

POLYESTER CTP

Craig Kevghas

Real Men Still Don't Eat Quiche, but They Do Use Polyester CTP

First, let me explain this article's title paraphrases Bruce Feirstein's 1982 bestselling, tongue-in-cheek book about masculinity stereotypes, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*. It also revisits the long-held printing industry adage, "Real printers don't use polyester plates," which I hope this article will help debunk.

If you walk into my home, you will see all the luxuries of today's modern man, save one: an large-screen, plasma HDTV. How can any football-loving, TV-fanatical, American male survive without one? I can afford one if I encourage the children to fast for a few weeks, but I've decided that until prices come down to a more economical level, I won't buy one. I don't believe the added value outweighs the added cost. Call me a holdout.

To many printing organizations, computer to plate (CTP) is like the plasma TV. If you are sans-CTP or a holdout, you might feel like the last print professional on a deserted island, but you have more company than Lost has cast members. You might be surprised to know that State Street Consultants says your shop is just one of many that are hanging on for a more economical solution. Recently, State Street polled 5,500 U.S. printing companies with 1 to 19 employees and determined 36 percent had an imagesetter but no CTP output system. From this we can deduce that currently there are more than 7,000 print shops (based

on a total population of 20,500 print shops with 1 to 19 employees) in this segment that are still outputting to film.

CTP is ROI friendly

If you work in a non-CTP shop, you might not be totally alone, but you are in the minority. A clear majority of printing companies have decided CTP is indeed critical to making money. For many organizations, the debate is not about whether CTP saves time or money. The issue arises in justifying the cost and calculating the technology's ROI aspects. For Roger Chamberlain, the manager of printing at The Cincinnati Insurance Companies (an in-plant in Fairfield, OH), that decision was a no-brainer.

He says, "Since September 2002, we've produced approximately 7,500 plates translating to 22,500 pages (7,500 pages per year or 600 pages per month). We estimate that jobs are produced in 20 percent of the time compared to 2001. With CTP, we were able to realize \$90,000-per-year cost savings, offsetting the equipment cost in less than a year."

CTP alternatives

While everyone would like to drive a Mercedes, the practical realities are friendlier to brands from Ford, Honda and Chevrolet. Obviously, car manufacturers would rather sell you a \$60,000 automobile. Their ads tell you it's classier, you deserve all its comforts and luxuries, and, after all,

you're worth it. One might conclude from watching too much MTV, real men seem to drive Hummers. The truth is, according to a recent Forbes survey, 85.2 percent of the men it asked named Dodge the most "Masculine Brand."

So while "real men" (please, refer to the introductory paragraph) are driving Dodges, the old adage, "Real printers prefer metal CTP" also is up for debate. According to State Street, total CTP sales in the United States and Canada in 2005 were estimated to be 2,050 units. While 1,300 of these devices were for imaging metal plates, 750 were nonmetal or polyester plate CTP systems. Using these figures, you can derive that polyester CTP system sales represented 36 percent of the total CTP platesetter market in 2005.

Was 2005 an anomaly? According to Primir's 2005 study, *The Life Cycle of the Analog and Digital Lithographic Printing Plate*, nonmetal CTP platesetter sales in the United States and Canada are projected to increase by an average of 9.5 percent through the year 2010. The vast majority of these sales (90.9 percent) are projected to come from small to midsize commercial printing companies with annual sales between \$150,000 to \$2.8 million. Most of the buyers in this segment are expected to be first-time purchasers of workflow software and CTP platesetters.

Conversely, of the metal CTP systems sold to all commercial printing

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companies in 2005, only 20 percent were sold to shops with less than 20 employees and only 35 percent were sold to print companies with 20 to 49 employees. State Street projects that in 2006, the 1-to-19 segment of commercial printing companies will account for an increasing percentage of the total volume of CTP systems sold, as adoption of technology continues to rise among the “holdout” print providers.

Polyester CTP makes business “cents”

While polyester CTP might have had an image problem, its users have always been quite adamant about its value to their business. According to Randy Kroneke at Corporate Graphics, “The savings for polyester plates over metal plates really add up — about \$3 per color, per page, or \$12 for each four-color page.” Tim Kinane of Kinane Corp. notes, “Polyester is an excellent money maker for us. We have pretty much doubled productivity and profitability in the prepress department.” Direct Mail Productions’ James Hug adds, “CTP was an easy cost justification because we were going to eliminate a monthly expense of about \$5,000 for film.”

Justifying polyester plates is becoming easier as the cost of metals continues to rise. According to printing industry consultant and writer Andy Tribute, the industry is in for another increase in aluminum plate prices. Tribute says, “Two key factors are conspiring to drive metal plate prices up in the very near future. The most obvious is fuel costs. The second is simple demand. Though basic economics teaches us that increased demand results in lower prices, there is a point where demand exceeds production capacity. With increased demand for aluminum — especially from China and

AmeriPrint Attributes Rapid Growth to Poly CTP

Printing companies that want to significantly accelerate the growth of their businesses are considering polyester-based computer-to-plate (CTP) solutions. One example is AmeriPrint Graphics Inc., a small commercial printing company in Neenah, WI. It credits poly CTP with growing the company by 50 percent during the last three years.

Says AmeriPrint president and founder Wayne Nemecek, “The combination of the Silver DigiPlate and the DPX platesetter has helped us grow in the short-run, process-color market by targeting in on what other people weren’t doing well.” AmeriPrint purchased the DPX platesetter from Mitsubishi Imaging, which also supplies the polyester Silver DigiPlate plates.

