

If you think 2008 has been a challenging year just wait until 2009 appears round the corner. This will be the year that really sorts the wheat from the chaff. If you listened to our politicians and financial numb skulls you may think the world will stop turning and we will all spin off into space immediately after the January sales. The impression is that if turnover falls then a disaster will ensue. No, in business we are not dependent on a constantly increasing money supply to provide our mega bonuses and maintain our parliamentary seat. In business our main financial concern is profit. Surprisingly it is often easier to make more profit on a reduced turnover. Difficult times make us concentrate on being better at what we do rather than assuming that things are great because the print shop is bursting with work, we also have time to make improvements in systems and methods. The other aspect of business we recognise has drifted is our sales and marketing. Not necessarily the sophisticated PR and marketing programs but the simple act of picking up the phone and talking to our existing customers, even, heaven forefend, getting off our butts and visiting their premises. You need to be as sure as you can they are financially secure. Talk to the delivery drivers they know who is struggling and who is not. The last thing you want is a client taking a fall into the insolvency practitioners' arms with your account settlement cheque pressed to his bosom. The same applies next year and every year if we are honest.

What happened in the screen printing market in 2008 is my concern in this issue. From my perspective there were a lot of positives. "Is he mad?" Some people may say. If you start from the fact that companies who have both screen printing and digital printing state that they make more profit from their screen printing than they do from digital. That doesn't take into account the depreciation on the equipment which in terms of digital equipment is as steep as the fall in the value of bank shares in the last few months. We have to feel sorry for digital equipment manufacturers for as soon as they have launched a new piece of kit another producer unveils something that competes directly into their target market.

This is very definitely the case with EFI Vutek DS and the "Baby" Onset S20 from Inca. Watching from the comfort of the screen printing enclosure my money is on Inca. What is interesting about both these pieces of kit is that they claim to be after the screen printing market. Really the term should be the "traditional screen printing market." Times have changed and screen printing has moved on. Printing four colour process and its derivatives onto ideal substrates is easy. The result is an optical illusion that can tolerate a level of variability when viewed in isolation that would be unacceptable in precision screen printing.

Screen printers use digital printing to do that sort of work if the run lengths are short enough or they are willing to invest stonking amounts of money on the sort of kit mentioned above and pay the eye-watering prices for inks and servicing.

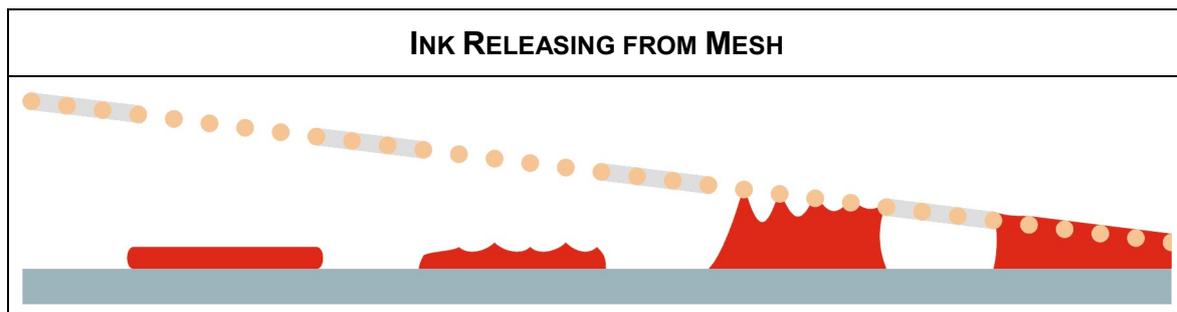
A highly respected leader in the field of PoS production when asked if he would be investing in one of these new printing leviathans said yes but two of them in case one broke down. Being realistic this is not practical for 95% of all service providers. As the majority of printers are micro businesses, that is less than 10 employees. The tools of their trade have to be a much more manageable investment. As an aside the EU

considers a Small to Medium size company (SME) as employing less than 250 employees and having a turnover of less than €50 Million, that is a big company in my book, certainly in the screen printing and allied fields. The full definitions of company size are shown as:

Micro	<10	<€2 million
Small	<50	<€10 million
Medium-sized	<250	<€50 million

I mentioned the term “precision screen printing” in the previous paragraph because it is a precise process. Predictable, measurable and eminently controllable screen printing is a mass imaging process that is being increasingly adopted by manufacturing and used by conventional printers when they have difficult substrates, substrates in difficult operating environments and need precise reproduction of specific colours.

In the past year I have seen more new applications for screen printing than in any of the previous twenty years. These applications range from highly innovative T-shirt printing to electronic circuits covering tens of square metres in area. This very day I was talking with a Professor of Ceramic Technology about using screen printing as the core process for a completely new manufacturing technique. What appeals to users and potential adopters is the flexibility of the process particularly in how it will cope with virtually any material that can be dispersed in a fluid of printable consistency. Screen printing mesh is a development of filter meshes that metre a fluid onto the substrate with its theoretical ink volume being the main determining factor in final wet film thickness. The print action takes place after the squeegee has passed and how the mesh releases from the wet film.



Mesh tension and off contact (snap off) combine with flood coater profile and squeegee edge affect the efficiency of the release of “ink” from the mesh. Stencil thickness and roughness determine edge definition. It is these and other parameters that give the user a high degree of control over the process.

Probably my greatest concern over the past twelve months is the apparent unwillingness of screen printing companies and their suppliers of consumables and equipment to tell us about their successes. There are some exceptions such as Vision Supplies, HG Kippax and Macdermid Autotype.

MacDermid Autotype is one of Europe's leading manufacturers of screen printing films and chemicals, have released a new e-book. Titled 'How to be a great screen printer' the book is published as a free to download PDF file and is designed to help screen printers understand the science of printing, so that they can produce even better and more consistent results. Download it from <http://screebook.macdermidautotype.com> alternatively if you are working through the Screen Printing e-learning course at www.worldofprint.co.uk you will find this excellent publication in the Digital Library. In this publication Professor Stephen Abbot and his team explain how different aspects of screen printing technology can be handled with a scientific and common sense approach, at the same time dispelling many of the myths that surround this age-old process. I can recommend this excellent book to all who wish to treat screen printing as an engineering process rather than a black art.

When you compare this with the deluge of copy from the digital printing fraternity it is no wonder detractors can get away with the spin that screen is dead. New adopters of screen printing have no such reluctance. They recognise the limitations of any production process but more importantly appreciate its strengths. However they are generally engineers, scientists and manufacturers.

When you come back into the "traditional" screen printing area there have been some real steps forward. Computer to Screen in several different formats is continuing to expand its reach. Probably the best practice of process control these devices bring into the print company is as important as the equipment itself. Unless the stencil is correct the process is flawed from the start.

You may remember the success of Signum Siebdruck and its Geschäftsführung (Managing Director) Dieter Jernej. Dieter simply did it right and earned serious profits using SIAS Multiformula large format machines. One of the key points in this company was that he aimed to replace all his equipment within a five year cycle, thus keeping up with the technology and maintaining very high levels of productivity.

Closer to home Top Banana Sports the highly innovative textile printer has blended digital textile printing and screen printing into a service proposition that is very attractive to a market that needs high quality printed garments with a fast turn round. Graham Ridley and his team have recognised niche markets and provided what the customer wants particularly through their web portal.

Individuals like Graham and Dieter show the way forward to others with their mix of technology, teamwork and understanding of the market. Well done.