



Color Ink: Creating Print that Wows!

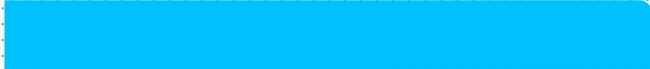
Case Study



KONICA MINOLTA



INDUSTRIAL DIGITAL PRINTING



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INTRODUCTION

Color Ink, located in Sussex, WI, the heart of America's Dairyland, describes itself on its website as a "Cow of a Different Color." What makes the family-owned printing company, which is located on land that was previously the family's dairy farm, stand out is its ongoing focus on innovation and digital transformation to meet customer needs. One area where the company has excelled is offering customers enhanced printing capabilities. This report provides an in-depth look at how Color Ink has evolved its operation to expand the services it offers customers and deliver digital print products that incorporate embellishments and special effects that capture attention and wow customers.

About Color Ink

The company was founded in 1984 when Jim Meissner added commercial printing services to his graphic design business. Today, the 74-employee company with \$16 million in annual sales is under the direction of Todd Meissner, president and son of the founder. Todd's son, Austin Meissner, assists as sales and sourcing manager. Color Ink operates in two buildings with 105,000 sq. ft. of production space.

The company targets the beverage market and a broad range of retail customers, including fashion, footwear, and convenience stores. Point-of-sale materials is a key application area, and the company excels at meeting this market segment's demand for creative and often complex products that are largely short run. Other key products Color Ink produces include short-run packaging prototypes, folding cartons, signage, and direct mail.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION YIELDS SUCCESS

Color Ink is an example of a company that has successfully evolved its business through dramatic industry changes and technology shifts. While the company started as a graphic design firm, it moved into printing to better serve clients. The company started with printing commercial work — catalogs, direct mail pieces, price lists — on offset presses. As commercial work started to decline, the company expanded its service offering and started investing in digital printing devices. Because many of the company's customers served the retail and beverage markets, the company added sign and display graphics and promotional packaging to its product mix.

Color Ink's ongoing evolution in its business, backed by solid technology investments, has positioned the company for success.

Economic variances in commercial print sales convinced Meissner to start replacing the company's offset printing presses with digital printing alternatives better suited to the rising demand for shorter print runs in the markets Color Ink wanted to pursue. Today, only one lithographic press remains, a Komori Lithrone. The company's equipment arsenal includes one Agfa Jeti and two Inca wide-format digital flatbed presses; a Fujifilm J Press 720S sheetfed inkjet press; a Komori Impremia IS29 sheetfed UV inkjet press; an MGI JETvarnish 3D digital spot UV embellishment system; and a Highcon Euclid III digital creasing and cutting machine.

Thanks to the company's digital transformation, Meissner says profits are better than they've been in 25 years and the company is more competitive on shorter-run projects. The company remains strongly grounded in retail graphics, which accounts for about 60% of its business. But new opportunities have opened up in trade show displays, promotional and prototype packaging, and other verticals where the emphasis is on short runs, fast turns, and printing enhancements that maximize customers' investments in print.

Reflecting on the company's evolution, Meissner says, "The technological transformation to digital-based production solutions has allowed us to become more competitive in shorter-run projects."

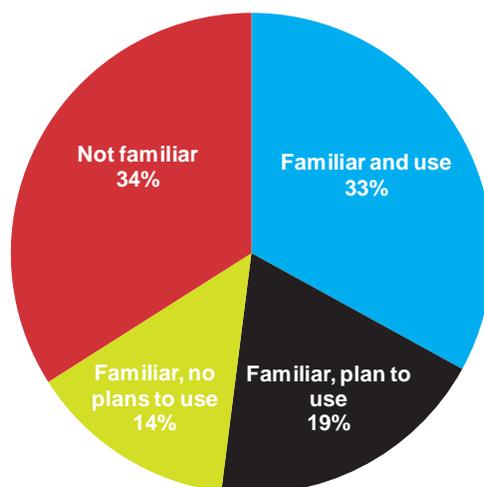
THE NEXT FRONTIER: PRINTING ENHANCEMENT

Recognizing the opportunity today's digital printing devices and finishing solutions offer in producing special effects and embellishments to enhance print, Color Ink invested in equipment that can transform printed materials from commodity, price-sensitive offerings to higher-value products that command a premium. The company purchased an MGI JETvarnish 3D digital enhancement press for adding embellishments to all of the print applications it offers. The device can add raised/spot UV coating and foil on runs from one to thousands.

