

SDI INNOVATIONS

This multifaceted company manufactures and manages a range of branded products and services designed to fill specific needs in the education market and beyond. To publish its flagship school planners used in more than 18,000 schools nationwide and abroad, it relies on production inkjet from Canon Solutions America to help ensure product quality, offer remarkable customization capability, and deliver with exceptional speed and precision.



The SDI Innovations executive team includes Chief Executive Officer Tim Powers, Chief Operations Officer Jeff Bapst, and Chief Financial Officer Scott Brady.

SDI Innovations is not a printing company, per se. It's a company that manufactures and markets printed books—so successfully, in fact, that there's a good chance you or someone you know is within easy reach of one or more of them. The proliferation of SDI Innovation's internationally sold School Datebooks is due in large part to help from the Canon ColorStream series inkjet web platform as well as PRISMAproduction workflow and output management platform.



SDI Innovations relies on the Canon ColorStream 6900 web-fed inkjet press to produce its signature datebooks and a range of custom-printed products.

IT BEGAN WITH MRS. POWERS' PLANNING BOOKS

Headquartered in Lafayette, IN, with facilities in Bellingham, WA, SDI Innovations got its start in 1985 at the kitchen table of Sharon Powers, a devoted mom determined to help her children get organized, finish their homework, and keep up with their studies at Lafayette Central Catholic High School.

Her idea was to create a customized planning calendar that would help students and parents better navigate the school year and keep up with classroom commitments. Off-the-shelf planners didn't cut it, so Sharon turned her kitchen table into a command center where, for the next few years, she created and outsourced production of a book-

style planning calendar that became indispensable to Lafayette Central Catholic educators and students.

It didn't take long for other nearby schools to recognize the value of Mrs. Powers' planner. Soon she was making them for all the local high schools. By the end of the decade, her kitchen-table business had become School Datebooks, a thriving small business with close to a dozen clients and as many employees. And everyone involved agreed that for all its initial local success, School Datebooks had even greater potential.

When Sharon's son returned from college, she brought him into the business and convinced him of what she already realized: School Datebooks was ready to expand its reach. The company's products could potentially be in students' backpacks and bookbags from coast-to-coast and beyond. Together, they transitioned School Datebooks to SDI Innovations, and by the mid-'90s, business was booming. Managing this enviable growth meant the company had to contend with new challenges.

FROM A KITCHEN TABLE TO CLASSROOMS COAST-TO-COAST

This is where SDI Innovations Chief Operations Officer Jeff Bapst picks up the story. "SDI is not a printer," he says both candidly and with confidence. "Our niche is creating and delivering custom datebooks for schools. What began with a humble idea to help students grew within a few years to a thriving business that demanded we take a close look at how things were done and figure out the best way to operate efficiently as a company."

Up to this point, SDI Innovations was essentially a design/publishing

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— Jeff Bapst, COO

company, developing products, assembling artwork, and farming out production to commercial printers. As the company approached the 21st century, leadership realized growth would be limited unless they took more control of the manufacturing process.

"As you can imagine, when you're doing the design and paying somebody else for the manufacturing, especially as everything scales up and you recognize the incredible potential of your business model, you realize there are a lot of hands in the cookie jar," Jeff explains.

To stay profitable and competitive, SDI Innovations made the decision

to add its own manufacturing capabilities, scaling growth in step with increasing business.

"The timing of the digital printing wave was perfect," Jeff says, "because it gave us the ability to take more control of our hybrid manufacturing model and deliver on shorter timelines. It was the breakthrough capability that would allow us to claim more and more market share. That's when our partnership with Canon Solutions America began."

CANON DIGITAL PRINTING CHANGES THE PLAN

"We never had the intention of manufacturing all of our products,"



COO Jeff Bapst and Digital Print Manager John Rush both credit Canon ColorStream technology for SDI Innovations' successful shift to in-house, full-color production for its School Datebooks.

recalls Jeff. "It was, 'What can we do more efficiently? How can we keep our service level and still be price competitive?' Doing more printing in-house was the answer."

As a relatively small, up-and-coming company, SDI Innovations met with several vendors before purchasing a press. They quickly realized the commitment of Canon Solutions America to R&D and technology was "a better fit." So in 2004, SDI Innovations invested in a Canon VarioStream 7000 series continuous feed digital toner press. This brought small-volume, quick-turnaround, black-and-white projects in-house, while full-color book elements were still being produced by the company's commercial print partners.

