

ALL DIGITAL, ALL DAY

TANGO PRESS IS ONE OF THE FIRST ALL DIGITAL
CORRUGATED PRINTERS IN THE U.S.

BY JACKIE SCHULTZ

FOUNDERS JOHN BALLENTINE (LEFT)
AND STEVE TOTH.

Just minutes from the epicenter of Walmart is a small startup that is emblematic of the changes taking place in the corrugated industry, and even the entire retail marketing sector. Located in Springdale, Ark., Tango Press, LLC is an all digital corrugated company. The 15,000-sq-ft facility has two key pieces of equipment, an HP Scitex 15500 digital press and a Zund G3-L3200 digital cutter.

Tango Press is the brainchild of John Ballentine, a corrugated industry veteran who sold high graphics printing for an integrated company for 10 years. During that time he says he observed a major change occurring in the marketplace with customers requiring shorter lead



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times and smaller order quantities. He also noticed that the quality of digital printing on corrugated substrates was improving.

Seeing an opportunity to deliver a different experience than what is typical in the corrugated industry, he convinced, Steve Toth, a friend and former vice president at Honeywell, to join him in starting up Tango Press. The startup represents a \$2 million+ investment. The sole value proposition is digitally printed packaging and displays for corrugated converters and CPG companies.

“We want to be a change agent for this industry and we want to do it in a way that’s not threatening but supportive, consultative, complementary and collaborative,” Ballentine says.

They first began the conversation about starting the company in 2014. Toth admits that previously he had no knowledge of corrugated packaging. “I didn’t know anything about the industry. A donut box sets my experience with packaging,” he jokes.

Once Toth understood the value proposition of digital print for corrugated, he began writing a business plan. He and Ballentine visited three corrugated companies that specialize in digitally printed corrugated packaging — Heritage Solutions, The BoxMaker and Ideon. They were humbled by how gracious and helpful all three companies

were, providing them with valuable insight and suggestions. “All of the visits were helpful on the commercial side of our business, understanding what is happening in different markets and where the value proposition really holds water, and where it sounds great but nobody really cares enough to write a check,” Toth says.

The major differentiator between the companies they visited and their own startup is the absence of any analog converting equipment. “We’ve been told we’re the first all digital corrugated shop in the world,” Ballentine says.

The partners chose Springdale to establish the business because of its centralized location. “You can move graphics pretty far and being centrally located you can reach a good part of the country,” Ballentine says. Also, it doesn’t hurt being close to a major retailer like Walmart and vendor offices for CPG companies. And the University of Arkansas is just a few miles away.

The new company’s target customer is sheet plants and integrated companies, offering them high graphics and extending their reach into markets that they’re not currently serving with their current assets. Ballentine and Toth emphasize they want to collaborate and not compete with other box plants. “We want to support the folks who don’t have digital assets until they get them or maybe they don’t have to buy them because we can serve them. We wanted to position ourselves uniquely so there’s not a threat of competition,” Ballentine says.

To further advance the customer experience, Ballentine and Toth recognized the need for in-house structural design expertise and added Adam McDonnough. Previously, McDonnough was part of the packaging team at Sam’s Club. All three operate

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the HP digital press, which was installed in September and was running full production jobs by October. The machine prints up to 6997 sq ft per hour, or 127 full size sheets per hour, on any material up to 1-inch thick. It can handle 63 x 124-inch sheets.

Based on HP Scitex High Dynamic Range Printing technology, the machine’s ink colors — cyan, magenta, yellow, black, light magenta and light cyan — offer a printing quality comparable to litho.

“The print quality is amazing. We can hold a tight registration that you can’t hold in flexography,” Ballentine says. “And the consistency is mind-boggling.” They recently had to run a job on two different days due to a power outage. It was nearly impossible to tell the difference between the sheets from the different runs. “You would think those sheets came back to back off the press. You don’t have that in analog printing.”

