layer technology which ensures minimal ink consumption.

The acquisition of INCA in 2022 further strengthens their position in sign and display and industrial print, along with a reentry into production inkjet focused on packaging. INCA has a long history of single-pass inkjet production systems including a wide range of high speed single-pass flatbed presses. Their high-performance Onset line can be operated in a hands-free mode with the use of two "high-five" robots.

This acquisition has also led to Agfa's recent introduction of the Speedset 1060 for carton production and their collaboration with BHS on the Jetliner Xceed (XC), an inkjet solution for the packaging industry. This could also provide additional expertise for further expansion of packaging and industrial print solutions at Agfa.

BHS is the leading supplier of corrugators with 50% share of the global market.

According to Arnaud Callega, VP of Digital Print and Chemistries at Agfa, "Digital printing solutions is one of the business groups that Agfa really wants to put resources in and to grow because the opportunities are there and we believe that we have the right technologies and the right resources to actually grow that business." This expertise can also be seen in their entry into the industrial print market. Each of these unique applications require high performance inkjet inks and fluid chemistries, one of Agfa's core technology strengths and a profitable consumable stream.

Agfa's InterioJet water-based inkjet system is designed for interior decoration of laminate floors and furniture. Built on their Jeti Tauro LED UV printing press, this press has been modified to print on digital décor paper, coated base paper or base paper treated with primer. The InterioJet



*“Digital printing solutions is one of the business groups that Agfa really wants to put resources in and to grow because the opportunities are there and we believe that we have the right technologies and the right resources to actually grow that business.”*

**Arnaud Callega**  
VP of Digital Print and  
Chemistries at Agfa

Inks have been specifically designed to match the requirements of the standard melamine impregnation and lamination processes used in flooring and furniture production.

Agfa’s Allusa leather decorating technology has been designed for personalized products for interior design, fashion, automotive, etc. Also built on the Jeti Tauro, the printing step is integrated directly into the leather production process.

#### **MORE THAN DIGITAL PRINTING**

Agfa is also focusing on other areas that leverage their growing industrial line, which includes ORGACON for optical film applications and printed electronics. Specialty DiPMAT inkjet inks for metal structuring and PCB manufacturing, along with a wide variety of industrial foils, films and more.

One of their interesting and very timely developments is their ZIRFON H2 hydrogen separator membranes which are used for Alkaline Water Electrolysis and Ni-H2 batteries, with a new Agfa ZIRFON plant offering the promise to reshape the fossil-free landscape through their GIGA-SCALES project. Co-funded by the European Union, this Agfa initiative is conceived to produce up to an equivalent of 20 gigawatt/year of electrolyzer capacity for the production of green hydrogen, which is starting to be used for aircraft fuel. The design of the unit will also allow later extension.

It begs the question—what’s next for Agfa?

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN:

# How to Break into Décor Printing

BY DEBBIE NICHOLSON





If you are hesitant and resistant about stepping into the décor market, hopefully the following information will spark new and exciting conversations with you and your customers.

Before we get to that, let's admit—and you know I'm right—everything we print is custom! So, since we are already experts at printing custom products daily, why not utilize those skills and ingenuity to increase revenues by entering a market that is 100% driven by ever-changing décor trends?

What exactly does décor printing look like for PSPs? When you research the meaning of décor, it's pretty simple: to make a space more aesthetically pleasing and functionally useful.

Let's thread the needle here; some of you may already produce custom-made bespoke décor products for an individual order, while others may produce décor but define it as signage, wall murals, environmental graphics or experiential graphics. However, there is so much more.

What is the so much more? Think: furniture upholstery like decorative seat cushions for both indoor and outdoor use. Your finishing decor touches from lampshades, window finishes, area rugs, shower curtains, wall décor and bedding. Leave no surface untouched, table tops, wall treatments and flooring. The world is your creative oyster waiting to be shucked. Wrap your chair, your couch, your windows... heck wrap your appliances to match your taste.



**What's the most effective way to penetrate the décor industry? Here are a few thoughts:**

1. Plan a lunch-and-learn with sales (inside and outside), customer service and production. Invite multiple vendors, suppliers and décor designers to demonstrate and educate substrates (textiles, flexible and rigid) utilized specifically for décor market applications. Uncovering ideas will initiate passion and sales.
2. Most importantly, ensuring your team supports the new and aggressive décor initiative is critical to success. Company-wide strategy meetings will prompt valuable and insightful debates, allowing employees to discuss how their independent departments could and would be affected.
3. Do you really understand the manufacturing capabilities of your equipment? On many occasions, printers do have the necessary manufacturing equipment to grow their portfolio. But in some instances, operators are not educated on the expansive capabilities, so pushback is their go-to mechanism. This way of thinking inhibits the company's growth.

4. Take a look around; you might have current clients or contacts that could catapult you into the décor market, such as architecture firms, hospitality, healthcare, education, construction, real estate (staging), interior designers, cruise lines, property management and corporate offices, to highlight a few.
5. Side note: you won't survive solely producing one-offs unless you are a bespoke operation. It is most critical that you align your décor sales model with your business model. Very often a printing business is all about feeds and speeds; however, with the décor model, it must be about quality, finishing, ingenuity and consistency.

You have a front-row seat to open the curtain for the exciting possibilities of décor printing, enjoy the show!



**ABOUT DEBBIE NICHOLSON**

Debbie Nicholson is the owner of Think-to-Ink! She is a wide-format printing consultant, columnist, keynote speaker, and masterclass educator. She has been in the print industry for 28+ years. Debbie is passionate and committed to helping printing companies elevate their untapped potential. As the previous owner of a printing company, she understands what it takes to continually navigate change and the strength it takes to endure challenges.

TUESDAY | MAY 7TH



## PrintSmart Summit

Join us at Americas Print Show in Cleveland, Ohio, where several exciting events will take place, including the **PrintSmart Summit 2024**. This is a cutting-edge gathering for print tech enthusiasts

and industry experts. Delve into artificial intelligence and smart printing, explore the latest advancements, and network with top professionals. Featuring speakers from the AI Institute, Google, MindFireInc., and more, this summit promises a transformative experience.