With a pair of five-color, two-up Heidelberg Speedmaster 52 perfectors and an array of other presses, AmeriPrint has grown by taking business away from shops equipped with digital printers. “The poly CTP system puts us on par with Indigo and DI presses when it comes to cost, for run lengths ranging as low as 250 sheets,” Nemecek remarks. “The difference is with polyester plates and my Speedmasters, I can produce better-looking work. My selling point is that I’m delivering much higher quality and it won’t take any longer to print the job.”

AmeriPrint can complete upwards of 600 jobs every month, and the majority of them are four- and five-color projects. To keep pace, the company has produced almost 70,000 plates during the past three years using polyester CTP exclusively.

Color’s no issue

As for printing color with polyester-based plates, Nemecek explains: “We’re running 2,400 dpi and 175 and 200 line screens on a routine basis. No one can tell the difference between polyester and metal output. It’s pure bull that you can’t run color with polyester plates. There are no issues if you do it the right way. It’s more of a press operator mindset than anything else. We don’t tell the press operators they can’t accomplish something, so they just get it done.”

Banking the difference

In addition to the high quality AmeriPrint is realizing from its polyester CTP system, the cost savings it’s achieving are making the company more cost competitive and profitable. “We’ve cut our costs in half just in material going from metal to polyester,” says Nemecek. “That doesn’t count any other factors such as chemistry, stripping and labor costs. When you add them up, the savings are huge. We went from an estimated cost of \$25 per plate to a \$5 per plate cost.”

That level of efficiency makes AmeriPrint a value leader for a host of printed applications. Sell sheets, flyers and postcards, ranging in run lengths from 1,000 to 2,000 copies, are the company’s bread and butter. More recently, short-run catalogs with runs as small as 500 copies have joined the agenda. “We can even compete against a 250-impression job produced on a color copier because we can do it for less,” Nemecek adds. “Thanks to poly CTP.” ●

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In June, ECRM announced an on-going distribution agreement with Mitsubishi Imaging that results in Mitsubishi being able to offer the DPX platesetter (above) and the leading polyester plate material, Silver DigiPlate.

the Far East — this year's capacity is expected to exceed more than 300,000 tons. Manufacturers will have no choice but to raise prices."

Polyester revisited

My father always held on to his polyester suits, convinced that they would come back into style. While his suits might not, the material has. Polyester plates have been in use since the mid-1980s. The most receptive audience for polyester has been small to midsize commercial printing companies, in-plants and instant print shops. While there are limitations to what these plates can produce, high-quality color is not one of them.

Notes consultant William C. Lamparter from PrintCom Consulting Group, "The biggest misperception with poly plates is that on press, the material stretches and thus registration becomes difficult. My experiences teach that a good press operator can generate professional, high-quality color using polyester

plates for runs up to 25,000 impressions. For the small printer, it's both a cost-effective and logical choice."

Interestingly enough, Tribute points out that most DI presses, other than those offered by KBA, are designed to image polyester plates.

Psst ... you got the stuff?

While the popularity of polyester plates has had a long run, the number of suppliers has slowly shrunk to a defined group. Tribute claims, "There really are only two significant suppliers of polyester plate material. Mitsubishi and Agfa own just about all of the market." Industry sources indicate that in this oligopoly, Mitsubishi is the clear leader, with some estimates touting it has an 80 percent market share advantage. Of all polyester plate material sold, it's estimated that 40 percent is imaged on dedicated CTP platesetters and the remaining 60 percent is exposed on imagesetters.

Imaging polyester plate material on an imagesetter is an entry point to CTP for print shops that are less concerned about high-quality color. While film typically has a 3 percent dot gain, there is minimal dot gain with CTP platesetters, resulting in sharper output. Beyond the quality issue, as demand for faster job turnaround increases, many printing organizations simply don't have the time to be stripping in halftones, making masks and burning plates.

Compared to the polyester plate market, the market for polyester platesetters is more diverse, but not by much. In early May, ECRM announced that it had acquired the polyester CTP product line of Esko Production A/S, including the DPX family of platesetters. This was significant, as it is estimated that there are more than 6,000 polyester CTP platesetters in the field today, and

DPX systems represent more than 70 percent of these installations. In June, ECRM announced an on-going distribution agreement with polyester plate market leader Mitsubishi Imaging that results in Mitsubishi being able to offer the leading polyester plate platesetter and the leading polyester plate material.

Polyester CTP: ROI or bust

While there seems to be no debate on CTP's benefits (time savings, faster job throughput, reduced material usage, labor savings and improved quality), ROI always is an issue that must be addressed. While CTP has become prevalent in the majority of print-production operations, whether it's right for your own shop requires in-depth analysis and inward soul searching.

Polyester CTP is an option that many smaller print businesses have adopted. For some, it's an entry-level solution; for others, it's the backbone of their production workflows. The important message is that polyester plate CTP is available today and deserves consideration in any CTP discussion. While the plates can't be sewn together to rebuild your disco-era wardrobe, "real men" are using polyester so they can afford plasma TVs and whatever make of car they want to drive. But, not so much to buy quiche. ●

Craig Kevghas is a 20-year veteran of the graphic arts industry with experience in the prepress production and digital publishing industries. He's worked as a marketing team member at ECRM, Hyphen and Scitex as well as a consultant for Agfa, Scitex and Creo. Kevghas is an account director at Matter Communications, a Boston-area marketing communications agency. He can be reached via e-mail at craig@matternow.com.