

ENTOURAGE

Leading yearbook and photo specialty company turns to Canon production inkjet innovation to enhance its competitive edge and support continued growth.



ENTOURAGE YEARBOOKS

In just 16 years, Entourage has become a premier yearbook and photo specialty company in the U.S. Led by Elias Jo, co-founder and CEO, and his brother Edward Jo, the company's co-founder and CFO, the Princeton, NJ, company annually serves thousands of schools and organizations around the country and around the globe. Distinguishing itself from traditional yearbook companies, Entourage offers an expansive array of digital tools and services to help make the process of publishing full-color yearbooks easy, plus a blazing fast production turnaround time. To support its growing business in both the yearbook and the booming photo specialty markets, Entourage recently made the transition to production inkjet, installing a Canon varioPRINT iX-series sheetfed press, further solidifying its reputation for quality and service.

The Jo brothers launched Entourage as a small photo uploading and sharing site in 2006 — while Elias was pursuing a graduate degree at a top ten-ranked business school in New York. In an entrepreneurship program at the school, Elias leveraged his professional IT background to develop a new, digital photobook concept based on custom-built software.

After Elias showcased the photobook concept at the school, a colleague commented that the idea looked “a lot like our yearbook.” Soon, the university asked if Entourage could produce its yearbook.

“We never made a yearbook before,” said Edward. “And the university didn’t want just one or two copies — they needed more than 500. It was a big leap, but also a big opportunity. We said, ‘Sounds good!’ We hired a graphic designer and created the 2006 yearbook around the dining table in Elias’s Manhattan apartment. That was our first customer.”

The brothers used the money from this first customer as the foundation for the business. Entourage grew rapidly, closing between 30 and 40 schools in the first full year of operation. This year, the company will serve between 5000 and 6000 schools and organizations representing all 50 states and about 18 countries. The international part of Entourage’s business focuses on military organizations wanting to produce an American-style yearbook for those attending military base schools abroad. Entourage also works with international schools in places like Japan and China that teach English and want to offer students an American yearbook experience.

Now, with the innovative inkjet capabilities of the Canon varioPRINT iX-series, the company is poised to capture additional opportunities, pursue even greater growth, and compete more aggressively.

THE ENTOURAGE DIFFERENCE

Entourage differentiates itself in the marketplace as the “next generation” yearbook company. It not only digitizes yearbook design, production, and printing but also sells a hybrid yearbook that includes both a printed copy and a digital license for unlimited online access.

“If you want a yearbook that your parents and your grandparents got, you would go to a conventional company that’s been around for years,” said Edward. “But if you want a next generation yearbook that is produced faster, more cost effectively, and always has an interactive component to the experience, then you would go to Entourage.”

NOT DOING IT OLD SCHOOL

When Entourage started in the industry, the standard yearbook was a black and white book on 80-pound paper (Entourage says they take credit for bringing 100-pound paper to yearbook printing!). School yearbook staff would cut out pictures, paste them on mockup sheets, and send the sheets out to make plates and print on an offset press.

“At Entourage, we didn’t have any legacy notions — or legacy ‘heavy iron’ like a multimillion-dollar offset press — when we started. So, we changed everything, going 100 percent digital on day one. We feel like we went into it with the right technology,” said Edward.

The result is a simplified, seamless web-to-print yearbook solution. Students can collaboratively go on their preferred creative platforms (Photoshop, InDesign, etc.); create a custom design or use a wide range of professionally designed templates, fonts, and themes; and even use social media to upload photos from Instagram, Facebook, and Google Drive at the click of a button.



Entourage Yearbooks co-founders Edward Jo (l) and Elias Jo (r) relied on digital printing to create a “next generation” yearbook experience since day one.

What else does Entourage do that some general printers can’t or won’t? They also Smyth sew — one of the strongest binding methods in book production — all their own yearbooks, both softcover and hardcover.

“We always want to be at the highest level of quality, including our finishing capabilities,” said Edward. “To us, that

means Smyth-sewn bindings. It’s a big part of what makes our yearbooks so durable as keepsakes. It can be very difficult to find printers who are willing to do Smyth sewing on the shorter runs necessary for yearbooks. So again, we’ve pushed ourselves, investing in a new, fully automated Smyth sewing line that we will be running online during our

full yearbook season with the Canon varioPRINT iX in 2022. It's a big thing for us."

