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Papers 'press' for automation

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As the battle for profitability becomes even more intense, newspapers are cloaking presses with software and other tools aimed at helping their pressrooms become more efficient.

Presses slated for installation at sites including the Naples (Fla.) Daily News, Free Lance-Star in Fredericksburg, Va., (New York) Daily News and Transcontinental Inc.-operated sites in Canada and northern California are all sporting control systems that will enable publishers to quickly change from one production run to another, with a minimum of personnel.

At the same time, the machines themselves have become much more sophisticated, sporting heatset, UV curing and other components that will allow newspapers to offer more printing services to more customers.

"You have to do more with less," said Sam Wagner, principal of Sarasota, Fla.-based Web Offset Services.

Wagner, who in 2006 helped oversee the commissioning of Independent Newspapers Inc.'s novel Koenig & Bauer AG five-high Colora press in Dover, Del., is in the midst of wrapping up a similarly innovative press start-up for Dansk AvisTryk in Denmark.

The Danish machine, a triplewide, four-tower, two-folder KBA Commander with a singlewide superstructure positioned between two folders, went on-edition in April.

Would be a disaster

"If you didn't automate this, the press would be a complete disaster to run," he said. "You have to have automation at the highest level and software and controls in place to eliminate as much manual intervention as possible."

Dansk AvisTryk replaced four doublewide presses with the new Commander, which is split into two lines. The machine is used to print more than 20 titles a day, ranging from eight to 128 pages, and measuring from 9 7/8 inches to 19 5/8 inches tall on web widths as narrow as 19 5/8 inches, all in full color.

In addition, Dansk AvisTryk uses the machine to produce commercial work, special orders and other periodicals - some with press runs as low as 10,000 to 15,000.

In order to get the press ready for these multiple jobs, Dansk AvisTryk and Wagner preloaded the four EAE press consoles with more than 700 job configurations including default settings and running press adjustments.

In addition, the EAE consoles are used to manage auxiliary systems such as QuadTech Inc.'s ribbon and cutoff control software. "There are QTI systems, but there are no QTI controls; EAE drives the entire operation," Wagner said.

Integration key

Wagner concedes integrating disparate systems can come with a cost. "It costs money to do this; instead of five buttons you might have only one, so the first question is who is going to pay, but we're trying to push all the vendors in this direction."

Dansk AvisTryk is also saving money by reducing the consumables and the number of operators needed to run the press. Instead of using regular-sized plates, for example, the publisher hangs the press with large-format plates, cutting the number of plates needed by more than half.

And it takes only six operators to run the press, compared with the 16 formerly required to run Dansk AvisTryk's four doublewide machines.

"It's surprising how much the publisher is doing with a minimal amount of staffing," Wagner said.

At The Free Lance-Star, work is continuing on the construction of a new plant that will house the United States' first Goss International Corp. FPS press.

The triplewide machine, to go on-edition next year, is configured with two 2:5:5 jaw folders and can produce, in full color, 48-page broadsheet products running straight, 96-page broadsheets running collect and semi-commercial products with ribbon widths of up to 36 inches.

Although the initial order was for a coldset press only, in late 2007 The Free Lance-Star added a heatset dryer to one of the machine's four towers in order to provide a wider breadth of commercial printing services to prospective customers.

"We have a high level of confidence of success and (the addition of dryers) fits our potential anticipated product range," said Operations Director John Jenkins said at the time.

The 21-inch cutoff press sports a modular design and automates a number of functions including impositioning and blanket cleaning. Most recently, The Free Lance-Star added automatic color and cutoff registration to the press, tapping Q.I. Press Controls for its technology.

The newspaper will also be able to exploit other time-saving benefits from inline stitching and trimming that will be built into its Goss and Ferag-anchored postpress operation.

Transcontinental Inc., meantime, also expects to reap dividends from presses it's installing in its new Fremont, Calif., facility as well as machines proposed to print The (Toronto) Globe and Mail.

The northern California site, scheduled to go into operation late last month, is built around three manroland Colorman triplewide presses. The coldset/heatset presses are equipped with software and other systems engineered to allow press crews to quickly shift from one job to another.

Transcontinental Inc. executives declined to comment about the Fremont plant, which is slated to produce the San Francisco Chronicle.

Transcon is pursuing a similar approach in Canada as it lays the groundwork for a 20-year extension of its existing contract to print The Globe and Mail. □