"The majority of our business was basically a product printed one-over-one black," Jeff explains. "And everything was done as a one-off for each school. Our niche was custom. That's what the

VarioStream allowed us to keep doing, but with limitations."

During this time, SDI Innovations also started actively acquiring its competitors, many of which were printing large four-color runs overseas. As the company absorbed some of these new product lines, the company realized managing a more extensive outsourced manufacturing pipeline was a hindrance. "It was squeezing margins and driving up costs," recalls Jeff.

Within a few years, this insight—combined with the inkjet wave—offered the company a way to meet customer demand more profitably for vibrant color, easy customization, fast turnaround, and inventory precision.

CUE THE CANON COLORSTREAM

The introduction of the Canon ColorStream 3900 inkjet press in 2014 ushered in four-color mass customization capability for the

SDI Innovations product line, a move that would be transformative for the company.

"We were an early adopter of the ColorStream," explains Jeff, "which brought with it the realization that we could build a model of high-volume web printing and small-volume digital printing that let us quickly and competently meet the needs of more schools while keeping more of the production process in-house."

It was now possible for SDI Innovations to custom print products for schools at a more expansive production range, one that accommodated typically larger orders, but one that also allowed smaller institutions, which were formerly beneath the custom-print order threshold, to have their own datebook. Along with typically larger orders of 5,000 or 10,000, a smaller school could order a few hundred custom books, and a homeschooling program could order even fewer.



Canon's PRISMA production software lets the SDI Innovations team automate a prioritized production roster that can be easily revised to accommodate last-minute demands or short-run projects.

"We've had specialty schools with 20 students who want a custom book, and we can say yes," says Jeff. "In our early years, our minimum order was 400. Any job below that wasn't worth the layout or design. That dropped with the VarioStream, and it kept dropping with the ColorStream." Today, Jeff adds, SDI Innovations' minimum custom book order is 10.

"It's been great to make our products available to schools of just about every size," Jeff continues, "but inkjet has also allowed us to expand our product line, getting into the full-color manufacturing market."

This expansion, according to Jeff, has brought with it a level of production precision that has been good news for SDI profitability. Inkjet technology allows SDI Innovations to set much more specific inventory projections, keeping them tight and printing for customers on-demand.

"I don't have to worry about over-projecting and throwing unsold

inventory in the recycle bin," Jeff notes enthusiastically, "which would have come right off the bottom line."

During the first five years running the ColorStream, SDI Innovations was able to use these advantages to assume more control of production and expand product lines that made upgrading from the ColorStream 3900 to the ColorStream 6900 an obvious next step.

A COLORSTREAM UPGRADE: TO THE CS6900

According to Jeff, as the tenure with the first ColorStream wound down, "everything just kind of fell into place to know that we should upgrade to the CS6900" so SDI Innovations could stay ahead of its expanding customer demand and product portfolio.

"We reached a point," says Jeff, "where it made sense to go for the print quality improvements and technology innovation afforded by the ColorStream 6900. That was easy ROI for me because keeping those

impressions in-house as opposed to outsourced made the upgrade an easy call."

As an example, Jeff offered that the choice between 800,000 impressions in a day or a million impressions in a day would mean millions of additional impressions printed in-house over the year—a welcome addition to the SDI bottom line.

"The ColorStream 6900 also accommodates inline finishing," he adds. "Our School Datebooks come off as book blocks which are collated, trimmed, and stacked page 144 through page one before being moved offline to our bindery equipment. Plus—and this is worth noting—when it comes to operational consistency and uptime, the CS6900 just runs. It's a workhorse."

Jeff candidly notes that on the rare instance he must deal with an equipment issue, it's typically an issue with the finishing equipment. "Our production runs do not go down



When SDI Innovations upgraded to the Canon ColorStream 6900, the jump in productivity, quality, and reliability catalyzed the company's expansion and diversification into new markets.

often, and if they do, it's typically the finishing equipment that's causing the issue, not the inkjet press."

The jump in productivity, quality, and reliability has also been the catalyst for SDI Innovations expansion and diversification into new markets. It's enabled the company to build ecommerce capabilities for its products. The company's online Datebookstore.com accommodates orders as small as one, which is a boon for the homeschool market and has opened a new sales avenue for some of its expanded, non-educational products.