WEDNESDAY | MAY 8TH & THURSDAY | MAY 9TH



## GIRLS WHO PRINT

**Girls Who Print**, the largest independent organization for women in the printing industry, is hosting a LIVE conference at APS on May 8th with speakers, panels, career coaches,

professional networking and a VIP tour of the show floor included. Women from all stages of their careers and students are welcome to attend this co-located event. Girl Power continues May 9th with a Girls Who Print Luncheon and Leadership Panel hosted by Deborah Corn. More details coming soon! Learn more about Girls Who Print at [girlswhoprint.net](http://girlswhoprint.net)

WEDNESDAY | MAY 8TH & THURSDAY | MAY 9TH

# AMERICAS PRINT SHOW

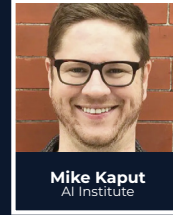
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### About APS 2024

Americas Print Show, APS, will once again partner with industry manufacturers, associations, industry influencers, educators, and printers to expand on the great success of the inaugural three-day event held in August 2022.

Americas Print Show is thrilled to announce the **"PrintSmart Summit"** scheduled for Tuesday, **May 7, 2024**, followed by Girls Who Print and APS24 on May 8th and 9th. Three great events, one perfect location!

### SPEAKER SPOTLIGHT:



**Mike Kaput**  
AI Institute

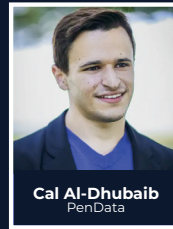
**Mike Kaput** is a globally recognized expert in marketing AI, an author, and a speaker. As the Chief Content Officer at Marketing AI Institute, he has assisted top global companies in gaining competitive advantages through AI. He co-authored "Marketing Artificial Intelligence: AI, Marketing, and the Future of Business" and co-hosts The Marketing AI Show.



**Mark Potter**  
Conduit Inc.



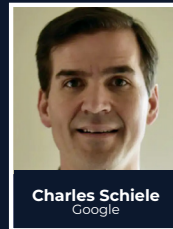
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**PrintSmart Summit | MAY 7TH, 2024**  
**APS24 | MAY 8TH-9TH, 2024**

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# How Data Protection Laws are Reshaping the Print Industry

BY PAT MCGREW, MCGREWGROUPO, INC., AND RYAN MCABEE, PIXELDOT CONSULTING

**D**ata privacy concerns aren't new, but there has been an increased focus that impacts not only the people producing regulated communication like transactional bills and statements, but anyone who produces output informed by data, including AI-generated text and images. The focus on reform and adding safeguards is driving legislation at the state level, but to survive unscathed requires looking beyond state borders to national and international requirements.

## MORE DATA, MORE PRIVACY DEMANDS

In 2023, Statista<sup>1</sup> estimated the global volume of data created at 120 zettabytes. To better visualize the magnitude of this number, one zettabyte (ZB) is

120,000,000,000,000 gigabytes (GB). If you stacked DVDs that each store 4.7 GB, it would take about 40 roundtrips from the Earth to the moon to reach 120 ZB! That's how much data was created just last year.

In the big data world, consumers are the product being shared and monetized. Hidden within all this information are insights into trends, consumer behavior, individual preferences and markers to predict future outcomes. The data is getting more personal because our smart devices are aware of our location, preferences and, increasingly, our health indicators. The amount of data available, combined with the powerful algorithms of artificial intelligence (AI), make the information more useful and actionable at lower costs.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/871513/worldwide-data-created/>

## FIVE REASONS FOR THE PRIVACY PUSH

Requirements to keep data secure are vital in print shops producing regulated communication and data-driven marketing collateral. Today, that obligation is bigger than ever before because all the data that comes into, or is generated by, the business requires attention. The risk of exposing customer financial disclosures, business disclosures built to acquire loans or leases, payroll data, business and employee insurance data and the data that informs pricing and contracts has legal consequences. The push to legislate is the result of growth in tools, including AI-based solutions, which make it easier to manipulate, analyze and potentially misuse information. The ID Theft Resource Center<sup>2</sup> identified more than 2,000 data breaches in the first three quarters of 2023.

Planning to meet the push should focus on:

- 1. Increased Data Collection and Profiling:**  
How do you handle incoming personal data like names, addresses and buying habits? Do you offer data aggregation, data management, address list management or other services that give your team access to clients' or their customers' personal data? If so, current and prospective privacy laws drive concern about potential misuse and invasion of privacy.
- 2. Data Breaches and Misuse:**  
Headline-grabbing data breaches make consumers more nervous about their personal information, leading to calls for greater control over how personal data is collected, used and shared or sold. Start by reviewing your firewalls and your policies covering how data is used in the business. Everyone needs to understand that personal data should be guarded carefully. Remember that breaches are most often the result of clicking on a link in an email that sets off a series of unfortunate events. Cyber insurance is now essential since most business insurance policies do not cover the aftermath of a data breach.
- 3. Evolving Consumer Attitudes:**  
Public attitudes towards data privacy have shifted significantly in recent years. Consumers are increasingly aware of the value

of personal information and are demanding greater control over it. This shift is reflected in growing support for privacy legislation, so having a privacy policy is essential.

- 4. Influence of Global Regulations:**  
The implementation of landmark privacy laws like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the US set a global precedent and inspired similar legislation globally. It's thus imperative that businesses understand their liabilities regarding all global data protection standards. Many of the evolving laws require mechanisms for consumers to gain access to their data and the right to have it deleted. How will you meet the requirement?
- 5. Competitive Advantage:**  
Embracing responsible data handling can become a competitive advantage. Buyers have a choice, and they are increasingly choosing businesses that demonstrate transparency and respect for their privacy. Strong data protection measures can build trust and differentiate a brand in a crowded market.

## WHAT DO PRIVACY LAWS DO?

Privacy legislation aims to empower individuals with control over their personal data. This includes the right to know what information is collected, where it goes and how it's used. Laws like the European GDPR and California CCPA are two that grant individuals the right to access, rectify and even delete their data.

In most cases, the burden of meeting the letter of law can fall on several parties, from the organization that collects the data to the companies using the results of data analysis, and everyone along the way. With an ever litigious population, it's no wonder that a 2023 Pew Research Center<sup>3</sup> survey revealed that 71% of Americans worry about companies knowing too much about them. This fear is echoed in research by Deloitte<sup>4</sup>, where 91% of consumers globally expressed an interest in controlling their data privacy. These statistics fuel the legislative fire.

