

Front end challenge

Platesetters make money. Computers eat it up. How three printers cope with the cost of progress

"It was never the output device," says Grant Morris, president of Topline Printing & Graphics, of his shop's rocky conversion to CTP six years ago. "The actual workflow was always the issue. Getting data from a computer in a reliable format that you could depend on, first of all into a proof, then onto that plate was always the issue."

Admittedly, Morris belongs to the ranks of the early CTP adopters in Canada—those who leapt into the first wave of pre-Prinerger, pre-Delta CTP without so much as a pair of flippers to keep them afloat. Their tales of CTP's dawning days in Canada are full of workflow-, proofing-, improper formatting- and colour correction-related woe—a real digital nightmare. Given that the nightmare has been tempered by advances in digital workflow and more than 120 shops in Canada have gone CTP since 1995-1996, does Morris's statement hold up? It might be fair to say those early days are behind the industry but is it fair to say those early problems are too? Is it all sunshine and unerringly colour-corrected gumdrops now?

We conducted three case studies. Three printers. Three shops. Each is at a different stage of the CTP life span—a senior (Morris), a sophomore, and a freshman. We discovered that Morris was not alone. It seems successful conversion to CTP, as

our printers know, is all about workflow, baby. All three, regardless of when they joined the ranks of CTP proprietors, found that purchasing, establishing and paying to maintain a digital front end workflow, and not so much installing the platesetter, is at the crux of going and staying with CTP.

THE SENIOR

Name: Grant Morris, president
Place: Topline Printing & Graphics, Mississauga, Ont.
Sales pre CTP: \$6 million
Sales post CTP: \$20 million
Number of employees: 85
CTP installed: 1996
Platesetter: Creo Trendsetter 3244
Front end: Prinerger workflow
Cost of installation: approx. \$1.3 million
Cost of yearly upgrades: \$200,000 or more

Grant Morris and Topline joined the CTP revolution early in the game. The shop began converting to a digital workflow about seven months before the Creo Trendsetter was installed in late 1995. The device was in full production by early 1996 and Morris estimates that it took six months to really get it going and another six months before the plant was just about filmless. The first chapter of Morris's CTP

saga, including purchasing the platesetter and proofer and constructing a digital front end, cost between \$1.3 and \$1.4 million and it wasn't an easy transition.

Morris and his staff, buoyed by grants from Revenue Canada, developed the digital workflow to feed the platesetter, a process that involved writing a PostScript and RIP for every file. (At the time, there were no workflow software programs like Prinerger and Delta.) It was slow going and file processing involved three to four operators using eight computers. Add having to hire full-time prepress staff to fix improperly formatted files—16 prepress operators spent 60% of their time correcting files—and the costs started to pile up. "We really bit the bullet," says Morris. "The year we went into implementation was a much worse year financially for us than the year before. We made very little money that year because of the extra cost."

Perhaps, more than prepress, Morris isolates the biggest problem in those early years (and, in retrospect, he admits his biggest error) as the purchase of a proofing device with a \$250,000 price tag and high consumables cost. He figures the machine ended up devouring \$15,000 a month in leasing and materials and generated, maybe, \$11,000 in proofing revenues. That was a big cost for a shop that was averaging \$6 million in annual sales.

In fact, the installation was far more expensive than Morris expected. "It probably hit our P & L in the first year to the

tune of \$300,000 to \$400,000." Yet, he persevered in the belief that it was go digital or die and saw the move as *the* opportunity for real, sustained growth for his business. While he admits "no accountant would look at our short-term business model and say this makes sense," he contends the long-term outcome justified his decision.

The real turnaround, Morris believes, came with the introduction of Prinerger to the front end and a Fuji Pictro Proof proofer. He installed Prinerger workflow software about 16 months ago. The purchase made a significant impact on the balance sheet but Morris contends it made an equally significant impact on efficiency. Prinerger produces smaller files (anywhere from 15%-20% smaller) than the old workflow, and locks everything in the file into place, while trapping and imposition can be done on the fly. This, coupled with faster computers, means more files are getting processed in a much shorter time and Topline's prepress staff has shrunk to 10. The Pictro Proof cost considerably less than its predecessor and produces what Morris believes are 99% accurate proofs for around \$10 a pop.

After five years, this setup has put the shop's operation on the right track. The platesetter spits out approximately 3,000 plates per month and Morris estimates that the prepress department is generating 50%-60% more revenue than it did a year ago. Of course, the revenue increase isn't all gravy; \$200,000 or so annually



"It probably hit our P&L in the first year to the tune of \$300,000 to \$400,000." —Grant Morris

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF SCOTT

By Lana Castleman