A trip through time – CTP in South Africa

According to José Botas, pre-press and consumables manager at Heidelberg South Africa, it is sad but true there are still many printing companies in South Africa that do not have CTP devices.

Some of these companies still rely on image setters, notes José, and Heidelberg still sells a substantial amount of film. ‘Those who do not have Imagesetters outsource their plate requirements to bureaus however this does not give the printer the flexibility that he needs. What we are seeing is the demand for second-hand equipment for those that cannot afford the prices of new equipment. A well maintained second-hand CTP device still produces to the requirements of the smaller printer. The CTP journey for Heidelberg started with the first CTP installation in South Africa back in 1997. This device is still in operation producing 16 plates per hour.

When we installed the unit, people laughed when we said we would produce 16 plates per hour. We however understood that, with a new installation and new technology, there would be a few hiccoughs along the way. With this in mind we made sure we had a dedicated application person onsite for the first three months, we had no doubt the machine would be able to produce the quoted plates per hour but a new installation comes with finger problems. This paid off and in just three weeks our customer was producing 85 plates a day. It was unbelievable, even for us. Eventually, after four months they were producing in the region of 150 to 175 plates per shift.’

This led to the previously unheard of situation, where plates were waiting for machines and not the other way around. ‘The word quickly
spread around regarding this technology and soon companies were clamouring to get a unit. It just took an early adopter to test the waters and the market was sold on the idea. From the very first day it landed in South Africa it was a viable proposition but price was then an issue and only the big boys could get involved in this technology.’

The market is reaching a saturation point. José believes, however, that there is always room for improvement in productivity, speed and efficiency and with the amount of R & D Heidelberg pours into new products the market still looks good. ‘There will always be a replacement market and this is a target going forward. Heidelberg has streamlined its CTP line and we are no longer offering Violet systems. Do not get me wrong, Violet was an excellent idea. It made CTP more affordable, our Prosetters did us proud. As a technical person I was so much for the technology it was a simple device just like an Imagesetter. Market demands however has forced us to adjust our product line, we are producing top quality products at an affordable price.

‘The experience we gained in the manufacture of CTP devices being under license or our own products widened our vision and the modular concept that we have today is once again a benefit for our customers, at any one time you can always increase the productivity of your CTP device thus adding value to your asset. If a customer can initially only afford a machine that produces 15 plates per hour, we will then be able to increase the speed at a later stage. The option of adding additional lasers at any stage is a benefit to the customer.

Since the early days of CTP, new devices have become more affordable and some companies are finding out today that they are buying superior machines at cheaper prices compared to the 1990’s.

By November 2009 we were finding the market rather slow but by Friday the 13th, good luck came knocking at our door. On one of the days, our staff managed to bring in 5 new CTP orders (now who said Friday the 13th was a day for bad luck?)

This said, there is general consensus, in all industries, that buying second hand machines is buying someone else’s problems. José says that this is not always the case but there are a few things you should look out for. ‘The number one thing to look out for is its service history. If the machines have been under a service contract and looked after well it should have a lot of life in it. We are actually still servicing Image setters that are over 20 years old and they are in perfect working order. Added to this, with the collapse of the European market there are machines on the market at very good prices with fantastic service records.’

Going forward José sees great things for Heidelberg in South Africa. ‘We are placing a huge emphasis on service. We are committed to training people, making sure we have enough technicians, and ensuring that we have enough spares parts to keep our customers up and running. This is not just a vision, this is reality at the moment I feel that we can only get better. Our business is going to be driven by a young, eager and dynamic team and 2010 is going to be our year.

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