

Debunking the Urban Myths of Digital Color Printing

As Digital Color Printing Reaches the Tipping Point, It's Time to Set the Record Straight on Popular Misconceptions about Today's Systems

by Bob Wagner

Which of the following is a true statement:

- Tapping the side of a can of soda will prevent its contents from foaming over when you open it.
- The Great Wall of China is the only man-made object that is visible from space.
- Offset presses are still the only real option for high-quality color printing.

The correct answer is that none are correct. In reality, tapping a can of soda does little to prevent foaming, the Great Wall is barely visible at altitudes of 180 miles and today's digital color printing offers a no-excuses complement to offset.

Still these urban legends persist. And in the case of digital printing, a handful of urban myths continue to hold sway with many creatives and print buyers, warning them about digital printing pitfalls that either no longer exist or are easy to avoid.

Fortunately, these urban myths — grounded in what was reality less than a decade ago — are easier than ever to dispel. So set aside your preconceptions and see how you, too, can bust the urban myths of digital printing.

1. The image quality isn't good enough.

Last fall, the *Technology Watch* newsletter reported that its scientific testing in the Rochester Institute of Technology's Printing Applications Laboratory



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concluded for the first time digital color print image quality matched offset. Scientists drew that conclusion based upon output from the then-new Xerox DocuColor™ 8000 Digital Color Press, which has true 2,400-dots-per-inch resolution, similar to offset.

Further, today's premier four-color digital presses typically achieve a larger color gamut than four-color offset presses. For example, the flagship Xerox iGen3® 110 Digital Production Press can match about 80 percent of Pantone colors, compared to about 67 percent on the Heidelberg Speedmaster.

The iGen3 press and DocuColor 8000 are among several digital color presses released in recent years that successfully complement offset production. Their print quality compares to offset as digital photos compare to analog shots. Each technology has distinctive characteristics that affect output, but the quality achieves professional standards in nearly every application.

"In many cases, I don't even tell my clients I'm printing digitally, and they don't notice the difference because the quality is equal to or better than offset," said Linda Dickinson, director of print production and purchasing at Lexington, Kentucky-based advertising and public relations firm Meridian Communications. "For me, deciding between digital and offset printing is more about turnaround time and costs — and other factors, like printing variable information. We print more jobs digitally all the time because the quality is there, the fast turnaround time is there and, often, the cost is equivalent to offset."

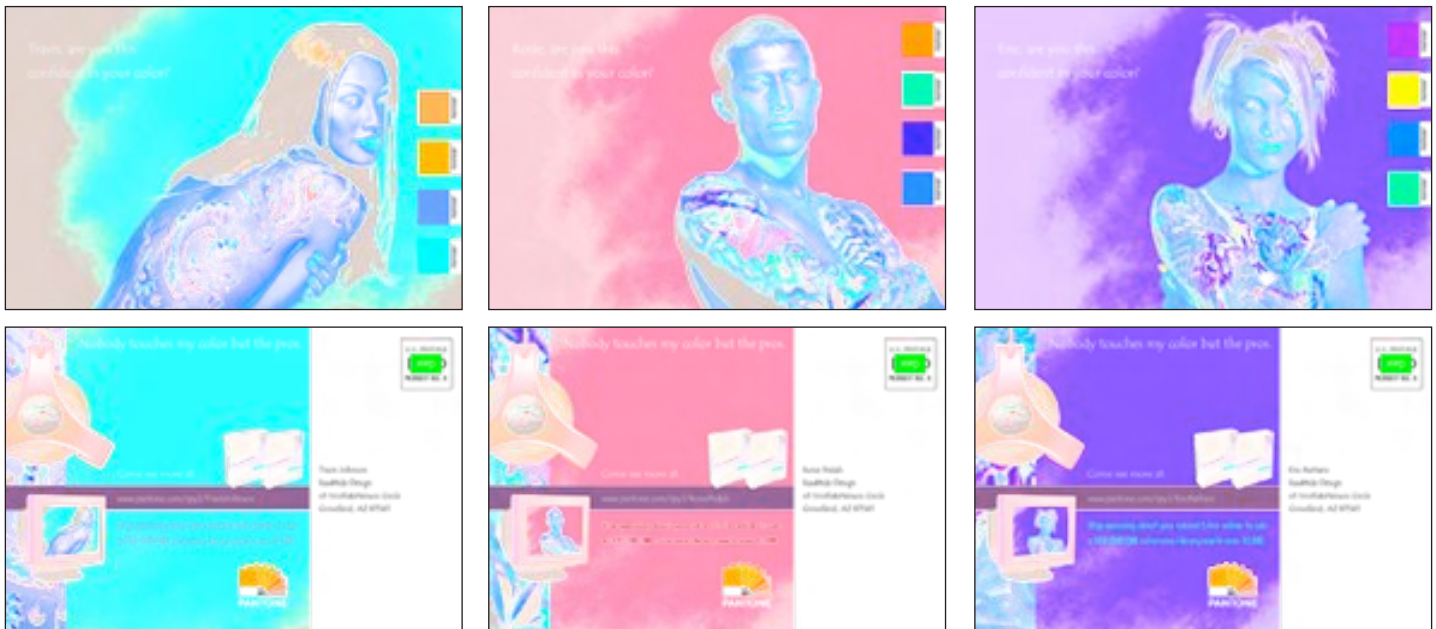
2. Digital printing is too expensive. Besides, our run lengths are too long to run on digital presses.

