



Labs Work the Wide Format Angle

Jack and Sue Drafahl

Graphic Systems Group (GSG) started as a high-end retouching studio in 1979.

Writers Jack and Sue Drafahl set out recently to review the digital printing scene, and to see how some labs were making the transition to wide format digital printing: They ran into problems almost immediately! For one thing, they realized that most of the information they gathered was out of date before they could even put this article together.

So, Jack and Sue figured they better go straight to the labs, and work from realtime data!

LOOKING THROUGH past issues of *PLM* magazine, we re-contacted labs that had successfully made the transition to digital imaging recently. We then put together a list of questions, and worked with four labs in compiling the answers. The choice of wide format printers varies considerably from lab to

lab and may not represent the overall marketplace.

The responding labs included one from southern California, another from New York City and two distinctly different types of labs from our local area of Portland, Oregon.

Our respondents included: Stan Hell-

mann, **Wy'east Color, Inc.**, Portland, Oregon; Hugh Taylor, **Digital Image Lab**, Encino, California; Ken Madsen, **Graphic Systems Group**, New York City, NY; and Al Berreth **digicraft**, Portland, Oregon.

The following questions and answers are arranged by question, then responses.



Wy'east Color, Inc., Portland, Ore. has worked hard to create a workflow for new digital equipment.

1. When did you get into wide format digital printing?

Wy'east: 1995

DiL: We started in 1997 as a test facility for the Kodak PS 1000 36" printer. Eventually, we leased the machine.

GSG: GSG started as a high-end retouching studio in 1979. We became a serious player in wide (large) format in 1994; adding large format photographic, inkjet and phase change processes. All were supported with a large format mounting and finishing department.

digicraft: We pieced together a large format printing system over a seven month period between December 1994 and July 1995. We focused everything on large format output, initially offering nothing else.

2. What startup problems did you incur?

Wy'east: Adapting to new technology: Creating a work flow for new devices/systems. Educating the market on the capabilities and limitations of the new technology and devices.

DiL: Early on, we had problems with ink cartridges clogging. Paper feeds were sometimes difficult, and color management was tricky. In the photographic side of the business, there was a lot of work to do getting customers to understand the process. Several clients felt the inkjet was simply another enlargement device with bad color. The photographic customer generally does

not think in terms of graphics. In some ways, it was like putting the left shoe on the right foot.

GSG: Most wide format printers had a dot or low dpi compared to the high end photographic process: no dot. When proofing or showing samples of the different processes our clients' eyes picked up on the dot right away.

What GSG and our client base had to understand is that for the price and application, these inkjet type machines could get them to another level of using a visual, and that the visual is viewed from a distance—not up close like the direct mail pieces we produced for them in the past.

digicraft: We discovered plug and play to mean plug and pray. Computer, storage and print head failures were common; the learning curve in layout programs was very steep.

The biggest problem however, was the belated recognition that our professional photographer market (80% of our business) was not interested in our 300 dpi product no matter how we presented it. We started with no customer base, no expertise, no market identity, and equipment that became obsolete before we learned who needed the product.

3. What printers do you use in your lab?

Wy'east: Rastergraphics 5442, Iris Inkjet, Encad Pro 50 Inkjet, Ilford IJT 620 Inkjet (Colorspan DisplayMaker 6000), Lambda 130 (installation

imminent)

DiL: We now have 2 HP 2500's, 1 HP 3500, and a Colorspan 7100 8 color 72" machine.

GSG: E-stat, phase change, inkjet, digital C print.

digicraft: We waited to upgrade our Novajet until the 54i 600dpi HP3500 was introduced in the early 1998. By then we knew we needed a machine capable of producing 48" prints at 600 dpi.

4. How do you train your people to work with the printers?

Wy'east: Initial training is done by manufacturers with department heads, who in turn train employees.

DiL: We rely on people who have previous experience in desktop publishing. For a person who is familiar with Quark, Illustrator, and Photoshop, learning to output to a large format printer is relatively easy. Additional training is needed to educate the employee about color management for different materials, as well as the variety of finishing techniques which we offer to customers.

