

2008: An Olympic Year
The printing industry is passing the torch.

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Every four years the eyes of the world focus on a global gathering of speed, style, accuracy and brawn. And for this, we shift our attention to China. And no, it's not for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad happening this month in Beijing. Our attention is on the world of printing. It's on drupa – the quadrennial Olympic games of the printing industry for plate setters, presses, stackers, guillotines, gluers and folders. Okay, I guess it takes a guy whose family has been involved in commercial printing for 140 years to get this excited about ink and paper but please read on.

Football (or soccer) has the World Cup; we have drupa – the biggest global stage for the printing industry. And it's big - more than 400,000 visitors and 175,000 square meters of exhibition area. That's equivalent to the population of the city of Miami exploring the latest and greatest in printing presses, paper, ink and related fulfillment equipment spanning 43 acres in 20 halls set in Düsseldorf, Germany.

And what does China have to do with this? Well, while other forms of printing date even earlier, book printing dates back to the 9th century during China's T'ang dynasty.

SO WHAT – BIG DEAL

Well, it is a big deal. I know that most of the time, writers and editors love to publish columns about interesting – and potentially disruptive – new digital printing technologies. But let's be fair, these advancements will only have an immediate effect on very small number of businesses. However, that may change, and there are some clear signs that it will. At this year's drupa, digital printing's presence was truly felt. In 2008 the number of digital printing exhibits expanded 30 percent over 2004 drupa levels, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the show's floor space. And remember, this is the *printing* industry.

Three years ago, Web Consulting conducted a market research study on why sign business, screen printers, commercial printers and other imaging professionals had yet to adopt inkjet printing. Most of the reasons given reflected the idea that inkjet was a "technology fad" – one that couldn't compete with traditional technologies. Let me tell you that drupa 2008 (the one some are calling "Digital drupa"), has buried those beliefs once and for all. Many who are familiar with, or have been involved with technology development, saw the advantages of digital printing long ago. But this year digital printing demanded the attention of the traditional printing world – in person and producing – along the banks of the Rhine River in Germany's Westphalia region.

My first trip to drupa was only eight short years ago when one had to ferret out the wide format inkjet printers on display. These devices drew circus side show reactions

from passers by who did not even recognize the names of most of these manufacturers But we saw it coming. Or we should have if we trusted Gordon Moore.

In 1965, Gordon Moore, the co-founder of Intel, stated that the number of transistors on a chip would double about every two years. This prediction, now popularly known as “Moore’s Law,” also applies to other technological advancements. Take wide-format inkjet printing. When I started following this market in the early 1990s, most wide-format inkjet printers (if you were lucky) dazzled shop owners with production speeds of 25 square feet an hour. Today in 2008, there are high-end presses with production speeds more than 5,000 square feet an hour. So Moore’s Law certainly applies to inkjet printing. And we haven’t seen anything yet.

BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Okay, on one hand it means that productive inkjet technology will be more available and more widespread in the market. It also means that inkjet technology will continue to advance and consume print volumes of screen and offset printing. It also means that it will be important to strategically implement inkjet as part of your business plan. Just being able to print isn’t enough anymore. In fact, the value you bring to your customers should not be about the printing process.

This year I am happy to be part of the NBM Show program — the **Sign Business and Digital Graphics Show**. During the first two sessions in Charlotte and Forth Worth, most of the questions were not about new technology or about specific inkjet printer models and how to differentiate business models and print applications. And these are the right questions. Business management expert Peter Drucker once said that “Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.” For decades, the traditional printing industry has been focused on being efficient. Now it needs to focus on being effective. And digital printing is here to help do just that.

Stay tuned.

781 words

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Founded in 1993, Web Consulting (www.web-na.com) is based in Boston and provides a range of consulting services including primary market research, an annual series of industry reports, market modeling and forecasting as well as strategic analysis and support.

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