"Our school planner's typical sales and manufacturing process is very cyclical," Jeff explains. "It ramps up to running the ColorStream as much as 24/7 May through August. Then the off-peak months—winter and late fall—provide alternate production opportunities.

"The adult coloring book, for example, was a wave we caught very early on that helps address that cyclical narrative. We can utilize our printing and internal binding capabilities during

the downtime to print the coloring books, journals, and other products we sell directly on our site and through e-retailers like Amazon."

AUTOMATING WORKFLOW ON A CANON WORKHORSE

Along with the quality and versatility of Canon's digital production solutions, the SDI Innovations team also points to the efficiencies made possible by PRISMA, Canon's distinctive technology brand for production workflow solutions.

"We've used PRISMAproduction since the very beginning," Jeff says. "Even going back to our VarioStream days."

Currently, PRISMAproduction is the press interface SDI Innovations operators use to queue up and run jobs on the ColorStream. Based on the job specs in the system, a PRISMAproduction job ticket file is created then dropped with the PDF into a hot folder that assigns the job to a queue in a specific order, creating a prioritized roster that can be easily changed to accommodate last-minute demands or unexpected short-turnaround projects.

"Managing our workflow with PRISMAproduction," says Jeff, "gives us the ability to stop what we are doing and change what we're running with incredible ease. Everything is in-house and everything is digital. I can make changes from my office, even from my home. It makes it easy to say yes to even the most demanding requests. I've had customers call a competitor saying they need books in two weeks only to hear it can't be done. Then they call us because we have a fast-turn option and can often meet their tight deadline. I've had customers call in a panic because a part of their order was destroyed in shipping, and I can put their mind at ease by telling them we can start reprinting that today."

SHARING A COMMITMENT TO CUSTOMERS AND TO PRINT

According to Jeff, the hallmark of SDI Innovations' relationship with Canon over the past decades has been Canon Solutions America's consistent commitment to its customer-first approach, as demonstrated by sponsoring the THINK inkjet user community to offering the industry

WE'VE EXPANDED INTO NEW MARKETS AND LAUNCHED NEW PRODUCT LINES. EVOLVING OUR BUSINESS ALONG WITH CANON SOLUTIONS AMERICA'S TECHNOLOGY HAS BEEN KEY TO THAT SUCCESS." – Jeff Bapst, COO



Canon's PRISMA production workflow solution and ColorStream 6900 web-fed inkjet press have enabled the SDI Innovations team to expand the company's production schedule to include millions of additional impressions per year.

its "Print Is Life" promotional campaign materials and supporting several advisory boards that solicit recommendations and industry knowledge from both customers and noncustomers.

"Early on," says Jeff, "I was invited to serve a two-year term on a Canon Solutions America advisory board. We were able to meet regularly with their R&D and Sales teams to make suggestions and talk about what our marketplace or industry needed. Then in our next meeting they would tell us how they took our input into consideration and show us examples of what they were working on. Having a company that puts that type of an investment into listening to their customers is not typical, especially in larger companies."

SDI Innovations also shares a strong commitment to its customers and to the continuing value of print.

"A lot of schools have gone away from the printed product," says Jeff. "They may have a digital solution. But as both a parent and a professional, I believe that a printed product and writing things down is still vital to children's academic, social, and organizational skills. In fact, there are several studies out there that show all the benefits printed datebooks deliver for students as they learn, including the important task of time management. We don't think print is going away, so, that's what we hang our hat on."

"I'm always going to believe in the power of a printed product. I've seen the positive impact our

School Datebooks have had on students. Parents and teachers see the benefit, and we have schools clamoring for them. I genuinely feel like we make a difference for so many students. And Canon has made a difference for SDI Innovations.

"We've grown from a literal kitchen-table business to a company that produces millions of datebooks for students in all 50 states and 23 countries," Jeff concludes. "We've expanded into new markets and launched new product lines. Evolving our business along with Canon Solutions America's technology has been key to that success. I'm positive it will continue to be a great partnership."

ABOUT US

Canon Solutions America recommends forward-thinking strategies to help achieve the highest levels of information management efficiency for your unique business needs. Using superior technology and innovative services, we then design, implement, and track solutions that help improve information flow throughout your organization while considering the environment, helping to result in greater productivity and reduced costs.

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- Media and Solutions Lab
- TrueSupport
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- Escalation Procedures
- Preventive Maintenance
- Canon PRISMA Workflow Software
- Resource Center Website

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