Offset will always have a cost advantage on longer runs. But as digital technology improves, its cost advantage extends to increasingly longer "short" runs. And many are willing to pay a slight premium for the improved workflow efficiency, faster turnarounds, elimination of warehousing and person-

Smorgasbord of Stocks

This print sample binder from Impressions Numécart, Inc. of Laval, Quebec won "Best of Show" in the 2004 Printing Innovation with Xerox Imaging Awards and an IAPHC (International Association of Printing House Craftsmen) Best of the Best award in the "Best Synthetic Sheet Printing" category. "The winning entry, is a tour de force of digital printing, using the Xerox DocuColor 2045 Digital Color Press to print on a veritable smorgasbord of synthetic stocks," the IAPHC noted.





Simple, Effective VI

Pantone achieved an 81 percent increase in sales of its Spyder2 color monitor calibration device over the previous year's promotion by incorporating some simple personalization in its direct marketing campaign, printed on a Xerox iGen3® Digital Production Press.

alization of every piece in a production run that digital printing provides. In many cases, these benefits compensate for the higher cost of digital printing by delivering big costs savings and better results.

And in fact, more creatives are specifying jobs for digital print than ever before. According to a recent survey, 63 percent of the creative professionals who read *Graphic Design: USA* now claim to have tried digital printing, compared to 52 percent last year and 25 percent in 2003. Most of them — 53 percent — also say they are using short-run digital printing more often this year than last.

Based upon last year's survey, *Graphic Design: USA* Publisher and Editor Gordon Kaye believed digital color printing was close to the tipping point, where many individual decisions combine to create a mass movement. This year, he said, "It is fair to say that digital short-run printing has tipped."

3. The available papers for digital printing are way too limited.

In 1999, most of the available papers for digital color printing were uncoated white stocks in a narrow range of weights, which were about all the leading xerographic printers could handle. The industry has come a long way since then.

First, today's digital presses perform better. The iGen3 press, for example, sets new standards for printing a wide range of coated and uncoated substrates from the very light to the very heavy (60 to 350 gsm for uncoated stocks, 90 to 350 gsm for coated stocks).

Second, paper manufacturers have continually developed new substrates for digital printing. In recent years, many print needs have been met with coated one- and two-sided papers, parchments, off-white graphics stocks for text and covers, and specialty products for ID cards, labels, transparencies, photos and other applications. Just this year, Xerox has added three new coated paper lines and weight and size extensions to several others, a new digital color transfer paper for textile products such as t-shirts, and the first carbonless paper for digital color printing of multi-part forms.

The new carbonless paper for color printing has permitted Beyond Signs & Graphics, Inc. to move its multi-part forms printing business in house, reducing turnaround from a week or more to hours while boosting customer satisfaction and revenue. "Time-wise and money-wise, Xerox Premium Digital Carbonless is a much better value for us" than outsourcing, said Annette Cogburn, production manager, Beyond Signs & Graphics.

4. We don't have the sophisticated data to leverage variable information (VI) printing, which is digital printing's real value.

In reality, many of the most effective one-to-one marketing pieces make creative use of the most basic data sets.

For example, Pantone recently promoted its Spyder2 color monitor calibration device with the company's first personalized direct marketing campaign, using data points for name, title, company, address and industry served. The hook: photographs of extravagantly tattooed models under a headline, "Nobody touches my color but the pros," and PANTONE® MATCHING SYSTEM® Chips positioned as if for a live job. Greetings were personalized, copy was customized for photographers or creatives, and when multiple pieces were sent to the same company, three different layouts were rotated, to generate interest.

The result: an 81 percent increase in sales over the previous year's promotion. "It accomplished what I was trying to do better than anything I've done in the past," said Doris Brown, vice president of marketing, Pantone, Inc.

Pantone is not alone in achieving such stellar results. Today's vanguard digital presses, breadth of paper technologies and professionals who know how to apply them to generate business results are busting urban myths about digital color printing every day.

And that's not an urban legend. ♦

Bob Wagner is vice president of the Creative Services Business Segment of the Worldwide Graphic Communications Industry at Xerox Corporation. He can be reached at robert.wagner@xerox.com.