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At US Ink, RealColor drawing real raves

By Chuck Moozakis
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As print and color management issues associated with coldset printing get more complex, vendors are touting programs aimed at helping newspapers avoid production pitfalls.

Case in point: RealColor from US Ink. The ink vendor next month will mark the sixth anniversary of RealColor, a collection of educational services and programs aimed at helping newspapers improve their operations.

"Over the years, we've developed more services for customers as a consequence of trying to serve their needs," said Larry Lepore, US Ink's vice president of operations. In April 1998, US Ink formalized those services under the RealColor framework. "With that, we made sure all of our customers are aware of what we can do."

Today, hundreds of US Ink's newspaper customers are taking advantage of RealColor, which consists of eight services ranging from press benchmarking and prepress audits to customized training and ink system design. The program also includes educational materials available via a RealColor-branded Web site as well as Press Doctor, a combination troubleshooting guide and question-and-answer portal.

Press Doctor attracts users

Of RealColor's offerings, Press Doctor is among the most popular, said Lepore.

"It's probably because it's so accessible; some of our other services require (on-site) visits or press time. This can be downloaded," he said of the guide, which now spans more than 900 pages.

Benchmarking, training and ink system design is also gaining traction, said Dennis Cheeseman, US Ink's director of customer services and editor-in-chief of Press Doctor. "There are lots of customers that want to improve quality," he said. US Ink specialists will also work with customers that either want to get their SNAP (Specifications for Newsprint

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Senior Vice President of Production,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Advertising Production) certification or want to qualify for Ifra's International Newspaper Color Quality Club. Cheeseman said 11 of US Ink's customers have obtained their SNAP certificates and many have qualified for Ifra's color club.

"New sites" that have just recently converted to offset printing "want to learn more about the technology," Lepore said. "We see a wide range of customers."

Understanding the vagaries of offset was one primary reason why the Omaha (Neb.) World-Herald took advantage of RealColor, said Steve Young, assistant production director.

The paper converted from letterpress to offset in 2001 when it commissioned a GeoMAN press from MAN Roland Inc. In the process, the World-Herald also switched to high-strength color inks and an entirely new way of producing newspapers.

"In the beginning, (US Ink) was involved with the engineering of the ink system and they were involved with starting the system. They also provided training," Young said.

"Any time you start a new press, there are issues," he said. "US Ink worked with us to develop the correct formula and eliminate other problems."

Steve Jordan, the World-Herald's quality assurance manager, said US Ink also worked with the paper and MAN Roland to develop testing procedures to ensure that ink quality met specs. "We check emulsion, water pickup, viscosity, tack and grind," he said. "US ink was very helpful and sent us test inks to help us."

At the Milwaukee Journal

Sentinel, which converted from dilitho to offset when it flipped the switch on its KBA Commander presses last April, RealColor helped make the transition "seamless," said Ken Kieck, senior vice president of production.

Peer review

"They did a peer review of our ink system and helped improve it," he said, adding that the switch to offset created questions that US Ink helped answer.

"We put on training and we used their (press) simulation services," he said.

"A relationship with a vendor is much different today," Kieck said. "You have to forge a partnership that is mutually beneficial. It's worked out very well."

Today, US Ink is also helping the Journal Sentinel prepare for Ifra's color club competition and also improve its overall color management. "They are helping us set up the press and in March we will participate in a process to calibrate the press," Kieck said.

The New York Post, meanwhile, is using RealColor's benchmarking service to gauge its press' performance, said Kris Socia, director of production.

"We're always trying to improve the printed product," he said. "We look at US Ink as a key vendor to work with us as close partners." Socia said US Ink reps helped the Post christen its three-year-old plant. "For us, they started with the design of the plant, everything from storage to the ink pumping system. They took a systemic approach and partnered with us."

Indeed, becoming an ally reflects one of RealColor's key missions, Lepore said. "The key with any of this is that we want to develop a partnership and solve issues before they become a problem," he said.

Yet another goal, he added, "is to achieve consistency."

"The only way to do that is put a concentrated (training and educational) effort into it and we believe these components will help."▲