

**CASE STUDY**

#INKJET MINDSET LIVING (AND LOVING) THE PRINT LIFE

Staying ahead of the curve—you hear that phrase a lot these days. Depending on who you are and what you do, it means different things to different people. When Adam LeFebvre and his team at Specialty Print Communications (SPC) use the phrase, it hits at the very heart of who they are. Staying ahead of the curve is a way of life for SPC, with a commitment to serve a marketplace that is constantly changing in every way: technology, customer solutions, buying and selling, consumer behaviors—the list goes on.

Over the years, SPC has methodically built a reputation as a company that is not shy about reinvesting in the technology and people needed to get things done. As one of the industry's foremost solutions providers for direct marketers, the Niles, Illinois, company is known for the unique and complex formats and applications it creates for its national client base. To date, it produces more than one billion mail pieces annually, much of the business coming from enterprising online retailers.

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AT A GLANCE

The ProStream Series

Here's a look inside the technologically sound Canon ProStream inkjet printer:

PRINT TECHNOLOGY: Digidot drop-on-demand, piezoelectric

INK: Pigment-based polymer ink with ColorGrip

PRINT RESOLUTION: 1,200 x 1,200 dpi with multilevel drop size modulation resulting in a higher apparent resolution

PRINT SPEED: 262 ft/ m (80 m/m) (equals 1,144 letter size duplex pages per minute or 112 B2 duplex per minute¹)

SPC's dominance in the direct mail arena can be summed up by a phrase that is highly visible on its website: "Moving at the speed of efficiency." In the direct mail game—one where customers demand and live and die by ROI—SPC knew early on that investing in inkjet was the way to win. So, after a more than three-year trek around the world (they met with six different manufacturers) looking for the right fit, SPC added a Canon ProStream roll-fed inkjet press to its portfolio.

As one of the first in the world to house a ProStream, the decision, Adam says, was easy. To be the best, you had to invest in the best. "We're in the direct mail business. The applications that we produce for our clients are really varied, so it's super important for us to have a broad offering and the right equipment for the job.

With marketers counting on more and more data, inkjet enables us to find use for all of that data, converting it into usable, highly leveraged marketing materials that provide better ROI than traditional offset ever could."

That was the key. In the days before going inkjet, the SPC team found itself without an option to produce high volume, fully variable jobs at cost-effective pricing, either having to turn down jobs that were too big or split them up. "There's a pretty good demand out there for these types of jobs," says Brad Lane, SPC's strategic account executive. "But we found that there were some where we just had to say no. We don't have to do that today."

In a time when too many other printers are still evaluating their mission statements, SPC's vision is laser sharp. The \$100 million juggernaut serves a broad wealth of Fortune 100 and larger companies in the e-retail, financial, insurance loyalty program, retail, and travel market segments.

The crucial pivot

The road to Specialty Print Communications started somewhat inconspicuously with a three-person company Adam launched in Plano, Texas, in 1996. A third-generation printer (both his father and grandfather were in the business), Adam slowly started to see that the print game, as his family knew it, was changing.

In 1997, Specialty Printing Company, as it was then known, moved back to the Chicago area and acquired the equipment of a small sheet-fed printer. That's when Adam's father, Paul, joined him at Specialty. The two have been working together ever since. "It was always the plan for me to go work for LeFebvre Intergraphics, the company my grandfather started as LeFebvre Printing," Adam says. "My dad grew to a pretty serious player in the commercial web space."

But when LeFebvre Intergraphics ran into financial strain while Adam was finishing up college, it became apparent the company would be sold or closed (it closed in the second half of 1997). "So technically, my dad came to work for me instead of the other way around, but it's always been a partnership," he says.

In 2009, Specialty was able to acquire many of the assets at a liquidation auction of a letter shop that was going out of business. That he made the move during the height of the recession only added to his genius, or madness, depending on your take.

Adam saw something in direct mail, even though SPC had never done anything in the area before. There was something in the process that he found attractive—developing a program that could help a client get results and build relationships. It was intoxicating.

Before that, the company was in the syndication business, producing oil and credit card inserts. “At some point, we knew that was going to end,” Adam recalls. “Thank goodness we knew before it actually did. So, we decided we were going to be a direct mail supplier. At the time, I was not quite sure how far along that spectrum we would be able to push ourselves.”