The laws are intended to protect consumers, and everyone who has access to the data is bound by the

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2 [https://www.idtheftcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/20231011\\_Q3-2023-Data-Breach-Analysis.pdf](https://www.idtheftcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/20231011_Q3-2023-Data-Breach-Analysis.pdf)

3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/18/key-findings-about-americans-and-data-privacy/>

4 <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/telecommunications/connectivity-mobile-trends-survey/2023/data-privacy-and-security.html>

privacy laws, whether they know about them or not. Data gatherers are generally required to provide a means for anyone who has had their data collected to have it deleted or to modify it. While the letter of the law is clear, the mechanisms were not defined, so there is still a challenge for many companies.

As the privacy tide rises for everyone, certain print providers are catching the biggest waves.

These include:

- **Data Processors:** Any print shop handling customer information, like names and addresses, falls under the data processor category. This covers both traditional offset printers and modern online print platforms.
- **Direct Mailers:** Targeting audiences based on personal data collected from various sources falls squarely under the privacy lens.
- **Marketing Agencies:** Utilizing print campaigns to personalize marketing messages based on individual data profiles also raises privacy concerns.

Remember that it's not just about who's affected, but how:

- **Compliance Costs:** Implementing new data protection measures can involve technology upgrades, training programs and dedicated personnel, impacting printing budgets.
- **Operational Changes:** Data access protocols, consent mechanisms and deletion procedures require adaptations to existing workflows, demanding time and resources.
- **Competitive Pressures:** Consumers and

businesses increasingly choose privacy-conscious providers, pushing businesses to demonstrate responsible data handling practices.

### THREE PRIVACY LAWS TO KNOW

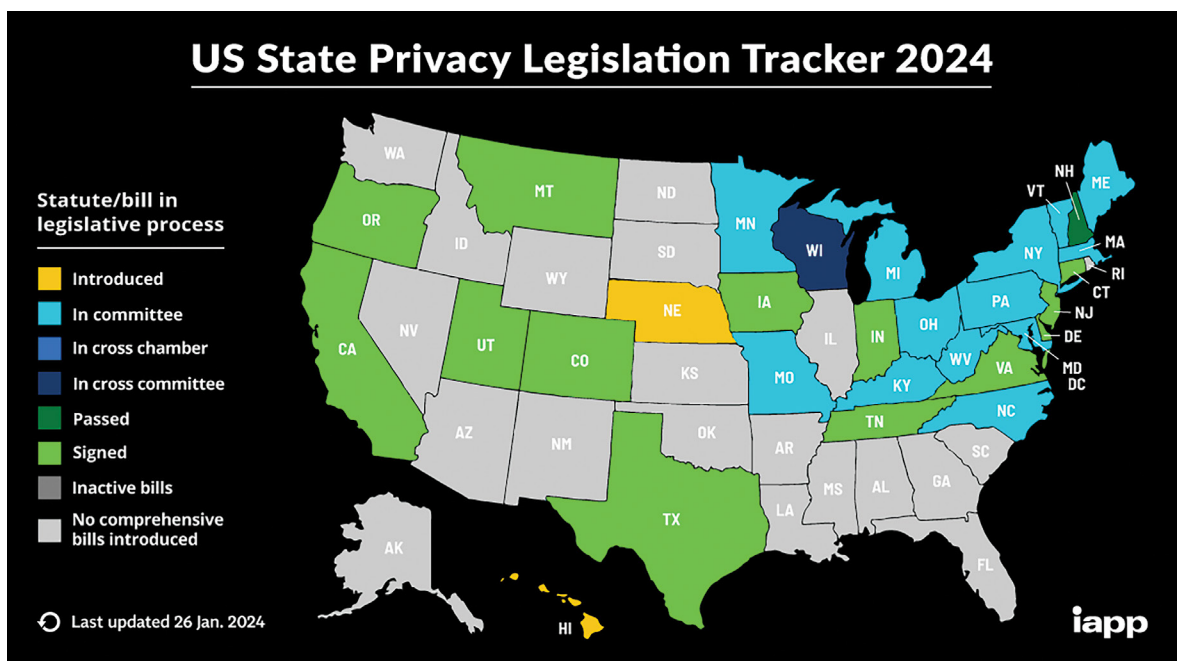
Although most states have introduced some form of privacy legislation, 12 have signed legislation into law. Without passing sweeping privacy legislation, some states, like Illinois, are passing bills that equally impact printers.

#### The Illinois Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act

While Illinois doesn't have a *privacy* law, as you can see on the map, it focused on consumer fraud. The law targets direct mail, so it is in the top three to keep top of mind. Enforcement rules began January 1, 2024, and is intended to curb unfair and deceptive acts that create an impression of an existing obligation when there is none. An example would be a mailer that mimics a statement or bill but is a solicitation for business.

Key points of the act for the printing industry include:

- Direct mailers must include a toll-free number or website address where consumers can request to be removed from mailing lists—and that implies it should be the responsibility of the mailing list owner.
- Prohibits direct mailers from using deceptive or misleading practices to obtain consumers'



contact information.

- Mailers must include:
  - A toll-free number or website address, which is active and accessible to consumers during business hours, must be prominently displayed on the direct mail piece.
  - All disclosures and disclaimers appearing on a postcard or letter must be conspicuously located at the top of the postcard or letter, be easily readable in clear and unambiguous language and be printed in at least 14-point bold font in a black-outlined box.

The takeaway for printers is to be proactive and work with clients to ensure that print work is compliant.

### California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) of 2018

This is the most comprehensive privacy protection program in the US based on the following rights:

- The right to know about the personal information a business collects about them and how it is used and shared.
- The right to delete personal information collected from them (with some exceptions).
- The right to opt out of the sale or sharing of their personal information; and
- The right to non-discrimination for exercising their CCPA rights.

The original CCPA was amended in 2020 to become The California Privacy Rights Act (CPRA), also known as Proposition 24. It specifies:

- The right to correct inaccurate personal information that a business has about them; and
- The right to limit the use and disclosure of sensitive personal information collected about them.

### EUT-US Data Privacy Framework (DPF)

This law states that personal data can flow freely from the EU to companies in the US that participate in the DPF. The DPF does not affect the application and rules of GDPR which are still required. Companies wanting to participate in the DPF self-certify with the US Department of Commerce and agree to adhere to the framework's Principles. It uses the concepts of controllers and processors where the processor is contractually bound to use and process the EU personal data based on the controller's instructions. A print service provider working with an EU-based client using EU personal data or a US-based client using EU personal data would be considered a processor.