A growing opportunity for print service providers is offering customers print work that is embellished or enhanced with special effects produced on digital presses or finishing equipment. Ongoing advances in printing technology, finishing solutions, and substrates enable new methods to enhance the power and value of print. There are many options to enhance print applications, including spot colors, clear coatings, specialty colors, extended color gamut work, textured effects, and foiling.

NAPCO Research conducted a study in 2019 titled *Adding Value to Digital Printing* — sponsored by the Specialty Graphic Imaging Association (SGIA), MGI, and Konica Minolta— to uncover the key trends and market influencers driving the use of techniques to add value to digital printing. The comprehensive research effort surveyed various types of print providers and brand owners/marketers that purchase and/or influence print.

Figure 1: Print Providers' Familiarity with Print Enhancement Technology



Q. How familiar are you with special effect TECHNOLOGIES for enhancing printing?
n=509 Print Providers

According to the research study, two-thirds of print provider respondents are familiar with special effect technologies used to enhance printing (Figure 1). One-third of print provider respondents use printing enhancement technologies and another 19% plan to use it, while 14% report being aware of it but having no plans to use it. A little over one-third of respondents are not familiar with print enhancement technologies, and there is an opportunity for industry suppliers to educate the market on their benefits.

In addition, almost half of print provider respondents that offer digital printing report enhancing digital print with special effects, while another 23% plan to add it.

According to Meissner, “We got into printing enhancement because our customers were pushing us to provide value. Everyone can put ink on paper. A common theme with all of our customers is they want printed materials that really stand out in a crowd.”

Competitive Differentiation Key Benefit

A huge benefit Color Ink gained from offering printing enhancements is competitive differentiation. Meissner explains, “We used to be competing against others on price, but by offering these really unique capabilities, in some cases we have deleted our competition and in other cases have dramatically reduced our competition.”

He says that by offering customers digital print enhancements, the company is able to command a higher price per unit and restore its margins.

Meissner notes, “Thirty years ago, our creative solutions were primarily two-dimensional graphics on printed paper. Now our creative involves more structural designs, three dimensions, maybe a unique material or production method, or embellishments.”

Samples Demonstrate Possibilities

Color Ink has many examples of projects that demonstrate the value of digital printing and finishing enhancement. Meissner, who calls the MGI JETvarnish 3D “an unbelievable addition to the mix”, says that teaming the device with digital printing and laser diecutting adds up to a “one-two-three punch” of capability that helps Color Ink win work. The company created (Figure 2) what it calls an “idea box” that includes an idea book to showcase what is possible when using varnishes and foils. Meissner says the samples of printing enhancements gives customers ideas and the opportunity to touch the texture effects.

