

IS THE INDUSTRIAL INK JET RECESSION-PROOF?

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Well, maybe it is, as many of the attendees at a recent ink jet conference in California claimed their businesses are holding up well and they are positive about the future. "Believe it or not we have a few more people at this conference than a year ago. It was the same in Europe last November, where we had more attendees than in 2007" said Al Keene, President of conference organiser IMI.

"The key reason people come to IMI events is to network with industry colleagues and find out about new products and technology - so the fact that they are attending in such high numbers indicates a certain optimism in the industry."

Digital printing and short run printing go hand in hand and it seems that in a recession there is an even greater drive to shorter print runs. When every marketing dollar has to be accounted for even more closely than before, carefully targeted short run printing is increasingly seen as the best ROI. New ink jet presses shown at Drupa using page-wide printheads have enjoyed considerable success in the last 6 months with new sales being regularly reported. As ink jet is increasingly displacing conventional printing processes it is in exactly the right position to offer economic shorter runs, enable agile manufacturing and customisation.

Desk-top product sales may be in temporary decline as consumers delay purchases and make that two year old ?obsolete? printer last another year. But our focus is on industrial scale ink jet products used to print outdoor graphics and point of sale materials. Ink jet is increasingly being used as part of specialised printing processes, adding value. Roger Oberg of Collins Ink told us "although customers want lower prices with the same level of service, they are also looking more and more at specialty items ? security inks, MICR, UV and IR readable inks, and increasingly the use of spot colours. This is driving our sales up!"

Bruce Morgan, CEO of iTi echoes the same theme, "Finding speciality applications is the key. Our flatbeds are being used for a variety of high value product decoration and texturing applications.

And there are so many emerging non-graphic applications using ink jet - such as photovoltaics, where we believe ink jet will play a significant role in reducing solar cell manufacturing costs."

A key technology for these new applications is UV-curing systems, as increasingly UV-curable inks are being used to print on non-porous surfaces and even directly onto products. "Our customers are focussed on the use of LEDs to enable digital print" says John Kuta of UV-LED lamp specialist Exfo Excelerate™. "There is a tremendous interest in this at the moment". David Johnson of UV-curing system manufacturer Integration Technology agrees. "Even with the economy the way it is, we have more development projects than ever before. UV LEDs are clearly the way everyone wants to go, and our customers want to drop new products on the market and accelerate the climb-out when the recession ends."

So how do companies go about finding new and emerging ink jet technologies and components? "If they're smart they'll come to our annual Ink Jet Technology Showcase" says Mike Willis, Managing Director of IMI Europe. "We have our next event lined up for the first week of June in Zürich, Switzerland where you can meet most of the industry suppliers, get some good technical tips from ink jet experts, and some commercial insight from our keynote speakers. Particularly in a recession it's a lot more cost-effective than flying around the world, and I guarantee the food will be better than most airlines too!"

The IMI Europe Ink Jet Technology Showcase 2009 will be held at the Swissôtel, Zürich June 2-3, 2009. Full details can be found at <http://www.imieurope.com> .