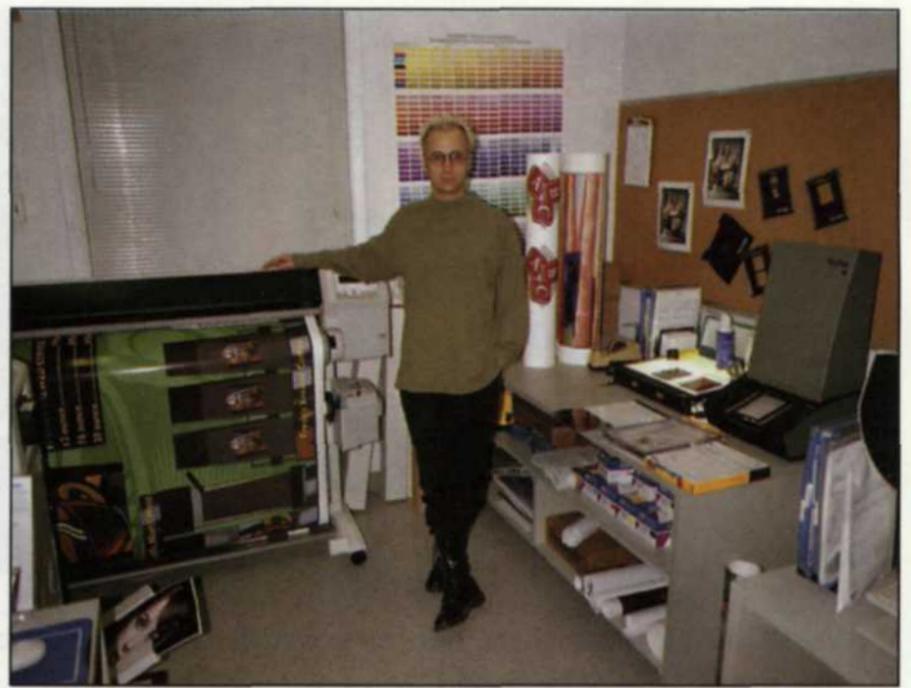
GSG: Training via vendor or other sources: Then we train internally.

digicraft: On site training if it's available. Finding talented people with strong problem solving abilities who can quickly learn from experience on the job is a good solution.

5. What are the digital markets you serve?



Digital Image Lab, Encino, Calif., is mainly involved in trade show exhibition graphics and point-of-purchase signage.



The only devices that interface with traditional services at digicraft (Portland, Ore.) are scanning, and output to film recorders.

Wy'east: Trade show, point-of-purchase, in-store displays, indoor/outdoor banners, museums and interpretive centers, theme parks, fleet graphics etc.

DiL: We're involved in two main areas of work: Trade show exhibition graphics and retail point-of-purchase signage. These are two staples of large format. The market has already been developed by photo labs and silk screeners, so the sell to the customer of full digital printing is not as complicated as, say, working with a graphic designer who may or may not understand the capabilities of large format digital printing.

GSG: Corporate marketing, corporate advertising, corporate special events, advertising agencies and display companies.

digicraft: Initially we focused on our photographic customer base and the emerging digital artist. Over the next two years we discovered neither market wanted 300dpi large format, so we refocused on scanning and photo quality small format output to service them.

We hired a marketing consultant in 1998 and belatedly discovered that our large format clients are primarily larger companies with in-house promo, PR, marketing, communications, and art departments, working on a time demand for single time or short term multiple use of trade display prints.

We now specialize in accurate 600dpi

color repro using profiling and are getting more multiple print orders. We do very little pure photographic output.

6. How does the digital service interface with the traditional service in your lab?

Wy'east: The departments interface well, providing both the customer and us with more options as to: how to produce jobs, and a wider range of products.

DiL: That question does not really apply to us. We are more of a corporate graphics center and less and less of a photo lab as time goes on. The only lab process we do now is E-6.

GSG: When we receive a file and a client needs a large format photographic print, we will produce it on our Durst Lambda at a size from 52" to 100". If they need a print 72"x15" in one shot with no seam, we produce a high res chrome of the negative, and use the traditional option in our mural department.

digicraft: Large format output is primarily dependent on layout program expertise and photographers are Photoshop people, so there is very little interface.

The only devices that interface with traditional services in our lab are scanning and output to a film recorder. We now offer CCD drum scans and 8X film recorder output to 35mm and 120. The superior quality of direct digital Fujix

prints makes 120 film recorder output for traditional optical printing a tough sell, except to reduce the production costs of volume orders. (We find our clients often want LVT quality even for small print repro.)

We are getting some pure photographic play, but photographers really want continuous tone and few are satisfied with anything less. The photo/digital artist is still focused on Iris prints, but will probably refocus on any printing device that offers a lower price when it offers a continuous tone, long lived ink.

7. What do you see as the advantage of this type of service over traditional?

Wy'east: Speed. Fewer generations produced before arriving at acceptable product. Wider capabilities. Greater ability to customize for clients. Wider variety of products/more options for customers. Wider/broader color gamut.

DiL: Versatility in the media we can use is a big plus for digital. Quality typography and graphics is another plus. Potentially rapid turnaround time is also valuable.

GSG: Digital has less steps and can be modified on the fly. Especially with digital, C printing is predictable and even exposure is consistent.

digicraft: The advantages of our 54" HP3500 ink based digital large format

printer over a wet process photo paper enlarger/processor mural system are: space, electrical service is all that is needed, low maintenance, price, color control, ease of scaling and sizing, hands-off production, market flexibility and archival materials.

The disadvantages are: complexity, not continuous tone, requires lamination, competition with established digital providers, short term period for capital recovery, requires niche marketing and technical education, client education and assistance is a constant need.

8. How do you decide on the hardware and software systems you purchase?

Wy'east: Read trade journals, attend trade shows, inquire of customers what their current and future needs/requirements are, talk to manufacturers, talk to others in the trade.