Figure 2: Color Ink Samples Showcase Printing Embellishment



Many Application Opportunities for Enhancement

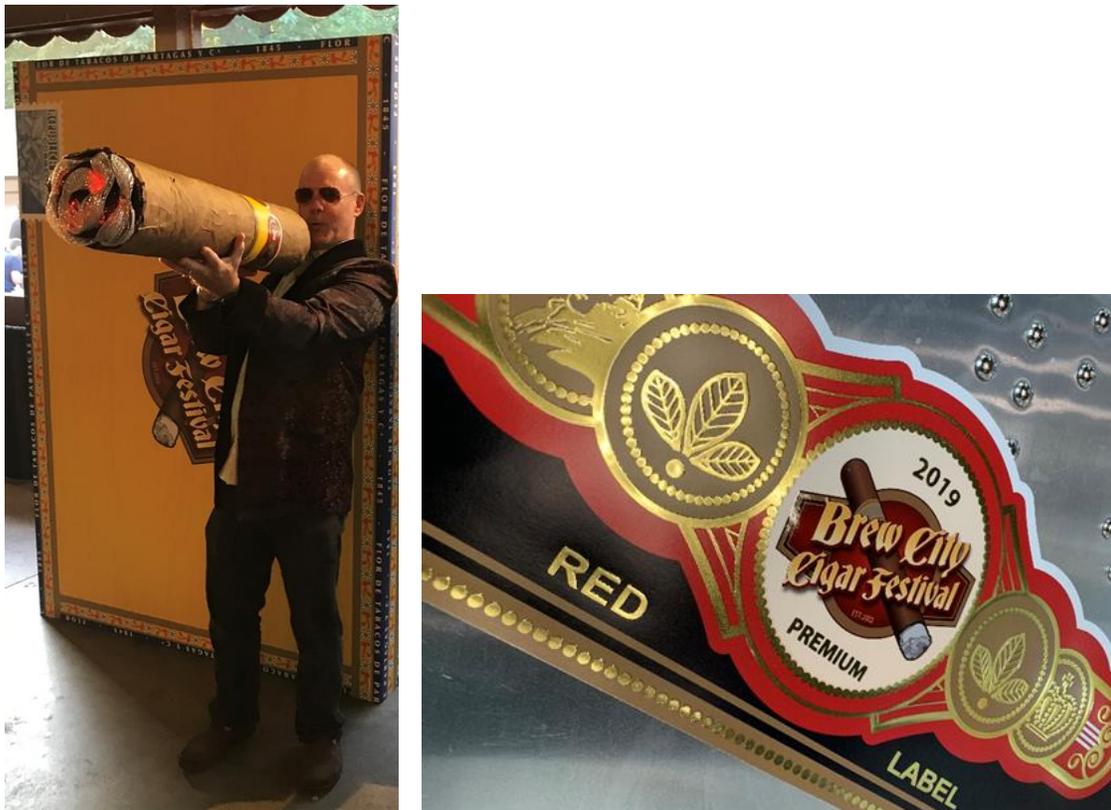
Color Ink uses its digital enhancement capabilities to create eye-catching displays, props, prototypes, folding cartons, and direct mail. Color Ink's digital enhancement capabilities were on full display at Milwaukee's recent Brew City Cigar Festival, an event celebrating cigars, spirits, beers, and wines. For the event, the company sold and produced a comprehensive package of printed materials including print advertising, direct mail, signage, and banners; it even fabricated display tables for the exhibiting vendors.

3-D Photo Prop

An unusual print item Color Ink produced for the festival was a 3-dimensional photo prop (Figure 3). The company created jumbo cigars that festival goers could take photos with. Meissner recalls, "We had to creatively come up with a way to produce a realistic cigar and we specifically wanted to produce a high-end-looking cigar band that featured foil and coating."

Color Ink printed the cigar band on its Komori Impremia IS29 sheetfed UV inkjet press and then applied spot UV coating and foil via the MGI JETvarnish. Only three of the cigar props were produced, but it was something they couldn't have cost effectively done using traditional means before. Meissner says combining digital printing with digital foiling is opening up opportunities for producing photo props and displays, in addition to prototype packaging and consumer packaging for package design firms.

Figure3: 3-D Photo Props Produced for Brew City Cigar Fest



Jumbo cigar prop with digitally printed, foiled, and coated band.

Promotional Product Packaging, an Untapped Market

Another application area enabled by digital printing and enhancement is promotional packaging. Color Ink found a sales opportunity in producing short-run promotional packaging for product launches. Brands launching new products are often looking to put those products in highly designed promotional boxes. Color Ink also has branched into offering product launch kits that include highly embellished sample boxes in runs of 50 to 100.

