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Long & Short of Finishing

Trade bindery in Pacific Northwest rolls with short-run changes—to the tune of 14% top-line growth in '07.

Staff Report -- Graphic Arts Online, 3/1/2008

More printers are looking for binding and finishing partners to accept projects with smaller production volumes—and quicker turnaround times. The rise of self-publishing and advancements in digital printing have created growing opportunities for post-press service providers who can produce timely short-run work.

The benefits of short runs are clear: less waste, more up-to-date printed materials, fewer storage fees and better cash flow. There's only one problem. The trend toward shorter runs requires significant procedural changes from a bindery industry that still loves long runs.

"Flexibility is critical to our prolonged market success," says Chris Garvey, co-owner of **Rapid Bind** Inc., Portland, OR. "We don't care if we run one job of a hundred thousand pieces on one of our Muller Martini saddlestitchers or 20 jobs totaling 100,000 pieces on our Harris multi-bind equipment."

Garvey and his partners, president Sue Hein and VP Russ Haines, understand they have to be where the market is going.

"Out-of-date materials are more costly than reprints," Garvey says. "We've had clients call us asking to scrap as many as 120,000 pieces stored in our warehouse. What's the sense in that?"

Short-run binding projects generally range from less than a hundred to a few thousand pieces. Jobs call for everything from diecutting, scoring, folding and mechanical binding. Smaller quantities can be digitally printed quickly and arrive at the customer's dock by the end of the day.

From a few hundred to a few thousand

"Like most binderies with 30 or more years of experience, **Rapid Bind** cut its teeth on longer runs," Garvey says of the 34,000-sq.ft., 40-employee, two-shift operation. "Over the past decade, our average billing per job has dropped, but the number of jobs we process has skyrocketed. Last year, our top line grew by 14%."

Short runs bring a host of challenges. Procedures developed to accommodate the production needs of this continuing trend can help companies deal with a flood of job tickets. "There are technical issues too," Garvey continues. "Toner adheres to paper differently than ink, and sometimes we have to be more careful about scuffing and transit damage. Paper stock may be more brittle, especially if we're converting a job that's been through a hot laser printer, drying out the paper fibers and leaving us with a very brittle sheet. Unsightly cracking can ruin an otherwise beautiful job."

The solution? Channel or rotary scoring, when possible.

"Even though we have adjusted to a shorter-run world, we still routinely process jobs in the hundreds of thousands and millions of pieces." Garvey adds, "You've got to make the right business choices though." Short-run work actually needs less coordination between shifts because most of these jobs are completed in just a few hours. **Rapid Bind**'s operators set up and run their own jobs. While set-ups are usually the same for large and small jobs, small jobs require better scheduling and better communication between departments.

Typical short-run mechanical binding projects include calendars, instruction books, manuals and sheet music. For quick-turn Wire-O projects, **Rapid Bind** routinely trims, punches and binds dozens or hundreds of books in just a few hours.

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Sometimes, short turnaround times don't equate to such short production quantities. One recent project called for diecutting 36,000 tabs that arrived around 10 a.m. and needed to be completed by 5 p.m. the same day. The work involved making three dies and setting it up on the presses. The production team was able to streamline the project through several departments within a span of five to six hours and accomplish the task.

Rapid Bind produces short-run catalogs for the apparel industry, instruction manuals for a variety of consumer products and educational books for Northwest colleges and universities. Many of the company's short-run folding projects involve niche mailings with time-sensitive coupons.

Short-run binding projects frequently require letterpress diecutting. Common applications include medical insurance cards, pocket folders and tab work.

"It's not worth fighting the market—customers tell us where we need to be," Garvey says. "Sometimes the best customer service comes from listening, not doing. We're committed to the short run for the long run."