The key points of the DPF are:

- Providing notice on issues ranging from the company's participation in the EU-US DPF framework, types of personal data collected, purpose for collecting the data and any third parties where the information is disclosed.
- Offering individuals a choice in using their personal information and how it is disclosed to third parties.
- Generally limiting the purpose and use of the personal data while maintaining security of the data and accountability when using third party processors.

### RESOURCES AND PROACTIVE MEASURES

The International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP) is a non-profit organization that offers daily news and other resources to understand current and future privacy legislation. With such a changing landscape, it is critical to stay up-to-date. This is one of the organizations that can help.

Being proactive instead of reactive is a solid approach. Have conversations with your clients to understand the data sources, their intended use and the required security protocols, as well as the protocols for how long to keep data you receive. If you only access data by a link that disconnects after a print run, you still have liability for data in temp files and test files, so build processes to stay safe.

Talk to your legal counsel to update contracts and create policies to address the roles, responsibilities and use of data, including AI-generated content. For any design work created in-house, do not forget to add any compliance text required. Leverage the user groups and industry associations you attend for resources and peer experiences.

# drupa 2024

## Can You Really Afford To Miss It?

BY DAVID ZWANG

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### drupa 2024

May 28 – June 7, 2024

Düsseldorf, Germany

[www.drupa.com](http://www.drupa.com)



Sabine Geldermann



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### BACKGROUND

When many in print and converting production and technologies around the globe get together, one of the discussions usually goes something like this: “How many drupa events have you been to? Or, what was your first drupa?” Full disclosure, I attended my first drupa at Messe Düsseldorf in 1982 and haven’t missed one yet.

When you start to dig into those questions and listen to the discussions, you really begin to see and feel the motivations that have driven the evolution of the “Print” industry. I capitalize the P in Print to reflect the new and expansive role it has grown into. Yes, there are other print events both large and small, some regional and some targeted to a specific vertical, but there is really only one drupa. I recently had an opportunity to speak with Sabine Geldermann, the Director of drupa, Portfolio and Print to discuss the event itself and the various regional events leading up to it.



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## EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

**WhatTheyThink:** Sabine, in advance of drupa 2024, I know you have been traveling and holding events around the globe. I am sure there are many factors, but I want to get to the bottom of the drupa allure. What have you found?

**Sabine Geldermann:** We traveled the world with drupa staff and board members over the last year, and so far have had about 25 presentations. On our journeys, we were traveling not just in the established markets of the Americas and Europe, but also in emerging markets, together with the VDMA and some board members of print industries.

It was always very emotional when, after the presentation or during the Q&A sessions, industry experts would say “it’s my fifth drupa” or “I’ve been attending drupa for over 20 years, and I am so much looking forward to it.” So it’s part excitement, part anticipation and of the emotional memories they recall while they are talking about drupa and their experiences. drupa always has been identified as the Olympics of print, or as an Indian industry expert said after our presentation, if print were a religion, then drupa is the Mecca.

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## TRENDS

**WTT:** But once you get past the emotional allure, there are many other reasons why drupa has this almost required attraction to the industry. Is one of those a need to understand how and where this evolving and growing industry is going?

**SG:** There is certainly a huge need, now more than ever, given the disruptive times we live in, to come to drupa in order to make sure you maintain or grow your competitive advantage. You have to go there in order to understand how the industry is developing, and how it is evolving. Many of our exhibitors certainly underline, when they’re talking to us, that they will show product premieres that have not yet been in the market or even on the agenda of so many members of the global print and packaging industry.

So I think we can expect, first of all, many and diverse technology trends, innovation and let’s say a complete workshop including workflows, integrations, machinery and a lot more. Even though there has been discussion about how sustainable is it to come and bring large equipment and technology, on the other side, everybody says this is the important part of your booth and of the exhibition. If attendees go to an exhibit and see digital screens, you are missing the point. Attendees and prospect customers on a global scale would like to touch, learn and experience the equipment and technologies.

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## INDUSTRY GROWTH

**WTT:** Post-COVID, some printing companies and equipment manufacturers have become more tentative in their decision-making. There is a pervasive sense that Print is a declining industry, when in fact it is actually an evolving and growing industry. What are you seeing as you travel around and speak with different audiences?

**SG:** I can only underline what you said because, at the end of the day, we shared very reliable statistics during our conferences and panels to prove it. Currently ~4 million people are working in the print industry on a global scale, and generate more than \$US980 billion in turnover [revenues].

What is certainly encouraging is the fact that the global middle class is growing. So, if you have a growing middle class, and this is defined by people that are earning \$US20,000 per year on average in these regions, then you automatically consume more. And this is all packaged and this is print for packaging, which is pushing growth in the overall print and packaging industry, as well as our customers who have diversified so much in their portfolios. It's a positive effect in terms of growth.

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## GLOBAL INTEREST

**WTT:** Many say that drupa is a regional or German event, having been there in the past I don't necessarily agree with that, but what are you seeing?

**SG:** Of course we will have many European visitors. Although it's very nice to see that, for example, print 21, which is the Australian based magazine and publisher group, is coming with a group of, as they say, Kiwis and Aussies. We are already getting similar questions and requirements from delegations in Asia, including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines and Korea.

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## NURTURING THE NEXT GENERATION

**WTT:** One of the things we hear a lot about lately is the need to engage the future generation to print, as the older generations are leaving the workforce. Are you doing anything with the educational communities?

**SG:** Absolutely. So you're hitting the mark, because one very central discussion point we heard a lot about during our world tour is the lack of skilled workers in Europe and in mature markets, as we expect a huge percentage to disappear given age and taking retirement. On the other side, we don't have the growth rates in population, so there's not as much young talent coming in and growing up.

This is why we are definitely working with universities. For example, the University of Stuttgart is coming with all their cooperating international university partners. We as drupa engage with different schools, and developed a program with them for their bachelor studies. and the nominees and the winners will showcase their project at drupa DNA in hall 7, which is a dedicated forum allocated to the university partners as well.



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## EVENT SIZE

**WTT:** drupa has always been a marathon, with lots of walking and buildings, what can we expect this year?

**SG:** We are covering the overall fairground and we're talking about 18 halls. We are talking about a net space of roughly 140,000 sq. m [1.5 million sq. ft.]. Which is, given the times and the consolidation in the industry, a very good result so far.

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## ALL WORK AND NO PLAY?

**WTT:** One of the side benefits of attending drupa is that once you have exhausted yourself walking around the exhibits, you get a chance to go outside of the Messe and spend time in Düsseldorf. What kind of special events can we expect this year?