DiL: We look at competitor's equipment and evaluate our position in the marketplace. Costing is a factor, especially as 6, 8 and 12 color machines come out. They use more ink. Availability of media counts, too, as there is only one vendor of 72" paper at this point, for example. Then, we go to a lot of trade shows and poke around.

GSG: Spec evaluation and samples. Also, our client base is pretty smart and savvy to new products and services out there: They let us know what their needs are and we respond!

digicraft: Initially, it was a crash course in trade show conferences and equipment exhibitions. We started with industry hype and graduated to constant incremental improvements to increase our productivity and improve quality control.

Although only 15% of our output exceeds 36", it's always a component of a large job. And multiples on 48" paper are more productive than on 36".

The machine is slow but incredibly reliable—we've worked it 20 hours a day, 5 days in a row without a single print head failure. We've found that the predictability of our color output and the reliability of the machine more than com-

pensate for the lack of speed.

9. What do you see as your future with this service?

Wy'east: We will continue to expand.

DiL: We plan to expand the service as much as possible, since there does not seem to be a great future in being small. The work will go to the companies which have the production depth to get large jobs done easily.

That is not the shop with one 36" machine. We want more machines and quality finishing. For example, we just got the ORCA III, which was expensive, but we feel that finishing is what counts in a lot of these jobs. You can print a nice poster and give it a bad lamination and really suffer with the customer.

GSG: Great potential and a huge growth market. To enter the market you have to know the processes and be able to offer a large product mix! There are a lot of complementary and supplementary services that the client will expect you to do along with the large graphic.

digicraft: I see no future for this business without it and we'll continue to focus on ink-based large format reproduction.

We're waiting to see the next generation HP before we look at a higher resolution machine (which is not necessary to satisfy 95% of our existing client needs).

The only opportunities we see for professional lab growth is in the digital reproduction business. The financial disadvantages of our naive approach are now painfully obvious, but the establishment of a digital service bureau has given us the probability of survival and the possibility of prosperity.

We feel there is a strong niche for our digital services because of our traditional lab color expertise.

10. How do you market this service?

Wy'east: Traditional salespeople, contact existing customers, seek out potential customers who may/may not be aware of our capabilities or the range of products available. Create awareness by placing large graphics on company deliv-

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ery vehicles. Traditional print advertising. Attending/participating in trade seminars, conferences etc. and advertising in programs for these events. Providing information literature and capabilities sheets through mailings, hand-outs etc.

DiL: I think large format is a complete service. It has to be marketed and produced "holistically."

The designer must understand the process. The customer must understand the designer's constraints, and the production team must understand what the client is trying to accomplish.

These limitations can put the sales rep into a training position, but hopefully the rep is building a solid relationship with the client in the process. If the company ignores the holistic approach, the client will suffer.

GSG: Word of mouth: Produce a great job and it gets around, especially in NYC. Direct Mail.

digicraft: Mostly word of mouth and referrals, call backs to existing and new clients, print media directed to the trade, free samples and free demo prints, in house displays, pro bono work for charitable causes and events. Absolute commitment to the customer's satisfaction at any cost. Consistency. Giving the service a digital name to establish a marketable identity was crucial.

We are now upgrading our internet presence with an FTP site to emphasize electronic file transfer and broaden our potential market area from local to regional.

We will tie all future media advertising to our site. We also need to do more direct sales, which will significantly increase sales expenses.

11. Do you have any additional comments to add?

Wy'east: It is important to offer a full range of services and products. The key is to manage the entire process, from creating high quality images (scans) and providing an image management system to managing large numbers of images and providing fast access to them. The ability to multi-purpose images is important.

In production, the key is to provide electronic files to multiple output devices using color management systems. It is also important to offer complete mounting and laminating services.

DiL: I think large format is a complete service. It has to be marketed and produced "holistically." The designer must understand the process. The customer must understand the designer's constraints, and the production team must understand what the client is trying to accomplish.

These limitations can put the sales rep into a training position, but hopefully the rep is building a solid relationship with the client in the process. If the company ignores the holistic approach, the client will suffer.

digicraft: Since almost all inkjet prints are laminated and mounted, about 50-60% (\$6.00 per square foot) is added to the printing revenue on every job.

We discount for volume work, but not much. Price has not proven to be much of an issue. Accuracy and meeting deadlines are the issues.

Knowing the market is of far greater value than knowing the technology—if making money is your objective. Finding the right niche before you run out of money appears to be the key.

Final Thoughts

As you can see from their responses, these labs consider wide format printing an integral part of their business.

Generally, they have all gone through some expensive trials and errors in the transition.

Al Berreth from **digicraft** sent us this note: "I know I had a lot to say, but it's helping me focus on where to go from here."

Hopefully the candid responses from these various labs will help you define your digital focus too.

Jack and Sue Drafaahl do custom digital work in Ore. They are also professional photographers, specializing in underwater photography.