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Tailored workflow revolutionizes operation

Super Color Digital customizes and perfects its digital workflow with new preflighting, digital asset management, and soft-proofing tools.

By Gretchen A. Peck

In the past few years, business exploded for Super Color Digital, and the company needed to find a way to manage the growing number of jobs passing through prepress. The company's management team set out to design a new, highly automated, efficient, and flawless digital workflow.

Super Color Digital is one of the nation's largest suppliers of grand-format print. Fortune 500 companies have turned to Super Color Digital for production of everything from banners to billboards, bus, and building wraps to fleet graphics. In addition to its headquarters in Irvine, California, the printer also operates manufacturing facilities in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and Las Vegas. It has a stable of 10 VUTEk large-format digital printers, including solutions from the 3000, 5000, FabriVu, and PressVu families.

To address Super Color Digital's workflow needs, the company brought in Jerry Robinson, CEO of JPR Engineering of Marina del Ray, California. Working in collaboration with partner All Systems Integration (ASI) of Woburn, Massachusetts, JPR subsequently developed a

solution that JPR and ASI call the Tsunami Job Control (TJC) Suite.

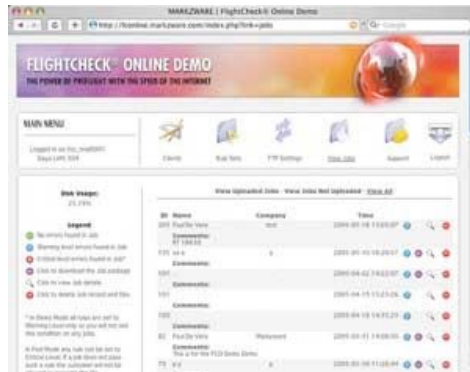
The TJC Suite comprises three key solutions: Markzware's FlightCheck Online, for job submissions and preflighting; WAVE Corporation's MediaBank for asset management; and Kodak Polychrome Graphics' RealTimeProof Partner solution for soft proofing and customer approvals. "Plus, a whole lot of other good stuff we've programmed for administrating the solution from a single interface, and helping process digital files, clean file names, build the asset management folder structure, and automate things like sending emails to the appropriate CSRs when a job arrives," Robinson explains.

The customized solution was created based on some of Super Color Digital's specific goals and objectives. "Originally, they were looking for help with storage issues," Robinson recalls. "But the

conversations very quickly evolved to a discussion of workflow. We narrowed that down to several key issues, such as a better way to interface with clients and get jobs into the system.”

More specifically, Super Color Digital wanted a solution for enabling round-the-clock job submission. Prior to implementation, jobs coming into the shop were typically limited by a 9-to-5 schedule. When customers would drop off files, CSRs would bring them in on removable media, or they'd arrive in the day's mail or via courier.

With the volume of jobs on the rise, the printer needed a solution that would support its 24/7 manufacturing schedule-enabling a customer, no matter the time of day, to submit a digital file and know that it's immediately on the printer's radar and has entered the prepress workflow.



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Besides just providing clients with a transmission vehicle, Super Color Digital wanted a way to ensure the files it was sending were properly prepared, according to the printer's exact specifications. That's where the quality-control features of Markzware's FlightCheck Online came into play.

FlightCheck Online provides a supplier-branded web portal and preflighting solution, and an icon residing on Super Color Digital's customer's desktop provides a digital bridge between them. The customer simply drags and drops its digital files into the icon folder, and automatically, the file is preflighted-checked to make certain that it meets Super Color Digital's prepress expectations. If it does, the file is automatically routed to the printer's prepress servers.

If the file doesn't pass the test, the customer receives an immediate alert, the file is prohibited from moving forward in the workflow, and a preflight report provides specific details about what needs to be fixed. "FlightCheck provides checks and balances for files," says Super Color Digital owner Peyman Rashtchi. "You can customize it to check your clients' files for only the problems that you want to identify before they're sent. Many times, printers receive files that are missing fonts or links. This system catches problems beforehand, which is much better than finding a problem later.

"Time is money. But from the minute a digital file hits our server now, we know that the file is not going to present these issues. It maximizes our time, our prepress staff's time, and our client's time," Rashtchi concludes.

Analyzing assets

The next component of the workflow, WAVE Corp.'s MediaBank digital asset management solution, takes care of managing the digital files on Super Color Digital's servers. "Once the files were in-house," Robinson explains, "they needed a mechanism for controlling those files and managing revisions." MediaBank not only streamlines the printer's asset management workflow, but also helps customers

submit jobs appropriately.

“Many of our clients have several jobs in production at the same time,” Rashtchi remarks. “When they drag and drop a file into that desktop icon, a window opens up and asks them to enter a job name, any specifications, and whether it’s a new job or another file for an existing job. If it’s for an existing job, it tells them which jobs are currently open, so they can simply drag the file into the appropriate one. Then, they get a confirmation that the job has arrived at our site.”

The soft side of proofing

Super Color Digital’s third primary goal was to devise a system for enabling its customers to view and approve soft proofs of their jobs, so JPR/ASI helped the printer integrate Kodak Polychrome Graphics’ RealTimeProof solution.

“Our customers can now go online, from the comfort of their desktop, and proof their files for accuracy. They see the actual high-res images, not just a low-res PostScript rendition,” Rashtchi explains. They view the precise digital file that will be sent to the RIP driving the digital printers. Rashtchi says his customers also appreciate RealTimeProof’s features for marking up proofs and indicating their approval. “With the tools, you can mark up a soft proof just like you would a Matchprint,” he suggests.

When numerous people are involved in adjudicating and signing off on proofs, this online solution becomes particularly valuable. “With a [hard-copy] proof,” Rashtchi explains, “they have to find the time to get everybody gathered around a table to look at it and discuss it. With this, our customers can log in, no matter their time zone, right from their desktop, and review it, make their [annotations], and approve it.”

Rashtchi doubts that soft proofing will replace the company’s hard-copy digital proofing anytime soon. But soft proofing has significantly decreased the number of hard proofs this printer produces.

“There are still some people who need to touch a final proof before they feel comfortable printing the job,” Rashtchi suggests. “But we have many clients that are now using soft proofs to replace the first few rounds of proofs we exchange. It’s not eliminating [hard-copy] proofing, but it’s reducing it to just one-the final one.”

“It’s been almost a year since we started rolling out the new workflow,” Jerry Robinson recalls, “and we’ve seen more than 4000 jobs flow through the system.”

What’s next for Super Color Digital? Rashtchi says that the printer intends to integrate its ERP and CRM software with the TJC workflow. And he acknowledges that it will be important to start a workflow overhaul with some fundamental goals and objectives in mind. Then, he says it will be rewarding to work with a systems integrator and see the vision unfold.

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