**SG:** So we are again having drupa City. It's a hospitality concept that we are organizing together with partners from the town, including restaurants, hotels, retail, etc. We will have our exhibitor party. We are also having meet the press receptions, global association receptions and so many more events organized either by exhibitors or even trade magazines and their communities to enjoy the evening downtown.

At the same time, June 1st, is Japan Day. So, as you might know, Düsseldorf has the biggest Japanese community outside of Japan and within Europe. So on a yearly basis, they are organizing Japan Day. You can expect a spectacular during the day at the riverfront, with people just getting in their traditional clothes or even Manga perceptions. There will be one of the most beautiful fireworks displays that is going to start when the sun sets roughly around 10:30 or 11:00.



**WhatTheyThink** has been selected as the exclusive media partner and drupa daily publisher for 2024. More information on sponsoring the drupa daily is available at <https://wttmedia.com/drupa/>

Visit [WhatTheyThink.com/drupa](https://wttmedia.com/drupa/) for the latest news about drupa 2024. Check out the **Road to drupa** video series featuring interviews with printers, exhibitors, analysts and others headed to drupa 2024.



AND THE AWARDS GO TO...

# The Winners of This Year's FASTSIGNS Project of the Year

BY RICHARD ROMANO AND AMY NOBLE

**F**ASTSIGNS Hattiesburg (Miss.) took top honors as this year's FASTSIGNS Project of the Year. FASTSIGNS Syracuse (N.Y.) and FASTSIGNS San Diego (Cal.) were this year's runners-up.

Choosing the best signage and display graphics project is always a tough business, as the competition is fierce, but three projects—one in particular—stood out from the pack in this year's FASTSIGNS Project of the Year Awards, which were given out at this year's FASTSIGNS Conference, held February 6–9 in Orlando, Fla.

## FASTSIGNS HATTIESBURG: CIVIL RIGHTS MEMORIAL WALL

Taking top honors this year was FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg (Miss.) for an illuminated signage project for an outdoor museum/historic site for the Hattiesburg Convention Commission. Comprising a 370-foot wall of illuminated signage, the memorial honors African-American residents of the city who were known for their leadership, service, and inspiration. The memorial is located on the grounds

of the Historic Eureka School, a pre-desegregation African-American school in Hattiesburg, built in 1921, that has since become a civil rights museum.

Three years in development, the project began when the Convention Commission approached FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg with a general idea of what they were looking for. "They had seen an example of a bridge that was done similar to it," said Justin Blackburn, co-owner of FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg, "but all they had were some pictures. They said, 'do you think you can do this?'" Justin and co-owner Amanda Blackburn met with the commission, discussed the project, and ultimately decided they could take it on. "I didn't know how we could do it, but I was sure we could!" said Justin—a common refrain at the start of almost any Project of the Year.

It took a few years for the Convention Commission to pick who specifically was going on the wall, but once the final line-up was decided, the project moved ahead quickly, and the FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg team started building the 70+ cabinets. "We probably started building cabinets sometime around the



**FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg's POY consisted of a 370-foot wall of illuminated signage honoring African-American residents of the city.**

middle of November," said Justin, "and we had the wall built by first part of February."

One challenge the team faced was that while the Convention Commission had a vision, they had no specific architectural plans. "A lot of times we work off of plans and drawings, but this one was different because there weren't any, there was just a vision for what they wanted to do," said Justin. "And they trusted and relied on us on for what we felt best for the structure itself. Not just the prints and the panels, but the building of the wall."

In addition to the cabinets and the prints, the FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg team also created the dimensional letters for a Nelson Mandela quote along the longest wall of the exhibit, as well as framed commemorative brushed aluminum plaques the Commission was handing out to individuals on the wall who were either still alive, or who had family who were, and the brushed plaque mounted on the brick fascia.

"Another challenge was making sure that everything we built was exact," said Justin, "because the actual wall itself was built first. So everything we built after that, the brick and the steel columns and everything, had to be exact, because at the very end, over 300 feet and 71 cabinets, everything had to line up exactly at the start and at the finish, and the corners had to be exactly right."

Each panel also featured a QR code to send visitors to a page on the exhibit website that contained more information about each figure and their contribution to the community. It turned out that the QR code was helpful in assembling the images. "Their designer

sent all the files over and the way they were labeled were by these people's names," said Justin, "but on the prints themselves, there were no names on it. There were just pictures and QR codes. So the organization of the files was a challenge." The Commission also had a specific order they wanted the images to appear in, which also complicated the logistics.

At one point during the assembly of the panels, the weight of the cabinets proved too much and a section came crashing down. "We probably lost about 15 panels that had to be redone," said Justin. Although they didn't have extra material in stock, "luckily our vendors worked with us to rush and get us the special delivery for it," he added. "That was an unexpected surprise."

The project was also kept under wraps from the community as it was being built, to create drama for the big unveiling. "And the reaction, the oohs and ahs that it got when it was unveiled was definitely worth all the work that we put into it," said Justin. "The community loved it."

A permanent exhibit, it is open 24/7, and joins other Hattiesburg tourism destinations, such as the Art Trail and the Military Museum.

The entire FASTSIGNS Hattiesburg team pitched in to make the project come alive.

"That seems like a once in a lifetime project for us," said Justin. "I really enjoyed it, and that we were given the opportunity to just be a part of it given the impact that it's made in the community here, and just to be a part of something like that was special."



**A brushed aluminum plaque was mounted on the brick fascia.**



Exterior signage at The MOST Museum in Syracuse, NY.

## FASTSIGNS OF SYRACUSE: THE MOST

There were many note-worthy undertakings submitted this year from FASTSIGNS franchisees. This year's second place winner is Russell Hall and the team at FASTSIGNS of Syracuse and their innovations at The MOST (Museum of Science and Technology).

After being closed through most of the COVID Pandemic, The MOST was awarded government funds to reopen. In addition to government funding, The MOST also received funding from Micron. Hall's team was selected by the museum to create interior and exterior signage for the exhibit sponsored by Micron (a company that creates computer memory and data storage) and comprehensive graphic design work throughout the rest of the museum. Located in a historic armory, the team took special considerations on the exterior banner frame systems installed to preserve the brick and easily replace banners when needed.

While the Micron exhibit is completed, the rest of the museum is a "work in progress" project, meaning Hall and his team regularly create floor and wall graphics, as well as custom acrylic and PVC display pieces and outdoor signage. FASTSIGNS of Syracuse continues to be a sponsor of The MOST.



