

SIGN & DIGITAL EXPANDS ITS HORIZONS

There will not be many print exhibitions which feature a skilled upholster demonstrating his craft live during a print show. Drupa, for example, will not be planning this. But Sign & Digital broke the mould.

MORE PRECISELY PHIL ROTHWELL occupied part of the CMYUK stand for the three days at the NEC producing footstools and chairs using fabrics printed on a Mimaki. He had been in the forces, holding down a number of other jobs before becoming the sort of artisan who skills are in demand across the world.

The demonstration was about matching his unique craftsmanship with one-off fabric designs that are now within the scope of any printer able to invest the £50,000 or so necessary for a dye sublimation printer and the calendar press to marry it with the fabric.

And the appeal is threefold. The cost of entry is relatively low, the margins are significantly better than in commoditised offset or display graphics and this is a rapidly expanding market.

THE PROBLEM, AS ONE commercial printer noted, is that the volumes are not there. But nor did they exist when colour digital printing broke into the industry 25 or so years ago during Ipex at the NEC, only a few metres from the CMYUK stand that organised the upholstery demonstration.

Furnishings were very much in evidence, a development of the growth in soft signage that has snowballed in recent years. Your Print Specialists has been one of the trade suppliers behind this expansion and it delivered a succinct message to the show's visitors. In a panel on an otherwise unattended stand, it provided a handful of

statistics: UK production of textiles is £9 billion a year; digitally printed textiles are growing 20% a year, though accounting for just 3-5% of the market; UK fashion and textiles is a strong exporting business, while UK household expenditure on homewares and soft furnishings is growing and will be worth £20 billion a year. The footstool is the tip of this particular iceberg. YPS also displayed the sort of one-off design of a chair that would work in a boutique hotel, restaurant, bar or for a creative minded business.

BUT THE MAJORITY OF VISITORS ignored this message. Most want the latest version of what they already have, perhaps faster or more efficient. Hence they had come to see the traditional providers, perhaps booked to see one of the rolled or flatbed printers that had not been on public display previously in this country.

And to this extent they were not to be disappointed. Sign & Digital reckoned to feature 50 new products, among them the HP Latex R2000 flatbed printer, the Ricoh Latex 5100 rollfed printers, flatbed and rollfed printers from Jetrix, the Canon Océ Arizona 1300 flatbed, Mimaki textile printers and more.

The continuing pace of development in this sector is enough to ensure that the show attracts good numbers, compared to those in commercial print where the shortfall in exhibitions reflects the overall decline of commercial printing. This has been enough

to ensure Sign & Digital UK's space in the exhibition calendar and if it continues to mutate, will keep attracting the footfall.

Organiser Faversham House says the show attracted more than 5,000 visitors, almost all on a day trip, including sign makers, commercial printers, franchisees, inplant printers and Hammonds Furniture.

IF CMYUK HAD ENGAGED THE services of a textile designer and an upholsterer to work on one corner of the stand, Antalis pushed a staff member up a ladder at regular intervals to hang wall coverings, part of its live demonstration of applications in this new area, while Art Systems had a collection of applications covering what print can do for a retailer. Alongside these developing areas, vehicle wrapping, whether of a car or jet ski, retained its appeal.

But beyond these examples there was relatively little emphasis on the applications. Instead exhibitors crammed machine after machine on to their allocated space, making it sometimes tricky to navigate to the centre of a stand. But the visitors like to see and touch the machines and few exhibitors would dare not do anything other than fill every available square inch of floor space.

Materials suppliers are not as restricted and the Antalis Alpine lodge and Premier Paper's film studio stands used the substrates each can provide to good effect. This was a first outing at the show for Premier Papers which has recently brought its range together in a dedicated Display Graphics



Cutting tables featured strongly as these are the way to keep pace with faster printers and more intricate jobs.

division to bring focus to its portfolio and to deliver wide display materials to the sector.

Its stand involved posters, wallpaper, backlit graphics, fabrics and more centred around a going to the movies theme. Just about the only thing that was outside Premier's compass was the gaping shark's maw serving as the backdrop for visitors to snatch selfies with the lookalikes of Marilyn Monroe, Star Wars stormtroopers or Jack Sparrow – and the shark model hanging above the stand.

"The whole stand is made from our products," said Premier marketing director Dave Jones. It included rigid materials, T-shirts, films and wall coverings to produce posters, the backlot wall, film stage and more, including movie memorabilia and posters for a spread of intriguingly named films, each highlighting a product family – Walk the Skyline with artwork inspired by the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line*, being typical.

"WE WALKED AROUND LAST YEAR and saw the range of materials used on the stands and how they were used. We decided we needed to do something different, something to stand out when we launched the new division. So everything here has a tenuous film industry link showing how the materials we have can be used to produce everything related to the films," he says.

It worked. There was a steady flow of visitors to the stand, drawn perhaps by the lifesized shark suspended above the stand. "It's about demonstrating the prod-

ucts and what they can do," Jones adds. And the company seems to have picked up a major contract as a result. And those pictures appeared in various shades of social media, spreading the marketing message still further.

PREMIER WAS NOT THE ONLY first timer to the show. Ricoh is starting to make a splash with wide format inkjet, having first introduced the L4100 latex machine a few years ago. The latest iteration of this, the L5100, was on show in Birmingham along with the TF6250 flatbed machine and the DTG inkjet presses. The latter will be a fast moving low cost product sold via dealers, while the flatbed is a direct sell, possibly to customers that have an existing relationship with Ricoh through cut sheet or MFP products.

