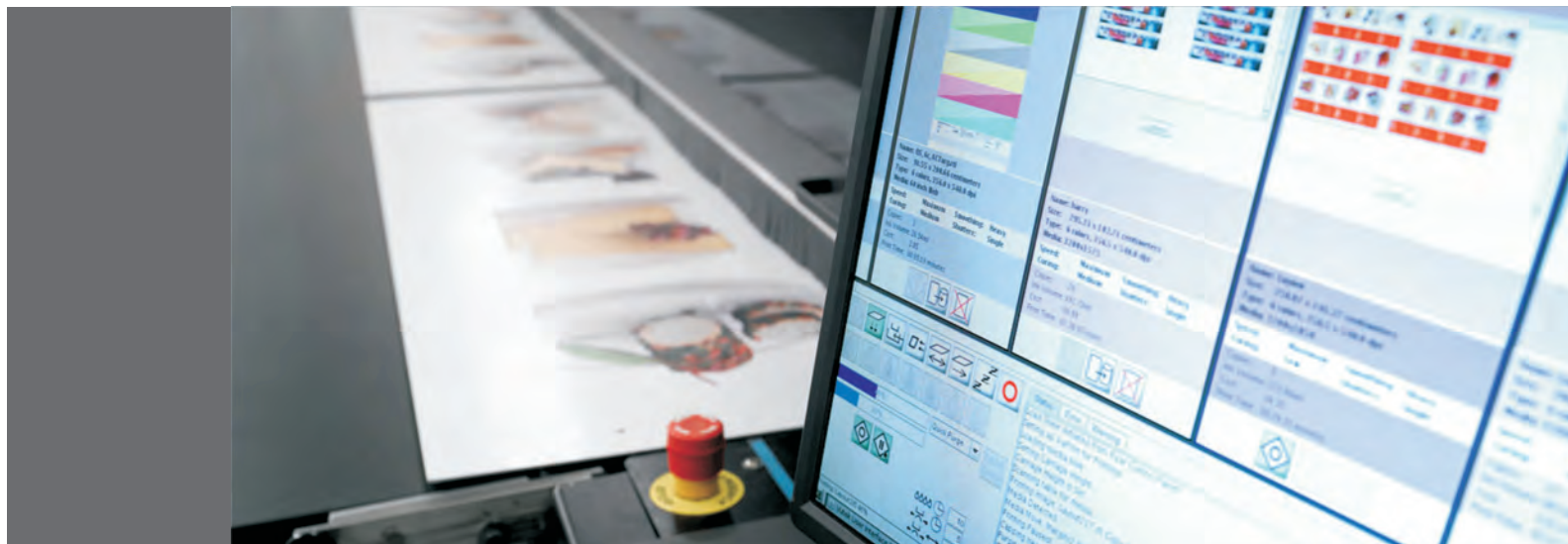


A quantum leap to the QS...

So successful was its investment 2 years ago in an EFI-VUTEK QS2000, that Chippenham-based screen-printer Image Factory recently added a second, wider machine, in the shape of a QS3200...



For many display production companies, moving through different wide-format ink-jet technologies has been a natural progression but, for Image Factory based in Chippenham, the decision was made to augment its screen-printing capabilities by jumping straight into UV-curable flat-bed production. Although the screen process still represents the lion's share of this business's output, so successful was its investment two years ago in an EFI-VUTEK QS2000 that a second, wider machine, was added more recently in the form of the QS3200. The printers were supplied by UK specialist, CMYUK Digital.

The history of Image Factory shows a steady growth path since it was originally formed 50 years ago. In 1959 it set up as Western Screen and Sign in a small factory in Bristol and, from here, it became a leading supplier of signs and displays within the area. In 1990 the business was acquired by the Quarto Group and moved into a larger production facility in Corsham, Wiltshire. This coincided with significant growth and investment in the screen-printing side of the business. Five years later a name change was deemed practical to reflect the capability and type of output being produced and Image Factory was selected as the new identity.