Meissner calls promotional packaging an “untapped market” for printers. “With the advancements in digital technology, especially on the embellishing and finishing side, we can do so much more than we could 10 or 15 years ago,” he says.

Tactile Folding Cartons

Color Ink added folding cartons to its product mix 15 years ago. Recently, a customer that produces a wide variety of sports recovery products transitioned its four-color printed boxes to digitally printed cartons with spot UV coating using the MGI JETvarnish. Meissner says this particular client conducted customer focus groups that found that including a raised coating on its packaging improved effectiveness. He reports, “The customer did quite a bit of research to validate paying the additional cost for digital spot coatings on their boxes.”

Direct Mail

Another application area benefiting from printing enhancement is direct mail. Meissner says Color Ink produces a fair amount of loyalty marketing materials for retail clients. He says there are many effects that can enhance direct mail.

A myth concerning enhancing direct mail and other print applications that Meissner looks to debunk centers on run length. Meissner explains, “I think there’s a misconception that digital embellishment is intended only for very small quantities and it’s not cost effective to do it in large quantities.”

Digital print enhancements enable Color Ink to transform all of the print applications it offers into eye-catching pieces that capture attention.

MAKING THE MOVE INTO PRINTING ENHANCEMENT

Before bringing printing enhancement in-house, the company outsourced many types of printing embellishments, including foil stamping, embossing, and specialty lamination. Outsourcing printing enhancements is a common practice of many printing companies, as it enables companies to offer these services without having to invest in equipment and staff. According to the NAPCO Research Study *Adding Value to Digital Printing*, print provider respondents report that many coating and foil effects are outsourced to other providers. Outsourcing work enables companies to offer more services to customers and learn more about a service before bringing it in-house. Another reason for outsourcing is that before the availability of digital enhancement printing devices, embellishing a printed piece with special effects was a complicated, time-consuming, and often expensive process.

Color Ink was able to bring enhancement options in-house thanks to its investment in the MGI Jet Varnish. The digital enhancement press uses inkjet printing heads to create texture, dimensional, and foil effects, and does not require plates, screens, or dies.

Meissner says that innovations in digital printing technologies have enabled his company to bring enhancements services in-house. He explains, "In the past, we had to outsource but having the MGI JETvarnish allows us to do spot coating and foil effects digitally in-house. The MGI allows us to do unique things we didn't have the ability to do before, even outsourcing. In addition, it really opened up an avenue for us to offer customers affordable solutions that add value and visual enhancement to their printed materials."

Open House Event Showcases Capabilities

After installing the MGI JETvarnish, Color Ink hosted an open house event for customers and prospects. Because Color Ink believed the device offered ideas of endless imagination with regard to print, the company choose a Willy Wonka theme for the event. In the film, "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory", the title character Wonka sings a song titled "Pure Imagination". Just like in the film, Color Ink invited guests to its facility with a golden ticket (Figure 4).

Color Ink used its printing capabilities to transform its shop into a facsimile of Willy Wonka's factory. Visitors could get fizzy lifting drinks, candy, and even play a slot machine where winners received a Wonka Bar. Throughout the facility, Color Ink showcased not only its embellishing capabilities, but also it's wide-format printing capabilities and general ingenuity when it comes to printed products.

"We were using the event to tell the story that we offer a variety of visual, and magical, solutions that involve more than just ink on paper," Meissner says.

Overall, Meissner reports that the open house was a great success and attendees' reactions were "overwhelmingly positive". The open house brought in new customers and showcased product offerings some current customers weren't previously aware of, which Meissner reports resulted in expanding existing customer relationships.

Figure 4: Materials Printed on MGI JETvarnish Support Open House Event



The "Golden Ticket" open house invitation and samples printed during the event showcase the embellishment capabilities of Color Ink's MGI JETvarnish.

