

This is an article written by Kevin Karstedt for Boxboard Container Magazine. Mr. Karstedt has a monthly article titled "Digital Connections" which he discusses issues of importance to Packaging Printers and Converters related to Digital Pre-Press and related technologies. Karstedt Associates consults with Consumer Product Companies, Packaging Converters/Printers and Graphic Service to execute package graphic development in the most efficient manner possible. They also provide marketing and product research for System Developers with products and services targeted at the Packaging Marketplace.

We hope you find the information in this article valuable. This and other articles on Digital Pre-Press and related technologies can be found at [www.karstedt.com](http://www.karstedt.com). Find out how Karstedt Associates can help your company by contacting us at (716) 992-2017 or e-mail us at [info@karstedt.com](mailto:info@karstedt.com).

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#### **The DOW is down, Should a Digital Workflow Still be in Your Future?**

The short answer is Yes! I have seen great strides over the past two years in packaging converters adopting digital workflows. In North America alone there are around 150 large format offset CTP devices imaging folding carton plates. My fear is that the economic slowdown we are in the midst of will slow this push to develop digital workflows. The truth of the matter is, now is the best time to implement such changes.

Adding a sense of urgency is the trend of more and more commercial printers getting into the folding carton business (brought on by economic changes in their traditional markets). Many folding carton manufactures have lost some work in recent months to a commercial printer just getting into the folding carton market.

One of the benefits many commercial printers have is an established digital workflow that includes digital proofing and large format film or even CTP output. This is being positioned by the new commercial/packaging printers as an added value to customers. These digital options will allow them to "cherry pick" jobs away from conventional folding carton manufactures. They are able to take jobs that are primarily process color (their traditional strength) and that require less converting. This trend may be seen by some as "nipping away at the edges" of the market but it is also "nipping" at already tight profit margins as well.

President Bush in responding to the recent economic slowdown said that any fix to the economy would have to be well thought out and have long term goals and implementation. This is the only way to sustain a healthy economy. The same thing applies to a plan to implement digital prepress and associated technologies. The long-term goals for a digital workflow for a packaging printer/converter should include:

- ❑ Increased customer satisfaction
- ❑ Increased value to your customer (make it easier for them to stay your customer)
- ❑ Increase product quality and profitability
- ❑ Decrease overall costs

Bringing home this point Dan McConnell, Director of Packaging for CreoScitex America refers the implementation of digital workflows as "... the only way to improve throughput, increase quality and reduce cost all at the same time."

Note that these goals are the same as many you already have in place. This shows that a digital workflow (that may or may not include CTP) is in harmony with - and may help you to achieve - your larger corporate goals.

The best way to think of a digital workflow is to envision the front and back ends of your presses being attached directly to your customer. Now, taking that vision a step further sees it with work continually flowing in and out of that press with no interruptions. While this may sound like a utopian view, it is not as far fetched as it may sound. An efficient digital workflow would, in essence, create this bridge from you customer to your presses - and back to your customer.

This is increasingly important as consumer product companies are changing the way they bring products to market. McConnell of CreoScitex remarks "... even though the economy is down the number of graphic changes is up and demands for short runs has dramatically increased." Achim Schmidt, Sales & Marketing Manager for the Packaging and Label Industries at Heidelberg USA also notes the needs of the consumer product company saying "...having digital prepress and CTP in-house give a folding carton converter the ability to make themselves more valuable to their customer by helping them to manage JIT inventories and greatly improve print quality..."

### **Digital Workflows - Something for Everyone**

If you are looking for tangible advantages, a digital workflow including CTP is something you can appreciate. The very nature of a CTP plate is that it allows you to precisely control plate results every time. Plates can be produced with much less process variation than ever before. They can be produced in multiple sites at different times and yield consistent and predictable results. This is particularly attractive for reruns of jobs and production of jobs and job families in multiple plants or on multiple presses assuring they all look alike. This is possible because presses can be "run to the numbers" decreasing the number a variables in the process.

Other benefits of CTP plates include registration and fit enhancements that lead to faster press make-readies and scrap reductions. CTP plates tend to come up to color and register on press much quicker than conventional plates. Scrap reductions vary widely from plant to plant but in most cases are very significant.

On the "fuzzy benefit" side of the fence digital workflows are prone to increasing customer satisfaction and increase their inter-dependence with their graphics and packaging suppliers. This makes it much less likely, and much more difficult, for a customer to take work elsewhere.

### **Own It or Buy It**

Many converters are going the OWN route. They are most comfortable buying or leasing the capital equipment and manning it themselves. While others are going the BUY route and having a prepress supplier implement the digital workflow for them (see Adding Value Through Facilities Management, September 1999 - guess it's time for another article on that topic). Both of these routes have procedural and process benefits

Gary Bernier, Corporate Director of Technology & Innovation for Southern Graphic Systems says that facilities management "...gives the packaging converter the time to do what they do best, print and convert packaging." He goes on to say that "Converters can reap the benefits of a total digital workflow through facilities management without having to incur the capital expense and to keep it up."

The February 2001 Digital Connections article *Get Your Graphics "In Control"* centered around the need both you and your customers have for "control" of your processes. Digital workflows are enabling factors to gaining that control. Since I wrote that article (in mid January) the national economy has taken a series of hits and has slumped significantly. What has not changed is the long-term benefits a digital workflow can bring to a packaging converter looking to maintain customers, increase profitability and decrease costs. If anything a digital workflow may make more scenes now than it did just a few months ago.

So, before you put that Digital Workflow Study on the shelf till the economy straightens out, think again...Maybe the best thing to do is move forward, not hold back.

*I invite calls and e-mails on this and all Digital Connections topics and will include your comments were possible. In the mean time....think digital.*