

Miller's Professional Imaging stays ahead thanks to 10 HP Indigo 7000-series Digital Presses



At a glance

Industry: Photo Specialty

Business name: Miller's Professional Imaging

Headquarters: Pittsburg, Kansas, USA

Website: millerslab.com
mpix.com



mpix

Challenge

- Increase production capacity for both Miller's Professional Imaging and online consumer site, Mpix.com.
- Respond to customer demand for photo specialty products on heavier substrates.
- Maintain image quality, reliability, throughput and 24-hour turnaround times.
- Expand potential for adding new photo specialty products using digital printing.

Solution

- Installation of 10 HP Indigo 7000-series Digital Presses over a two year period at two production facilities.
- Integrate presses into product specific production lines with web-to-print input.
- Create a powerful digital front-end solution with HP SmartStream servers and custom built HP servers to manage imposition and drive JDF (Job Definition Format) workflow.

Results

- Increased production capacity with a very high level of automation.
- Addition of new products using heavier substrates and stocks with matte finishes.
- Continued increases in revenues based on fast-turnarounds, wide product range and print quality.

“We had customers screaming for photo products on substrates that our dry toner digital printers couldn’t deliver. Our HP Indigo 7000-series Digital Presses are able to; they have helped us develop our product range and do things we couldn’t before.”

– Todd Coleman, president and COO, Miller’s Professional Imaging

Installing 10 HP Indigo 7000-series Digital Presses in a three year period is a big investment by any standard, and demonstrates not only faith in the technology but also in continued market growth.

In spite of enormous changes in the industry, communications and social customs, photographs have remained the preferred way to keep and share experiences and memories.

Beginning in 1939 when Bill Miller began his wedding and portrait photography business in Pittsburg, Kansas, ‘staying ahead’ has been a driving principle. 75 years later, Miller’s Professional Imaging, incorporating the online consumer service Mpix.com, has 400 employees, hundreds of photo specialty products and customers throughout North America.

“Miller’s serves professional photographers and is based in Columbia, Missouri. Mpix, for consumers, is in Pittsburg, Kansas,” explains Todd Coleman, president and COO, Miller’s Professional Imaging, and grandson of the founder. “It was all built from a potential disaster and a sound understanding of the future.”

The pursuit of excellence

After World War II, in which he was a distinguished cinematographer whose footage is still seen in documentaries, Miller continued his photography business and began processing film for professional photographers. In 1970, his studio burned down and he was faced with the decision whether to rebuild, or focus on his processing enterprise, which had not been affected by the fire. Miller chose the latter and today Miller’s Professional Imaging is a \$120+ million, debt-free company, handling millions of orders annually.

“We are in constant pursuit of excellence,” Coleman says. “This applies to the quality of our photographic work as well as to the products we offer professional photographers and customers. We’re pretty much control freaks and do everything ourselves, in-house.”

The list of products available from Miller’s covers all the expected items and formats as well as the more novel, like wooden USB drives, die-cut and pop-out greeting cards, custom printed DVDs, and metal and acrylic wall art.

“Mpix has a scaled-down offering for consumers, but all orders are turned around within 24 hours,” Coleman says. “Orders received by 3:00pm are out the door by 6:00pm. That happens in August when we handle 36,000 orders per week, or in December when there are 130,000.”

Miller’s 10 HP Indigo digital presses are essentially dedicated to greeting card and calendar production, as well as certain specialty items, handling about 50 per cent of the orders.

“We have the most vocal customers in the world, and when we began receiving a big demand for products requiring heavier stocks, we knew we’d have to respond,” explains Coleman. “Our existing fleet of 10 toner-based printers couldn’t handle the heavier stocks and we also knew that our competition had HP Indigo presses, so, wanting to stay ahead, we talked to HP.”

The company now has three of its HP Indigo digital presses in Columbia, for professional work, and seven in Pittsburg, meeting the demand from Mpix customers.



“We have HP SmartStream servers running with custom-built HP servers,” says John Martin, production manager at Miller’s, in Columbia. “The HP SmartStream server handles the imposition and the HP custom-server drives the JDF workflow. They take data from the web in a fully automated operation. We don’t pre-flight anything, which further accelerates throughput.”

The revolution in photography

The company also processes 50,000 rolls of film each year. That’s down from a peak of 2.4 million, and illustrates the change the industry has undergone.

“In fact, digital is about 25 per cent of our work,” Coleman says. “75 per cent of our business is silver halide. All individual prints are produced on our 100+ silver halide printers.”

“Fifteen years ago, we just produced photographs,” says Coleman. “Today, we have thousands of product options and add hundreds of new ones each year. The HP Indigo digital presses have helped with that, and also given us the potential to develop further offerings using features like the seven-colour option, textured prints, digital matte, and other added value effects.”

With the range of Miller’s product line and its 24-hour turnaround times, reliability is essential.

“Our operators are HP trained and capable of resolving most issues quickly,” Coleman explains. “HP is very responsive and knowledgeable. We normally run two extended shifts for a 12 – 13 hour work day. During peak season, we run 24/7 and have a trained service engineer on the floor all night to keep the presses running.”

Differentiation through finishing

Given the large number of photo specialty products, Miller’s has a comprehensive range of finishing equipment.

“Our production lines are arranged by product for maximum efficiency, so the right finishing equipment is near each press,” Martin explains. “We have die-cutters for luxury cards; perfect binders, trimmers, saddle stitchers and spiral binders for calendars; side-sewing for hard-cover books; glue padding for notepads, and so on. We also have some specialty equipment like foil stamping for cards, UV coaters, laminators and magnetic strips.”

“We are very pleased with the presses, the workflow and the service. We’ll be adding more space and more digital presses in the future. We’ve grown every year since we focused on processing in 1970. We can only continue that by staying ahead,” Coleman concludes.

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