What a difference time makes. Today, Adam says that SPC is having fun trying to break the paradigm of direct mail greatness, pushing itself to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of how it helps its clients. “I can tell you this, it’s super exciting,” he says. “We love doing what we do.”

More than anything else, that SPC can call itself a bona fide marketing service provider is a testament to all of its efforts. “That is something we have always strived for,” Adam says. “Everybody in the industry talks about how you have to go above and beyond customer expectations and don’t sell on price, etc., but for us, getting to that point proves how ingrained we were in the process. It’s about being able to help your customers’ customers.”

That said, Adam is quick to point out that despite its prowess in all things

direct mail, SPC is still very much an “ink-on-paper” company. And that’s a good place to be. “It’s always about, ‘How can we make things better for our customers?’ The competition is super strong. We need to always be in the position to provide our customers with new ways to spend their marketing dollars.”

Leading the charge

In a time when more and more printers are trying to find their way, SPC is perfectly positioned to lead the way. “I’d like to say that the process was organized and complex, that there is a formula and we did it right,” Adam says. “But there’s not. What we do is listen to our customers, all day, every day. We ask them things when they’re not talking to us. What do you need? What do you want? Where do you want to go?”

Next, SPC dives in and figures out where the fit is. That is where the inkjet mindset came in. It was a little different—a new frontier that Adam knew SPC had to explore. “I saw it as part of the future. Toner is great. It’s slow. It’s expensive. It was a matter of wanting to be relevant. It’s about relevant personal marketing, and here’s a faster, better, more reliable way to do it. So, if you want to know why you need to get into an inkjet mindset, that’s why.”

When it comes to direct mail, Adam’s take on this is different from most printers. “In our world, we’re not focused on what type of print our customers want to produce. We’re looking at what they want to achieve with their marketing. Once we know that, we can

choose the right type of production and output device to achieve just that.”

Adam says SPC is lucky to be at a scale that it can produce with so many different technologies. It doesn’t have to force fit its clients onto equipment that might not be perfect for their objectives. Inkjet technology is the newest effective output, but it’s not right for everything.

“You simply have to have more than one tool in your toolbox to do what we do,” he says. “And I love the new inkjet tool!”

SPC engages with customers who look like they have a project that is right for inkjet. The discussion begins with the objective, the desired ROI, clarifying the size of the target market, and then the big questions, “What about data? Do you have it? Can you access it? Can we help you analyze what you want to say and to whom you want to say it?”

All of that information is put into its secret super computer and is moved to execution. As for inkjet, Adam’s praise can crash through the ceiling. “Inkjet is an art. Just like litho, the best guys in the business are not just pushing the button and waiting to see what comes out. We work with customers on color curves, stocks and then have some incredible finishing options that are pretty unique in the marketplace. All along this journey, we said that inkjet was not going to put us into a new marketplace, it was just going to enhance the marketplace that we were already in.”

It’s all about having an #InkjetMindset.



Buzzworthy

Why printers are talking about the ProStream 1000



Word is that the capabilities of the ProStream 1000 are worth checking out. Designed for use on a wide range of media, the sophisticated, innovative output of the ProStream 1000 is helping today's print service providers expand their capabilities and enter new markets.

Why? For starters, the ProStream Series is a new breed of fast, high-productivity continuous feed inkjet press that combines the vibrant colors of offset with the variable-data versatility of digital printing. The production

printer is ideal for applications printing at 1200 x 1200 dpi running at a speed of 262 feet per minute (80 m/min) at 22 inches (565 mm) web width. This press does not require external primers or coaters nor does the speed need to be slowed down to achieve 1200 x 1200 output on offset coated papers.

Boasting outstanding quality, the ProStream 1000 uses an innovative polymer ink set to support a broad substrate range, including coated or uncoated media from lightweight to

9 point and beyond. This continuous feed press fits seamlessly into workflows, allowing easy integration into existing PDF workflows, IPDS and PDF DFE, plus it boasts an intuitive, modern user interface.

Add this all together and it means you can now enter new markets by offering outstanding quality, relevant content, and short turnaround times for promotional and graphical applications—with the versatility of digital variable data printing.

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