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Retooling production still work in progress

By Chuck Moozakis Editor In Chief Mar 29, 2010



Rolls of paper await placement on the press at Transcontinental's Fremont, Calif., facility.

News & Tech

Slammed by the decline of ad and circulation revenues and flattened even further by the Great Recession, U.S. newspaper publishers' intentions to diversify their production infrastructures remain very much a work in progress.

There are exceptions. Transcontinental Northern California, for example, cloaked its manroland presses with both heatset and coldset capabilities. The Free-Lance Star in Fredericksburg, Va., has the same flexibility with its Goss International FPS machines. The Butler (Pa.) Eagle, the Standard-Examiner in Ogden,

Utah, and Rotary Offset Press in Washington state also boast heatset/coldset machines. Next up: four KBA Commander CT heatset/coldset presses slated for Transcontinental's Canadian plants, scheduled to be in operation later this year.

In all these cases, printers and publishers believe they will reap dividends by being able to offer prospective customers services that go beyond coldset.

Meantime, scores of newspapers - with presses from Manugraph DGM Inc., Goss and Tensor Group Inc. - added UV curing to their singlewide machines as they diversified their production. The technique is now moving to users of higher-speed, larger-capacity machines, with Transcontinental Inc.'s TransMag operation the latest to move paper through its UV curing-equipped doublewide manroland press.

Yet the cold, hard realities of today's still-teetering economy are forcing many publishers to rethink their plans to tap into the so-called hybrid production market. They're still interested in capturing new business, but they want to ensure they find ways to make those ventures economically viable before they're willing to invest.

"It's not so much a question of getting more commercial work," said Ulrich Wicke, KBA North America's vice president of sales and service. "It's become more of a question of how to optimize your press infrastructure to make money."

Added features

That means more automation and the ability to provide ancillary production services such as stitching, trimming, gluing and other offshoots, he said.

KBA, he said, is "constantly" working with its North American customers to ensure they can get the most versatility out of their presses, especially as newspapers seek new revenue streams from non-traditional sources.

"We're finding demands for stitching and ribbon and section stitching in the folder," Wicke said. "We also see papers interested in buying equipment that will let them perforate."

Sam Wagner, president of Web Offset Services, said the economy has hobbled many American publishers from being able to emulate their European counterparts when it comes to maximizing their output.

Danish paper Dansk AvisTryk, for example, is producing more than 1.5 million all-color newspapers each day on its press, a triplewide four-tower, two-folder KBA Commander machine with a singlewide superstructure positioned between the folders.

"The press is made in such a way that it can run as few as 5,000 copies (profitably)," Wagner, who consulted with the press' design and installation, said. "On a typical day, there are 24 to 26 makereadies, and these are makereadies that go beyond adding a new headline or a new page; we're talking switches in formats" and other attributes, he said.

Missing opportunity?

"In the U.S., newspapers are missing the opportunity (to transform their operations). When you think about it, look at all the competition a newspaper faces. All are more colorful and they're produced to a higher standard. But there are answers," Wagner said.

Brian Moser, production director at Signature Offset, a Colorado-based coldset printer with seven plants in the Southwest and South, said diversification is part of the firm's strategy as it looks to open up a new plant on the East Coast this summer.

"We're banking on a new market," he said. To that end, the new facility, at a yet-to-be-disclosed location, will be built around a Goss Community press with an N-40 folder capable of producing differently sized products.

Signature is also touting its concentric dot screening technology that permits 175-line screening, permitting the printer to offer higher-quality printing to its customers.

"We're confident that there's enough business there" to justify the press and the construction of the new plant, Moser said. "This will let us look at producing different types of work."

Varied platforms

Printers wanting to add different types of equipment to tap new markets is a trend that manroland has also seen, said Ron Sams, the vendor's vice president of newspaper sales.

"The state of the industry has created an opportunity," he said. "Those newspapers and other printers who have bought newer equipment and added features are positioned very well to court new business."

Mexican newspaper and semi-commercial printer Goldenstar de Mexico in Culiacan, Sinaloa, is an example of a company that expects to attract new accounts with its recently commissioned press.

The firm kicked off a Tensor T-400BE press that's equipped with an H-50 folder and Prime UV curing system. The 40-inch-wide press can accommodate super-calendared webs and, with its Jardis ribbon decks, can produce a 6-page broadsheet or 12-page tab from each web.

"We understand that our customers require increased flexibility and the ability to run various product types on their presses," said Martina Hozjan Ruda, Tensor's vice president. "It's a highly competitive environment for newspapers and printing firms, no matter the geographic location. Presses must be extremely flexible and cost-

effective."

In addition to the installation in Culiacan, Tensor sold a three-tower T-400 press addition to the publisher of La Presse de la Manche in Cherbourg, France, featuring a slate of automation controls that will make operation more efficient, Ruda said. The vendor is also integrating closed-loop register, cutoff, remote inking and other functions within an existing Solna G150 tower for additional automation.

Press control upgrades play a more prominent role as publishers begin to incorporate commercial printing standards such as CIP4 into their operations, Ruda said.