The Micron chip exhibit at The MOST Museum in Syracuse, NY.

## FASTSIGNS SAN DIEGO: HITS DEL MAR

Our third place winner comes from FASTSIGNS San Diego (Calif.) for their high stepping style work on the HITS Del Mar Horse Park.

Self-proclaimed FASTSIGNS poster child Shane Beard and his team were tagged to transform the previously worn collection of horse arenas and stables into an exciting and inviting space for spectators and riders to compete. Working on tight deadlines, the team was able to produce over 13,00 linear feet of mesh banners, hundreds of branded way finding and signage pieces. They also created custom flags and hundreds of flexible frames for the stables on the property.

The unique challenge of the 65 acre Del Mar Horse Park offered the opportunity to think of advertising with sign making in a new way. The FASTSIGNS San Diego team will continue to work with the HITS team on phase two of the project in 2024.

Congratulations to all FASTSIGNS teams on your hard work in 2023.



Mesh signage at the HITS Del Mar Horse Club.



Custom flags created by FASTSIGNS San Diego for HIT Del Mar Horse Park.



# The Simple but Shrewd Arithmetic of Offset Press Replacement

BY PATRICK HENRY

Running newer offset presses usually means running fewer offset presses—the differences in productivity between vintage and late-model equipment are that significant. Six printing companies discuss how having less iron in their offset pressrooms has made them more efficient.



**S**ix printing companies, six capital investment decisions—and a wealth of insight into what makes swapping fleets of old presses for a smaller number of new, more productive models a strategic necessity for printing businesses everywhere. Here is what these firms had to say about the many positive outcomes of one-for-more-than-one offset press replacement.

## PRISMA

In its Nashville plant, Prisma replaced two straight-printing, five-color 40-in. presses and a two-color 40-in. perfecter with an eight-color Komori GL840P advance perfecter with LED UV. Its Phoenix facility is home to two 40-in. Komori G40 perfectors that replaced a total of four presses.

Michelle Yun, President of Prisma Nashville, says that because the Komori GL840P advance in Nashville was so much more productive than the equipment it replaced, “we were able to get more done with that press than we were with all three combined. We’re running consistently at 15,000 sheets an hour almost every day.”

Thanks to being able to print two sides instead of one at a higher press speed, “we’re pretty much three times faster than we were on our previous four-color equipment,” Yun says. Gains in productivity at Prisma’s Phoenix plant have been very similar, according to James Hall, Prisma’s COO.

Yun notes that one way the Komori GL840P advance press automation features pay off is by speeding approvals to print. “We’re able to set color coming out of proofing and plating and have that information fed right to the press, so we get to color faster,” she says. “We have a much higher ratio of clients approving the first sheet they see.”

## WINSTON PACKAGING

The higher running speed and the more spacious print format of a Koenig & Bauer Rapida 106 have been boosting output at Winston Packaging ever since the Winston-Salem, N.C., folding carton printer purchased the six-color press at drupa 2012. Over time, the Rapida 106 replaced one and then a second 102-format press as the plant transitioned more of its work to the larger size.

James Gordon, president of Winston Packaging, cites the “double effect” of installing a press that can run faster on larger sheets than the equipment it replaced. He says that with the 106 format—roughly 1.5-in. longer and 1-in. wider than a 102-format press sheet—the printed yield increases by up to 35%.

Gordon says that the extra dimensions permit imposing cartons six-up on a 106 sheet instead of four-up on a 102—a “huge improvement” in yield that comes from printing more product with fewer sheets in less time.

### **DIVERSIFIED GLOBAL GRAPHICS GROUP (DG3)**

The three-press offset department at Diversified Global Graphics Group (DG3) in Jersey City, N.J., slimmed to two when the company installed a six-color Koenig & Bauer Rapida 105 LED UV press last year. This led to taking two older presses offline and running the new press side by side with an eight-color press from a different manufacturer.

Running on three shifts, these two presses give DG3 more capacity than it had with three machines, says Steve Babat, President.

He adds that high-speed production on DG3's Rapida 105 "is driving our estimates to fewer hours, because we've increased the run speed. It's a quick setup. There's far less waste. [It takes] far fewer sheets to set up and get the press on color and ready to print."

Thanks to the Rapida 105's automation features, says Babat, "the press gets color matched pretty quickly. We have auto loading on the plates. We have ink dispensers on the ink, so it is a fully automated press. "We're very, very happy with the purchase."

### **COLORDYNAMICS**

A two-for-two press exchange at ColorDynamics didn't reduce the number of machines in operation at the Allen, Tex., commercial printer. But, by removing a pair of six-color presses to make room for two Heidelberg XL 106 eight-colors, "we doubled our throughput with each device that we replaced," says David Dey, Executive Vice President.

Now, says Matt Coltharp, President, "we're running 24/7 on those two presses alike." This means operating

them at their full productive capacity, without any of the "throughput constraints" that drove work into overtime on the old equipment, Dey adds.

At ColorDynamics, the two Heidelberg XL 106 presses—one a perfecter, the other straight printing—have boosted throughput in every segment of the company's offset business. For example, says Dey, "we print quite a bit of plastic material. We've likely tripled or even quadrupled the number of sheets we could put on the floor versus our old equipment."

### **TUCKER CASTLEBERRY**

Although one of two straight-printing six-color presses replaced by an eight-color Komori GL840P perfecter remains in place at Tucker Castleberry in Atlanta, "we don't ever run it," says Tuck Tucker, President. By itself, the Komori GL840P can print two and a half times the combined volume of the old equipment—a giant step up in pressroom productivity.

With Tucker Castleberry's straight presses, "we were able to put 100,000 sheets on the floor in a shift," Tucker says. "Now we can put 250,000. If you had one long run job and ran it all day long, you could put over 300,000 sheets on the floor printed both sides. And that's at about 85% productivity. We run it around the clock, 24 hours a day."

Time saved on a high-efficiency press is productivity gained across the board, Tucker observes. "Now an average makeready (on the Komori GL840P) for both sides of the sheet is usually less than 15 minutes. Saving 15 minutes per job adds up week to week, month to month."



Whereas Tucker Castleberry's former equipment typically needed 500 to 800 sheets to make ready, the press that replaced them can complete the task with 200 to 250 sheets. "If you're printing 150 jobs a month, do the math on that and see how much paper you're saving," Tucker says.

