

HP Indigo digital printing technology takes central role in Artron's future strategy



At a glance

Industry: Publishing

Business name: Artron

Headquarters: Shenzhen, China

Website: en.artron.net



Challenge

- Ability to print small orders at short notice, to meet last-minute needs of auction houses.
- Produce high quality print material, capable of reproducing highly detailed art material.
- Enable the business to build a digital archive of Chinese art.

Solution

- HP Indigo 5500 Digital Press for short-run print jobs.
- HP Indigo 5600 Digital Press for high quality book production and print-on-demand.

Results

- Grown print business on the HP Indigo 5500 from 1 million impressions in 2010 to 1.6 million in 2012.
- Artron are now able to deliver last-minute services to auction houses, making them the preferred choice.
- Library of previous digital jobs creates an archive to be commercialised for B2C market, opening up opportunities among growing Chinese middle class.

“For Artron, HP Indigo Digital Presses are not a technology driven requirement, it’s strategic. We’re focused on the strategy.”

– Peter Peng, vice president of market strategy and operations, Artron

Artron is a specialist print house focused on the Chinese art market. Formed in 1993, just as the Chinese economy was beginning to open up and the same year as the first Chinese art auction, Artron has grown from a supplier of pre-press services to, in its own words, “an art and culture hub”. Today, it provides graphic design, photography, text, e-book publishing and Photoshop services to around 3,000 auction houses, artists and galleries.

The business has grown in line with the Chinese art market. From zero in 1992, revenues from Chinese art auctions were around \$16 billion in 2011. Artron currently works with 400 artwork auction houses and has a 95 per cent share of the auction catalogue market.

“Art books are not just books, they are pieces of art,” says Peter Peng, vice president of market strategy and operations, Artron. “We’re not only serving the art community, we’re part of the art circle.”

Fast, accurate print quality

Artron has worked with HP Indigo since 2007. Though offset printing takes the bulk of the high-end print work, impressions on its Indigo 5500 Digital Press grew 60 per cent between 2010 and 2012, from 1 million to 1.6 million, and digital printing is the fastest growing part of the business. The HP Indigo Digital Presses prove invaluable in turning around small print runs and last minute jobs – auction catalogues, event invites – or for colour proofing.

“An auction might have an initial print run of 2,000 catalogues,” explains Peng, “but at the last minute they need another couple of dozen. As we already have the digital files, it’s just a matter of running it through the HP Indigo press and sending the copies over. It might be last minute, but the customer still needs high-quality.”

This level of service, and responsiveness, does wonders for the reputation of the business among the art community, he says. From short runs, Artron has then used the HP Indigo presses to develop final colour proofs for art books.

“The HP Indigo presses are the closest thing to the quality of offset printing there is. Some digital alternatives are no better than colour copiers,” says Peng. Better proofs make for better decision making and faster production, saving time and money.

One typical customer is the Forbidden City Publishing House, as the name suggests, the publishing division of Beijing’s Forbidden City museums and palaces. It publishes art books on the museums’ collections, along with academic titles. Print runs tend to be 2,000-3,000 and demand a high print quality, with a correspondingly high price point. It has been an Artron customer for ten years.

Artron and HP Indigo technology have been central to the success of another artbook project. Costumes of the Dynasty, a gift from the organisers of the Beijing Olympics for the First Ladies of 200 heads of state, and published by the Palace Museum Press, has since needed additional copies. “It’s the most famous artbook in China, printed on HP Indigo,” says Peng.

The future is digital printing

At present, Peng says, digital printing accounts for just a fraction of the business, “but we want to be early on the curve so we understand the advantages digital printing can offer.



“In our mind we believe eventually all printing business will be digitised. Anything that can be digital, will be digital. We’re helping artists digitise their work.”

“The advantage and the benefit of working with a technology partner such as HP,” says Peng, “is the ability to digitise every step of the process.” Artron now scans and stores every job, every image, every piece of artwork it touches. “No-one was doing this. We now have a huge digital library of content,” says Peng.

Artron manages the official websites of 4,000 artists, and digital asset management for 2,000. The expectation, says Peng, is that the vast majority of content will be digital. “Conventional books will become luxury-level products, only the most valuable will be printed. Information will be digital and mobile.”

Peng says the Artron plan is to expand from the business-to-business sector, to business-to-consumer, targeting consumers of art, not just professionals: “We can separate each picture in a book, for instance, and turn that into a product, to be printed, or customised or shared by consumers. A client order could then be printed, on demand, with the HP Indigo Digital Press and shipped direct to the customer. The size of the Chinese middle class and the democratisation of the art market is the opportunity.”

Working with artists, galleries, architects and photographers, Artron launched a website and app in late 2013 allowing consumers to access its library of content. A store opened in Shanghai’s Art Museum, which included the HP Indigo 5600 Digital Press, allowing visitors to print copies of works in the museum’s collection. “We had a few customers on the first, and hundreds every day since,” says Peng.

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“We already do more than print,” he explains, “but quality is key to everything. Print is just one component of our business, mobile is now important, there are possibly others we are not aware of and that’s why we need partners such as HP, with a broad capability across the technology sector.”

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4AA5-0813EEW, February 2014