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Entourage also offers variable data personalization. Schools can customize pages for individual students or groups and create one-off or a limited quantity of books at the same speed and with no significant additional cost as static pages.

Which brings up another issue with traditional yearbook production. Because the typical design and offset printing process was expensive and labor intensive, most yearbook companies imposed strict quantity requirements on orders — usually around 1,000 copies. It didn't matter if the school only needed 700 copies. They would be left with a closet full of unused yearbooks and costly waste.

"Digital technology not only changes the entire creative experience but also the production experience and expense," said Edward. "Digital presses are well suited to the short run, high-quality yearbooks most schools need — in the dozens and the hundreds, not thousands — plus they enable companies to use variable data and offer even one-offs and on-demand reprints at a cost-effective price point offset never could."

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE ON SPEED

An industry-leading delivery model is another big differentiator for Entourage — one that actually helped Edward and Elias decide to do everything in house.

"When we first started, offset print providers we contacted couldn't do the work as fast as we needed them to," said Edward. "We'd ask them for three week turnaround, and they came back with 12 weeks. We felt that was

way too long and wouldn't work for our customers. We're always pushing the envelope on speed to deliver as close to the end of school as possible and enable the schools to include more spring events in their yearbooks. Ordinarily, we promise 28-day delivery — but right now we've actually been able to complete printing within days, primarily because of the new Canon varioPRINT iX-series sheetfed inkjet platform!"

MAKING THE INKJET DECISION

Before making the move to inkjet — and selecting the

Canon varioPRINT iX-series — Elias and Edward certainly did their homework.

"Over the last 16 years, we have, I believe, used all the major digital platforms at some point at Entourage," said Edward. "When we installed the varioPRINT iX last October, we were using digital liquid toner presses — both sheetfed and roll-fed. But all along, we've continued to watch the evolution of inkjet and gather information on the production inkjet presses that impressed us — what's the better machine, what's better for the operators, what's better for our paper

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— Edward Jo, CFO and co-founder for Entourage

“ UPTIME IS CRITICAL FOR ENTOURAGE. WHEN WE PROMISE CUSTOMERS THEY’RE GOING TO GET THEIR YEARBOOKS BY A CERTAIN DATE, WE KNOW WE CAN TRUST THE iX TO BE THERE FOR US. WE DON’T WORRY ABOUT MEETING DELIVERY DEMANDS. WE CAN PREDICTABLY PRODUCE A VERY LARGE NUMBER OF SHEETS COMING OFF THE PRESS.”

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Entourage Yearbooks recently installed a Canon varioPRINT iX-series sheetfed inkjet press to increase capacity, productivity, and opportunities for growth.

suppliers, what’s better for our products and for our customers.

The Canon varioPRINT iX-series was the first platform where we finally said, ‘This quality meets the standards that we need to deliver to our customers! Several things stood out as just being next level!’

Uptime. Though they admit to being skeptical at first, one of the major things that impressed Elias and Edward was the varioPRINT iX’s uptime record, which some current users report at

an average of 94 percent — thanks in no small part to Canon’s outstanding Service and Support, including predictive analytics and 24/7 service models that help reduce downtime and keep presses running.

“Uptime is critical for Entourage. When we promise customers they’re going to get their yearbooks by a certain date, we know we can trust the iX to be there for us,” said Edward. “We don’t worry about meeting delivery demands. We can

predictably produce a very large number of sheets coming off the press.”

Consistency. The brothers also were impressed at how consistent the Canon press was — an important factor in yearbook production, where there should be no deviations in color or image quality, even after days or weeks.

“It used to be a school would order X number of yearbooks for the students, faculty, and staff who ordered them,” Edward said. “But in reality, they had

better have extra in case somebody decided they want one afterwards. Now, digital technology makes it possible to order just enough yearbooks. If a school gets a late order after the main print run is completed, they don't even have to call us back. They can just go on our website and click to order one more yearbook. And they have peace of mind there will be no difference. That was a big selling point for us too."

Ink coverage. Another concern for Entourage was the fact that full-color applications, like yearbooks, require high ink coverage and high quality. It's imperative the substrate can handle it without causing print quality or paper defects and that the output is compatible with any finishing requirements. Smart varioPRINT iX-series ink-optimizing and drying technologies helped Entourage make it their top choice.