"I think we have one of the best stands here," says Simon Isaacs, Ricoh national sales manager, sitting beneath a vast print of a stylised lion in bright colours and white, which like all else on the stand was printed on the Ricoh technology. The challenging nature of the image underlining the message. Isaacs continues: "The product mix we are showing is pretty broad.

"People have read about the technology we have and have come to see it. We want to be part of the mix when people are thinking about new technology. And part of the value proposition we have is to do with white.

"We had to find something different, to

help printers find a niche – printing on radiators for example, that others can't offer."

Existing customers are a key opportunity, so too those delivering print to corporate customers that use Ricoh to manage a fleet of printers and want to stay within the Ricoh world when outsourcing display print requirement. While the larger machines attracted a steady flow of traffic, the fast moving machines were the DTG printers, able to print T-shirts in minutes and enabling an out of the box revenue stream and rapid payback – at least for the early adopters.

"This is the biggest opportunity for a printer," says Stuart Cobby. The market can run from team apparel through to garments for stag or hen weekends, personalised clothing and high end exclusive designs, he explains. If furniture and home decor is a little rarefied for the majority of visitors, everyone understands a T-shirt.

Epson again combined display graphics and direct to garment printing, something that is clearly an opportunity for walk in or online business for print. Likewise direct to object is a rapidly expanding opportunity. A few years ago the first smaller format UV flatbed printers began to appear with jigs to enable inkjet to print a name or logo directly to a phone case or similar standard object.

This has flourished in the years since. A Roland DG printer had been set up to print directly to footballs at one extreme, and Mimaki once again showed its kebab machine to turn a cylindrical object, ...

a bottle or flask, for example, beneath the inkjet array.

Now it has gone a step further, introducing a low cost 3D printer to print the jigs for the UJC 7151 and others to hold the solid objects to be printed.

It is not going to win awards for intricacy, nor for speed and size as it is limited to 200mm in each of the three directions. But this also keeps the price down and ensures that the cost will be amortised over relatively few jobs as well as increasing flexibility for the print company looking for new types of product to decorate.

Mimaki was one of the few to also show its solvent printers, the entry level to large format display printing. Despite the rise

the same core Mimaki Circulation Technology that is used to prevent the larger white pigment particles clogging the inkjet nozzles. Metallic particles have the same characteristic.

The launch of the dye sublimation TS55 as cost effective entry point to textile printing, will set a printer back little more than £20,000 and can run at 120m²/hr. As an option, customers can choose to fit a jumbo reel that will take 2,500 metres of transfer paper along with larger packs of ink to keep the machine running without interruption for as long as practical. "It's a low cost way to get into textile printing," says a spokesman. "We are expecting big things from this as opportunities expand in fashion, furnishing

guard standards for indoor applications.

Jetrix showed three machines at the NEC for the first time, though the 3.2 metre roll to roll printer has been available since September and is already a sales success. The LXi6 which blocked the front of the stand is the fifth generation flatbed in a decade for the Korean manufacturer. The learning from the previous machines is incorporated including antistatic bars and deionised air blowers, a smoother GUI that enhance production capacity, according to national sales manager Ben Woodruff.

"This will ensure that any potential static or debris is removed before printing," he says. "We are finding that people want to print on anything." The company's inks have a big role to play in delivering this.

THE LATEST GENERATION OF KonicaMinolta printheads account for faster production, which on the LXi8 flagship model becomes a double array head offering additional white and varnish along with the CMYK set.

The flatbed machine will go from the NEC to Munich for Fespa, but it almost did not make it to Birmingham. It has been shipped from Korea and had been due to arrive with ten days clear to unpack and install it. This ought to be have enough, even with the 29 March Brexit deadline threatening logistics. But even without Brexit, the printer arrived just three days before the doors opened.

The roll printers were already in the country, the LXi R320 is almost a stock machine. Woodruff describes it as "one of our most ground breaking products in recent times. And we have so many orders stacking up for installation in the next few months."

IT WILL PRINT, AGAIN USING KM heads, in two-, four-, six- and eight-pass mode and can take single, double and triple rolls, printing up to 120m²/hr. Pricing starts from £72,000 creating a new entry point for a printer of this standard, he explained.

Again the idea is to make the printer as simple as possible to operate, something that occurs also on the £40,000 all in 1.9 metre wide version, the LXi190. The width was chosen to enable two full rolls to be loaded and printed simultaneously. Adding to the simplicity, there is an inbuilt compressor, integrated cooling of the LED UV head and the ability to operate it from a standard laptop if required. "We have consequently managed to squeeze it into some very small spaces," Woodruff said, and "because it is so straightforward, the machine can be ready to go later the same day it is delivered". ■



CMYUK crammed its space with machines, but also found space to set up a furniture restoration shop.

of Latex and in particular UV printing, there is still demand for these units. They are straightforward to use and produce a predictable gloss level which some end customers like. If solvent is under environmental pressure, Mimaki is addressing this through recycling programmes for ink cartridges and bulk delivery of inks.

MIMAKI THOUGH IS ALSO offering LED UV with a print and cut machine with a clear ink to create the gloss varnish, spot varnish and textured effects. There is now a metallic ink available for the UJC 7151 flatbed printer, paving the way for proofing, prototype and small sample production of cartons and other packaging. This uses

as fellas soft signage and high quality light box printing." RA Smart will be handling UK sales.

Roland DG is another that continues to work with solvent printers, launching the latest TrueVIS VG2 in both 1625 and 1371mm guises. The company claims 40 improvements over the first generation VG printer/cutter. If one of the advantages of LED UV is that the print is ready to go as soon as it comes off the printer, Roland DG says that output from the new machine is ready for lamination in six hours.

A new ink set adds orange to the four process colours, their light variants and white. The inks are certified to the 3M MCS standard for vehicle wraps and meet Green-