Continued growth in turnover led to a further move in 2003 to the company's current site in Chippenham, located conveniently close to the M4, with a further £3.6 million investment programme designed to boost its production capacity. This additional space now accommodates a comprehensive facility comprising computer-to-screen, screen-printing, cardboard engineering and finishing machinery, as well as ample storage for stocks of materials and finished jobs which can be called-off by the client as and when needed. Today Image Factory has gained a strong reputation in point-of-sale and retail work including many three-dimensional applications incorporating creative cardboard engineering.

Although the bulk of the work produced by Image Factory is still produced on its screen-printing presses, a move to digital output was inevitable as shorter runs, particularly those output as smaller pieces, became more popular. The company previously hadn't needed to investigate ink-jet printers outside the need for internal proofing and, as a result, its investment into its EFI-VUTEK machines was nothing short of a quantum leap into wide-format ink-jet technology.

Image Factory's Tim Boore states: "We're unusual because we have gone straight from screen-printing to high-end UV-curable flat-bed technology but the advantage is that we've bypassed many of the earlier problems by waiting until we really needed to enter this side of the market. We knew that, inevitably, the day was going to come when the company would add a wide-format digital production option but, by the time we believed it was right to invest, we had a clear idea of what we expected from our printer. In addition, we could avoid many of the mishaps and make sure we got the right machine first time."

Two years ago Image Factory purchased an EFI-VUTEK QS2000 as its introduction into wide-format UV-curable digital output. The company's extensive screen process experience of working with UV-curable inks onto different types of rigid and flexible materials gave it a tremendous advantage when transferring some of its jobs across from analog production or blending a combination of screen and ink-jet into the same project.



The fact that we didn't rush into digital wide-format when it first became available, deciding instead to wait until the time was right for our requirements, means that the technology we've now invested in is based on solid foundations and not on a gamble.

Image Factory's screen printing expertise means that they know exactly which process will achieve the required result, and can advise on using screen printed special varnish effects to capture an audience. Add to that 3D design and construction using advanced software, two CAD tables and a talent for cardboard engineering, Image Factory can provide a complete service. Continuing to use the right digital equipment to enhance these offerings was key.

"We soon discovered that both we and our clients would benefit from the 3.2 m width available with the QS3200 and, within a year of buying our first machine, we decided to invest in a second, larger version of the same product," Boore continues. "Because we have plenty of space at our Chippenham site, we had no restrictions on accommodating both printers which are both sited close to our EskoArtwork Kongsberg cutting tables to give us easy finishing options without any bottle-necks."

Choosing a wide-format flat-bed printer was also a completely open book for Image Factory. With no expectations of digital ink-jet machines the company was able to take its assessment of available models at face value without any influence from previous suppliers. Boore says that several options were considered, and the benefits and disadvantages were scrutinised carefully before a decision was made.

"Watching and listening to the wide-format industry's movements in general gave us a clue as to which printers were performing well and were behaving reliably and consistently," Boore comments. "Every supplier is eager to sell you a machine but of importance to us were some compelling factors, such as quality of output and ease of use. To fulfill our clients requirements, we also need to be extremely selective about colour accuracy and the EFI Fiery XF RIP has helped us to maintain fidelity across both screen-printed and digitally produced output."

The installation of both of its QS UV-curable printers has enabled Image Factory to spread its work-load more efficiently across its analogue and digital capabilities, optimising the size and type of job with the more suitable and cost-efficient process. Where many of today's companies are reducing their screen-printed throughput in favour of wide-format ink-jet, Boore says that its screen presses are busier than ever. Some of the reasoning behind this lies in the fact that Image Factory is able to look at the longer term when it comes to production, with stock items being printed in advance and stored for instant call-off.

"Digital Wide-format is a great benefit to Image Factory but it is a complement to our existing comprehensive screen process capabilities which still rule the production here," Boore concludes. "There is a tremendous value in being able to produce one-offs and short runs digitally without having to disrupt our screen-printing lines and, as more localised variation is required by some of our clients, the VUTEKs will play an important role in providing us with quality fast turn-round throughput. The fact that we didn't rush into digital wide-format when it first became available, deciding to wait until the time was right for our requirements, has meant that the technology we've now invested in is based on solid foundations and not on a gamble."



Printer showcased in this study:
EFI-VUTEK QS3200

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