## ADVERTISERS PRINTING

Nowhere is the potential of one-for-more-than-one press replacement plainer to see than at Advertisers Printing of St. Louis, Mo., where a 10-color RMGT 920 perfecter now handles the workload of four straight-printing presses that the shop used to operate. Alex Fechner, Director of Sales and Business Development, calls the LED UV equipped press a "beast" in terms of the volumes it can produce on its own.

Format size and one-pass printing were the keys to getting maximum productivity from the RMGT 920 at Advertisers Printing, says Fechner, noting that the 37-in. press is the first eight-up, 4/4 offset platform that the shop has worked with. Substituting it for half-size and smaller equipment meant "not only were we fitting more work up on the sheet, but we were also perfecting in one pass. So our capacity more or less quadrupled overnight."

Makeready has contracted sharply at Advertisers Printing, where, says Fechner, "we're making ready in a fraction of the sheets that we were before." He says the RMGT 920 can come up to color on both sides of a 4/4 job in 50 to 100 sheets—far fewer than what was typical on the old equipment, which might consume 100 sheets per color per side, or 800 sheets of makeready and spoilage in all.

## "NIGHT AND DAY BETTER AND EASIER"

Replacing old presses with a new model isn't all there is to getting the swap right. Ensuring that operators can make the most of what the new equipment can do is the final stage of a successful installation.

For press operators, says Dey, the automated technology of new equipment "is night and day better and easier for them than anything they've worked on."

"We have a feeder operator who has become a lead pressman on some of our most challenging jobs," Dey says. "Because he was not a pressman previously, he adapted to the technology more quickly. That experiment showed us that somebody who doesn't have previous habits may learn more quickly and embrace the press technology."

Tucker advises that part of the learning curve with a new press is learning to trust it.

A major difference between the plant's Komori GL840P and its older equipment is that "you're not

supposed to go up there and adjust the ink keys," he says. When operators couldn't resist the temptation to "monkey" with settings instead of letting the press run to correctly preset ink densities, "after a while, we got it out of register. Things were just not right."

The lesson, Tucker says, is to "let the press do the work. It knows what to do. You just have to follow the computer screen, and the press takes care of everything else."

"Many printing companies become technology-poor. Realistically, if packaging and print service providers do not keep up with technology, their competitors will just run ahead of them. You won't be able to compete if you don't keep moving forward on technology."

## THE INESCAPABLE CONCLUSION

All the same, retiring tried-and-true press equipment to make way for an unfamiliar new platform is no small step for any printing company to take. The uncertainty of the prospect, says Gordon, naturally makes people "uneasy" about committing to the swap.

But for shops watching profits fall as their presses age into obsolescence, there is no longer an alternative to doing what the printers profiled here have done—and done successfully. As Babat observes, "in today's very competitive environment, having efficient equipment is key to competing and, not only maintaining, but growing your business."

In that environment, observes Dey, "many printing companies become technology-poor. Realistically, if packaging and print service providers do not keep up with technology, their competitors will just run ahead of them. You won't be able to compete if you don't keep moving forward on technology."

Printing is, as Fechner puts it, "a hyper-, hyper-, hyper-competitive industry" where margins are always under pressure. That is what makes an automated, high-output offset press "a weapon that helps you create more margin for yourself."

"The low-hanging fruit is definitely investing in your equipment, and equipment that's easier and faster to run is more or less a no-brainer for us. We've always tried to stay ahead there," Fechner declares.



converters? Regulatory agencies are creating EPR programs affecting brands, retailers and the manufacturers that support them, mandating reduction of the disposal of packaging waste and promoting a more circular economy. As manufacturers, printers and packaging converters are clearly targets of these regulations, along with their brand and retailer clients. Taking the regulatory approach back to the design phase means producers can also be held accountable for the design of products and packaging, to ensure that they don't create waste from the outset. Since printers and packaging converters often offer design services, this presents an additional point of accountability for them, likely in partnership with their brand/retailer clients.

According to the Interstate Technology Regulatory Council (ITRC), in 2018, the United States generated approximately 15 million tons of plastic containers and packaging, but only recycled roughly 2 million tons (13%).<sup>4</sup>The majority of that plastic instead was either landfilled (approximately 10 million tons or 70%) or incinerated (approximately 2.5 million tons or 17%). The recycling rate for plastic is much lower than rates for other common packaging materials including glass (31%), paper (80%), aluminum (35%) and steel (75%).

California put a number of interim goals in place to help achieve its 2032 goals, according to the Environmental Law Institute. These include:

- **2024**—a list of recyclable/compostable categories will be published by the Department
- **2025**—regulations will be completed and published by the Department
- **2026**—current recycling rates will be released by the Department to help identify areas of improvement
- **2028**—at least 30% of covered material must be recyclable (as determined by producers and demonstrated to the Department)
- **2030**—at least 40% of covered material must be recyclable (as determined by producers and demonstrated to the Department)

The law requires plastic container manufacturers or wholesalers of the “covered material” to comply with the metrics and timelines outlined above, or they will be prohibited from selling, importing, and distributing such materials in California.

There's no argument that California is a large

market. Even if a company is not located in California, their products are likely being sold there. Plus, if history is any predictor, other states and perhaps even the Federal Government, will eventually follow suit.

As we understand the rulings in both California and the EU, you can't just say you have done these things to comply with the regulations—you have to hire a third-party auditor to confirm that these actions have, in fact, been taken according to the laws.

This is a lot to digest, and it is happening fairly quickly. Anyone in print and packaging should be paying attention to these changes, and taking the appropriate actions based on the types of products they are producing, the materials that are being used, how they are managing waste and even what happens at end-of-life—can the packages be recycled, for example. Some industry pundits have noted that it is not clear that many companies even have the resources to track and analyze the relevant data, nor perhaps do auditing organizations enjoy the full set of required skills in this early phase. Even if your company primarily serves local businesses outside of California, you could be held accountable for EPR programs, now or in the future.

Our goal in publishing this article is to help create more awareness in the industry, not only about legal responsibilities, but our common responsibility to protecting our planet.