"What the Canon product does distinctively well is handle the high ink

coverage on our yearbooks," said Edward. "Pretty much every page is covered with images. But with the iX, pages come out the way we expect them to — not only with exceptional image quality but also flat and ready to go through finishing."

Media flexibility. And speaking of substrates, the brothers also recognized that having media options is what Edward calls "a big thing for us, especially in this supply chain constrained world." In Canon Solutions America's Media and Solutions Lab, qualification tests already have been satisfactorily run to ensure quality results — and avoid production issues — on more than 600 papers for the varioPRINT iX.

"Being able to use regular paper, rather than treated stocks, is great," he said. "With such a large media library, if a paper is not available, we can quickly pivot to a different media — one that's already been evaluated and calibrated for the iX — and still be able to deliver

the product as promised."

Application opportunities. The timing of Entourage's move to inkjet couldn't have been better. Globally, the demand for photo specialty products — including photobooks such as yearbooks, as well as personalized calendars, cards, and posters — is booming at the same time production inkjet printing technology has created a highly competitive platform for this growing multibillion-dollar market. It's a synergy that is helping Entourage grow and pursue more business opportunities as an outsourced partner for commercial printers and book manufacturers, especially during the off-peak season for yearbooks.

"Yearbook production is seasonal, with the work heavily concentrated in April, May, and June," said Edward. "Which just happens to be counter cyclical to the peak season for so many other photo specialty products. It actually works well to keep our presses running during the rest of the year by printing

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calendars, children's books, photobooks, personalized gifts, etc. as overflow work from other print providers. That side of the business has grown a lot since we installed the varioPRINT iX. We did some photo products during the fourth quarter last year and the uptime, consistency, and quality was amazing"

A SUPERLATIVE EXPERIENCE

The brothers' well-informed decision to add inkjet to the company's core capabilities also led to a very positive and seamless installation experience for Entourage. Canon Solutions America's understanding of the complexities of openly communicating with Entourage's existing workflow system and managing essential processes — such as first-in-first-out scheduling, web-based file transfer of PDF files, and progress tracking — played a big role.

With the installation of the varioPRINT iX, Entourage was among the first Canon Solutions America inkjet customers to benefit from its Photo Smart Suite — a fully customizable portfolio of Canon inkjet presses, production workflow alternatives, media options, and finishing partnerships. Powered by Canon's industry-leading PRISMA® as well as third-party software, Photo Smart Suite helps optimize every piece of job-related data and efficiently bridge communications and process steps from end to end.

As a result, the varioPRINT iX installation was "pretty plug and play for us, and the training process was the best," according to Elias.

"Workflow is the nervous system of a good production environment — the press and its ink laydown capabilities, its substrate compatibility and versatility, and how the press interacts with finishing processes. You can have the best equipment and the best operators

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GOING FORWARD INTO THIS FULL YEARBOOK SEASON, WE'RE LOOKING TO RUN THE MACHINE 24/7 FOR THOSE THREE PEAK MONTHS."

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in the world, and you're still not going to get the right output at the efficiency levels you need to be competitive without the right workflow. We plugged the iX into the custom system we built in-house, and it performed at the high level we expected. That's key."

Entourage's team is also enthusiastic about the varioPRINT iX innovations that make their jobs easier and the output better.

"The operators were a little hesitant at first, especially when I told them the specs," said Edward. "I said, 'You don't have to recalibrate this thing. Uptime is 90 percent or better.' They were skeptical, like we were at first. But they've come around and definitely come to really appreciate the machine. And our own internal designers agree the output quality is better. We put it side by side with pages from one of the liquid toner presses, they always prefer the output of the Canon."

A BRIGHT FUTURE

With an eye on the future, Entourage is well-positioned to be voted "most likely to grow" among yearbook publishers. The recognition that there's tremendous opportunity in production inkjet is already having an impact on the bottom line — even though the varioPRINT iX is a fairly recent install.

"This Canon technology makes perfect sense for our plans to grow and scale up yearbook production," said Edward. "Going forward into this full yearbook season, we're looking to run the machine 24/7 for those three peak months. We're also looking to test Canon's claim of 10 million pages per month duty cycle. We don't expect to be disappointed. We're looking to double our business in the short term — about three to five years — and I think the Canon platform will be instrumental in supporting our need to increase capacity and productivity."

ABOUT US

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