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drupa wraps up and winds down in Sydney: James Cryer's take

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By Print21

The 'drupa unwrapped' roadshow from Printing Industries rolled into Sydney this week for a breakfast presentation. Alliteration addict, James Cryer, was there and came away with a belief that the industry is at a crossroads.

A grateful gaggle of graphic-arts gurus gathered to hear an octet of orators opine on the outcomes flowing from the recently-concluded drupa 2008.

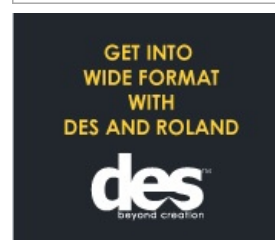
As human beings we're hot-wired to put labels on things and each drupa is neatly packaged with a moniker that is supposed to define its message or signify some signpost for the future direction of the industry. Like economic forecasters, they're probably about 50 percent accurate, some of the time.

Most of the speakers agreed this drupa is proving more elusive and no amount of name-calling or 'nicknaming' has successfully summarised the event. I feel several speakers got close when they referred to 'integration', but not just integration as applied to workflow management.

I believe the real message was a new-found integration between hitherto opposing suppliers, many of whom now realise the industry requires such complex, multi-level solutions on the factory-floor that it's impossible for one OEM to be all things to all converters. For the first time we saw the 'two elephants in the room' – Heidelberg and Fuji Xerox – not boasting how big theirs was (floor space, that is) but actually sharing the same floor space on the same stand. That would have been unthinkable a year or two ago.

Many other examples abound – Müller Martini and Océ, Goss and Ferag, Fujifilm and Fuji Xerox, Hunkeler and everybody. All of this is good for the industry as, for the first time, we are confronted with choices of suppliers, rather than the traditional dependence on two or three dominant OEM's.

But if I was to define this year's drupa, I would call it the year our industry came to the crossroads.



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The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.
<http://ft.co/d5oamorf2X>

Picture above: The octet of orators at the Sydney drupa unwrapped breakfast: (l-r) Stuart Shirvington, Geon; Napil Abdel, Tharstern Australia; Steve Dunwell, Currie Group; Brett Maishman, Fuji Xerox; Simon Dodd, Snap Printing; Andy McCourt, McCourt Consult; Garry Muratore, Agfa; Glenn Plummer, Heidelberg; Herbert, Kieleithner, Océ Australia.

For the first time the proprietor of a traditional sheetfed plant, when faced with the need to buy another press, will be forced to consider more than the Heidelberg/Roland/Komori option. Not only must s/he compare sheetfed presses with each other, s/he must now look outside the square and consider a digital colour press as a viable option. He (or she, sorry) must now look at the relative pay-back on a sheetfed offset press versus the return from a high-end, digital colour device.

This marks a milestone in our industry's evolution. It's not that one press type is better than another, but we've arrived at the point where digital fills a legitimate niche in our collective service offering to clients. In fact, it would be very interesting for someone to pose the question: supposing you are a typical, traditional sheetfed printer facing the normal capacity constraints, and you know you've got to buy 'something', will it be offset or digital?

The intuitive answer may be misleading. You may be inclined to get another offset press simply because most/all of your work is offset. But the analogy may be like Sydney Airport that lands a jumbo jet one minute and a Cessna the next. The mix may be creating the bottle-necks. Perhaps by syphoning the 'rats and mice' offset jobs onto a digital device you'll be streaming both workflows more efficiently.

Of course, one of the key determinants of ROAE (return on average equity) for a press is its throughput. Offset presses have historically gone for speed, not width whereas the inkjet brigade have gone the other way. But as we're seeing, the very process of feeding a sheet is starting to impose limits to growth in potential press speed. I'm no engineer but I suspect we're approaching the upper-limit of offset sheetfed technology at about 20,000sph. Any faster and you're likely to send the next sheet through the roof – literally.

Enter Andy McCourt with the new Goss M-600 Folia press tucked under his arm. What makes the Folia different is its reliance on reel-feed, which gives it an entry-level speed of 30,000sph!

Glenn Plummer of Heidelberg could rightly claim they have the Cut-Star, which is a serious attempt to bridge the gap between sheet- and reel-feed; it kicks the speed up to around 18,000sph depending on sheet-length. But for whatever reason, the Cut-Star never really took hold here although there are several dozen in the UK and well over 100 sold worldwide.

The 'reel' advantage of a roll, however, as Andy McCourt pointed out, is the much lower paper cost if you can browbeat your customers into taking a standard range, instead of the proliferation of stocks which we currently offer.

But with digital breathing down offset's neck in the race for productivity, it is forcing some long-overdue changes, all of which may result in the impossible dream of lower print-prices AND higher margins. Imagine what may be around the corner:

- * more 44-inch wide presses – say, a five percent increase
- * more perfectors – say, a 20 percent increase
- * more reel-fed – say, a 10 percent increase

This represents a 35 percent increase in productivity without any reduction in margins.

Now some might say, this is unrealistic, because much of the current throughput doesn't suit a 'big iron' offset press. Quiet true, but I'm assuming that the unsuitable offset jobs have been streamed onto the in-house digital device, which allows the offset press to do what it does best.

In fairness, some of the above may be fanciful. I return to my point that this drupa represents our industry 'at the crossroads'. For the first time ever, we're confronted with choices and options that we've never had before. We should view an offset press and a digital device simply as tools to do different job – just as a carpenter has a range of different equipment in his toolbox.

I can't help one final observation: at no stage did I hear any supplier boasting about his presses' abilities when it comes to 'quality'. Many other adjectives were used – flexibility, quick make-ready, more in-line functions – but no mention of the dreaded Q word. I think that's a good sign.

Finally, credit must go to Steve Dunwell for a rare glimpse of his true talent as a comedian with his suggestion that the recent birth of the Packers' new child is the first case ever of a kid being named after a digital printing press. And if I ever find myself hurtling down the digital super-highway I hope to have something Napil Abdel described as a 'dynamic dashboard'!

Congratulations to Valerie Alderman from Agfa, who won Andy McCourt's coveted drupa thong. That's one mean feat – Ed.

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