<sup>4</sup> <https://mp-1.itrcweb.org/>

# HOW SUSTAINABLE ARE YOUR FASHION CHOICES?

BY CARY SHERBURNE



It's no secret that the fashion industry has multiple sustainability challenges. According to The World Bank, "It takes 3,781 liters of water to make a pair of jeans, from the production of the cotton to the delivery of the final product to the store. That equates to the emission of around 33.4 kilograms of carbon equivalent. If that is for just one pair of jeans, imagine the environmental cost for everything in our wardrobes."<sup>1</sup>

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation reports that the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of annual carbon emissions and consumes 93 billion cubic meters of water every year, enough to meet the consumption needs of five million people.<sup>2</sup>

Surely fashion brands are aware of their unsustainable practices, and some are making substantial changes. As we have noted, dramatic change will not be driven by the collective conscience of the fashion industry, although some efforts are being made. Dramatic change will be driven by consumer choices. When consumers dramatically reduce their spending on unsustainable fashion, brands will need to move faster to stay in business.

That means that each of us need to carefully consider each fashion item we purchase. What fibers are used? Are they bio-based? Some 60% of all garments manufactured today consist of polyester or poly blends. Where are the garments manufactured and how are workers treated? Are clothes well made so they will last, or are they what we refer to as fast fashion...wear it once or twice and then discard it? That's been a common practice for too long.

When consumers send a strong message with their pocketbooks, the pocketbooks of brands are affected. Money talks, and when slim margins get slimmer or vanish, brands will have no choice.

Then there is the issue of recycling. The World Bank notes that less than 1% of used clothing is recycled into new garments, adding, "The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that every year some USD 500 billion in value is lost due to clothing that is barely worn, not donated, recycled, or ends up in a landfill."

## LET'S TALK SLOW FASHION!

James Hillman, the founder and Creative Director of James Hillman Fashion Consultancy, has written

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/09/23/costo-moda-medio-ambiente>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/>

extensively about the sustainability challenges facing the fashion industry and some potential solutions.<sup>3</sup> His blog is where I first came across the term “Slow Fashion.” He says, “Slow fashion refers to clothing that is durable, unique and produced ethically. By buying slow fashion instead of fast fashion, customers can ensure that they are helping brands make more sustainable decisions about their supply chains. Fast fashion is often characterized by short production cycles and made with cheap materials sourced from overseas factories, which has a detrimental impact on the environment.”

We can also choose Fair Trade clothing over that using conventional materials and sweatshops. This applies to other fashion choices as well, such as jewelry. I recently came across a jewelry collection that uses Tagua nuts, gathered from the Ecuadorian rainforest floor, providing sustainable employment to local residents and protection for endangered palm trees. Tagua is often called vegetable ivory due to its color and solidity.<sup>4</sup>



Hillman works with brands to help them work towards their sustainability goals offering expert support and advice.

On the surface, it seems like progress is very slow. Hillman notes, “Although sustainable fashion is a more modern term used to describe the slow fashion movement, they both have the same goals in mind: creating quality garments that last longer. However, there is a key difference between the two: the time scales. Slow fashion isn’t necessarily long-lasting, it’s more about buying better quality pieces less frequently. Sustainable fashion however, takes it to

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jameshillman.co.uk/blog/2021/1/27/how-can-the-fashion-industry-be-more-sustainable>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.serrv.org/category/tagua-crafts#:~:text=The%20tagua%20nuts%20for%20our,to%20its%20color%20and%20solidity>



the next level—focusing on garments that can be worn for years and even decades at a time. So we know sustainable fashion means high-quality clothes that last longer and slow fashion is about buying less frequently but better quality.” The two work in tandem to help increase consumer power over the future of the fashion industry and to help mitigate the damage the fashion industry does to the planet.

So we ask, “What’s in your closet?” Do you really need that new dress or jacket? Do you have clothes in there you haven’t worn in a while? If so, can you resell them through an app like Poshmark, donate them to an entity that will get them to people that need them or find a way to upcycle them into a new look?

We have lots of choices. Let’s start making the right ones for the planet.



# JOHNSON'S WORLD

## Big Virgo Energy

BY STEVE JOHNSON

In today's English lexicon, the words astronomy and astrology have very different meanings, but up until the 17th century these two words were synonymous. These words share common etymology from the Greek *astron* meaning star.

Tycho Brahe, perhaps the greatest astronomer of all time, devoted his life to the meticulous observations of the heavens, the cataloging of these observations for future calculations, and the creation of ever more accurate instruments of measurement, all before the invention of the telescope.

As court astrologer of first the Kingdom of Denmark and then the Holy Roman Empire, he was also expected to cast horoscopes of royals and nobles, and to use the stars to predict great events. He was as renown in his own time as much for predicting the deaths of the Russian Tsar and the Ottoman Sultan as for his discovery of supernovae.

Following in Tycho's footsteps, today's astronomer considers himself a scientist, an observer of the celestial spheres, and usually a mathematician as well, using calculations to extract meaning from observations.

Today's astrologers, on the other hand, are not concerned with new observations, but instead use traditional tables to cast horoscopes to predict a person's destiny.

I note that an astrologer will tell me that my sun sign is Virgo, but an astronomer will insist that the Sun was in the constellation Leo the day I was born. Both are correct, each in their own way.

Most astronomers have nothing but scorn for astrologers, and don't hesitate to express it. They take every opportunity to brand their fellow star aficionados

as frauds, charlatans and just plain stupid.

This vitriol puzzles me. It seems to me that, however misguided you consider these folks to be, they are in fact your biggest fans. Stars, moons, planets; these hold equal fascination for the astronomer and the astrologer.

Astronomers are always trying to interest new recruits in pursuing their field. Why on earth (pardon the pun) would you strive so hard to alienate the very people who are most interested in your subject matter? Why rudely disparage them when you should, in fact, be gently educating them?

Come to think of it, the same applies to printers, mailers and book manufacturers. When our cousins in marketing, publishing, education and creative design overlook print in favor of digital media, what is the appropriate reaction?

We can scream, yell, stomp our feet, or pout. We can curse them for their ignorance. We know, of course, that print is more cost effective, more environmentally friendly, preferred by end-users and of greater aesthetic value...and we have the data to prove it.

Rather than disparage our fellow communicators, we ought to gently educate them. Persistently, firmly but gently. Thus far, it seems to me, we've left the education component to others, such as trade associations, special interest groups and paper companies.

We need to refute false claims and promote the efficacy of print ourselves, one-on-one, at the individual and corporate level. We need to do it in our marketing materials, on sales calls, on our social media accounts, and at cocktail parties. Yes, I really do tout the value of print at birthday parties and barbecues.

Next time you hear someone say "no one reads anymore" or "nobody uses mail" take a deep breath, count to 10, and smile. Let the education begin.



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