Educating customers and prospects through open house events and print samples are key tools for influencing customer purchasing decisions. Brand owners and marketers participating in NAPCO Research's *Adding Value to Digital Printing* indicated that they highly value providers that proactively educate them on technology innovations and options to enhance their printed materials. Across all buyer segments studied — package printing, sign and display graphics, and commercial print work — brand owners/marketers report that it is highly important for their providers to educate them on new technologies and special effects.

Efforts to Educate the Market

According to NAPCO Research's study, there is a knowledge gap in print providers' and marketers' understanding of digital print enhancements. Looking to educate the market and print buyers on the value of special effects produced on digital devices, Color Ink joined forces with the Great Lakes Graphics Association (GLGA), an affiliate of the national Printing Industries of America (PIA) trade association. Together with leading technology vendors, they hosted an education event at their facility called the ColorUp Digital Boot Camp. The event's focus was to promote digital technologies and their applications, while helping other print providers in their digital transformation efforts.

The idea for the boot camp came from a lunch meeting between Meissner and Joe Lyman, president of the GLGA. Both men believed that an event hosted in a print facility where attendees experience a “deep dive” to learn from an experienced print owner could be a huge success.

The inaugural, three-day event showcased a variety of digital printing and finishing options in a real-world production environment. The boot camp featured sessions to help industry professionals understand digital production, print and enhancement, equipment choices, best practices for implementing, and successful methods for selling.

Figure 5: Color Ink Hosts a Digital Printing Boot Camp



When asked to explain the reason for educating other print providers, Meissner says, “Our peers need to believe in the technology and send a positive message to the market on its benefits. If we all send the market a unified message on capabilities and opportunity, we all win.”

Meissner explains that when lingering “myths” about digital printing’s limitations and costs filter down to customers, no one’s best interests are served. As result, he believes that getting his peers and their print-buying customers to think differently about digital technology and its benefits is essential.

He says, “In our experience, whenever you mention the term digital with regard to print technologies, many customers think it is negative; many think it is low quality and its meant only for very short runs. A key strategy to fighting that perception is educating our industry peers — and even our competitors if necessary — about what advances in digital printing and enhancement are available these days.”

The purpose of the boot camp — which is now an annual GLGA & Color Ink tradition — is to get print providers and their customers on the same page with regard to understanding today’s technology capabilities, the benefits that digital printing and enhancement offer, and future trends.

Lingering myths about digital printing’s limitations need to be replaced with market reality.

Another annual GLGA event hosted by Color Ink is its PowerUp Creative Print Symposium, which targets print buyers and designers. The goal of this event is to foster a collaborative environment, with a hands-on focus on print and finishing equipment. Some of the educational points addressed at the event include:

- How does digital print quality stack up against offset printing and when to use each method?
- What are “digital embellishments” and what are the practical applications for them?
- Do I need to prepare files differently for digital devices?
- What are the challenges associated with digital print technologies?

CONCLUSION

Color Ink’s long history of evolving its operation based on solid investments in technology and marketing has positioned the company for success in an ever-changing industry. The company was named an Innovator of the Year by NAPCO Media’s *Printing Impressions*. A big reason for the honor was the company’s ability to strategically evolve and diversify its operations to reap advantages from shifts in competitive and customer markets. The latest focus of Color Ink’s innovative offering, digital print enhancement, is opening up many new print and customer opportunities and helping the company continue to be a “cow of a different color” in an ever-changing pasture.

About the Author

Lisa Cross (lcross@napco.com) is the principal analyst of NAPCO Research (a unit of NAPCO Media LLC) where she conducts market research and analysis on emerging trends and changing dynamics in the commercial, in-plant and packaging industries, and the market forces that are driving those changes. With decades of experience covering the graphic arts and marketing industries, Cross has authored thousands of articles on a variety of topics, including technology trends, business strategy, sales, marketing, ecology, and legislation.

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INDUSTRIAL DIGITAL PRINTING

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