E-Commerce Binding

Its location in a hotbed of software development and video game businesses also opens opportunities for the firm to branch out. In January, **Rapid Bind** launched a new online unit, Rapid Shipping Solutions, which provides shipping containers for DVDs, and an e-commerce portal. Made of tough board stock, the DVD Case-Mailer has a peel off, self-stick adhesive strip for quick sealing and a perforated tear-off tab for easy opening by the recipient. Customers select the item quantity and pay online, with shipping charges automatically calculated. "This is an exciting development for us," says Hein.

"Our DVD Case-Mailer will be the first of many products," says Garvey. "Look for future announcements from us for BluRay, PS3, PSP and Nintendo DS formats."

ONLINE : **www.rapidbind.com**

ON DEMAND Finishing

At the On Demand Conference & Exposition this month in Boston, Standard Finishing Systems expands its automated bindery equipment line-up with the launch of the new Standard Horizon HCM/HCP-1 Case Binding System. With more automation, users can produce ultra-short-run hardcover books with high-quality results.

To produce high-quality finished documents on its iGen3 digital press, Xerox is introducing a new finishing option that creates professional books and manuals automatically.

Duplo's new DC-445 Creaser is a fully automatic solution that can process up to 15 creases in one pass at speeds of up to 50 spm. The unit also has a feed capacity of up to 100 mm and can handle a variety of substrates, including UV coated paper, and paper weights between 24-lb. bond to 130-lb. cover.
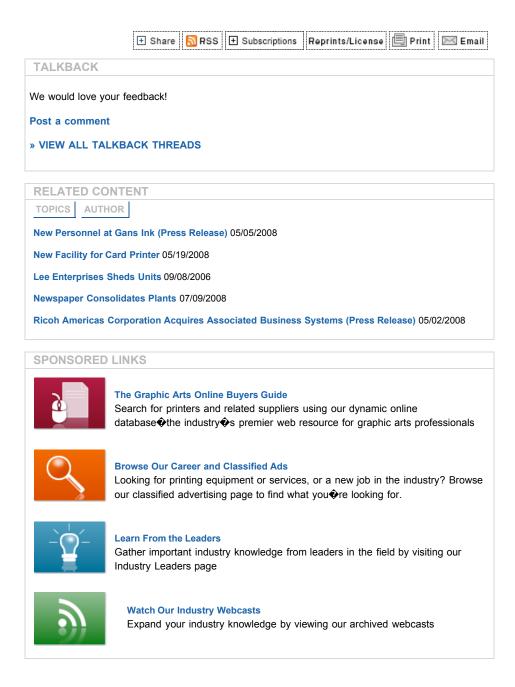
Digital Color Document Finishers include the DC-645 Slitter/Cutter/Creaser for high-volume digital print and the new DC-615 model. Standard features on the DC-445 Creaser include a simple three-step adjustable creasing depth (optimizable according to paper type and weight), extended feed and receiving trays and user-friendly LCD display. Optional modular features that can be easily included into the Creaser unit include an Air Knife to increase feed consistency and reduce static, an Ultrasonic Double Detection Sensor to detect double feeding as well as Center Slitters and Perforator Wheels.
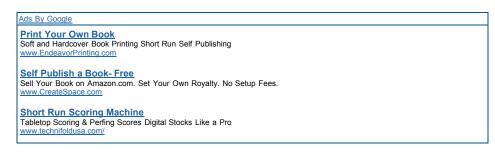
MBO America is demonstrating its Digi-Finisher for short-run, variable brochure folding, stitching, trimming and signature/cover feeding. It also will show the Foldmaster modular line of tabletop folding and creasing machines, which consist of automated and manual buckle and knife folders, feeders, creasers and perforating devices. The automated system stores jobs in memory, with menu-guided control, ability to easily change to a new fold and an electric stream delivery.

On Demand Machinery (ODM) has published a free guide called "Bookbinding Made Simple." The eight-page pamphlet explains the hardcover bookbinding process as it applies to the on-demand digital market. ODM offers a complete line of bookbinding equipment that enables users to produce on-demand, case-bound photo books. The Casemaking System, Sticker, Smasher and Super Sewer (an inline sewing machine) produce quality books in a range of sizes. —*Nancy Hitchcock*

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