Toth and Ballentine also point out that matching Pantone or brand colors has not been an issue. They ran a small order for Tyson, which is headquartered in Springdale, and were able to successfully duplicate the company’s logo colors. Ballentine says, “The customer brought his own spectrophotometer and when it registered .4 Delta-E, he said, ‘That’s unbelievable. Nobody ever gets that close.’”



THE PRINTING QUALITY OF THE HP SCITEX 15500 DIGITAL PRESS IS COMPARABLE TO LITHO.



JOBS ARE DIECUT ON A ZUND G3-L3200 DIGITAL CUTTER.

"If there's a color you want, we're going to get as close as we can," he says. "There are always a few colors out there where you're not going to get below 3 or 2 Delta, but we're going to communicate to you, 'Here's where we are.' We're not going to say, 'You get what you get.'"

Ballentine is committed to customer satisfaction. To prove his point he spreads out four different proofs from a recent job. With each iteration, the customer made subtle adjustments to

the artwork. Ballentine and Toth ran the proofs on the HP press and sent it to the customer for final approval. "We could have easily said, 'It's your art. You get what you get.' But that's not what the customer really wants. We can provide what the customer wants," Ballentine says. "This process never would have happened in analog printing. We're changing the game as to how we approach problems and opportunities."

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Ultimately, Ballentine and Toth want to become the color experts as well as an extension of a box plant's business. "That's exactly what we communicate to the producers. 'Consider us an extension of your resources. This is your press,'" Ballentine says. "On a per shift per week basis we have 200,000 sq ft of print capacity. So on a weekly basis we can print up to 600,000 sq ft digital so we can take any brown box plant and turn them into a high graphics plant."

The partners are offering their production area as an innovation lab where customers can bring in their ideas or designs in the morning and have their job on press later that day, significantly reducing the commercialization time.

The plan is to set up a coffee nook, couches and work spaces for customers' convenience. "We want it to be a place where people want to come and use our assets as an extension of their own," Ballentine says. "We want to be different. We want to deliver delight, excitement and pleasure and not disappoint them."

Digital Sweet Spot

One mindset the partners are trying to overcome is the idea that the HP press is for samples only. "We're working real hard to communicate that we're not a prototype shop. We're a digital production facility," Ballentine says.

Toth says volume shouldn't be the only deciding factor as to whether a customer chooses digital. "We print really well really fast and stack it in an amazingly tight stack on a pallet



THE 15,000-SQ-FT FACILITY HAS TWO PRIMARY PIECES OF EQUIPMENT – A DIGITAL PRESS AND DIGITAL DIECUTTER.

and have it on a loading dock and out the door. That is all day, everyday. The volume doesn't matter," he says.

Throughout the plant are examples of digitally printed corrugated packages and displays, each with their own story as to why the customer chose digital printing. For example, one customer determined that the cost of cutting dies and printing plates along with the setup times on his analog machine didn't justify the order volume, which was 250 pieces. "Those are the types of jobs that are perfect. When their setup time is longer than it takes for us to print the job, it makes sense for us to do it," Ballentine says.

Toth says companies might find themselves backed into a corner due to short lead times. "Our ability to turn a job around in a couple of days is easy. Four days seems like a long lead time for us. We'll turn two pallets of finished product — shrink wrapped and on a truck — easily in 24 hours." Adds

THROUGHOUT THE PLANT ARE EXAMPLES OF DIGITALLY PRINTED CORRUGATED PACKAGES AND DISPLAYS, EACH WITH THEIR OWN STORY AS TO WHY THE CUSTOMER CHOSE DIGITAL PRINTING.

Ballentine, "If a customer wants litho lam we're talking a minimum of four weeks. We'll have the job done before they could have ordered the tooling. But I think we're also getting opportunities because of quality," Ballentine says.

Ideally, Toth and Ballentine would prefer to have the majority of orders be print only. "Our goal would be to leverage the print capacity of this plant," Toth says. "The cut capacity is a value add for us. We can cut and we do cut well."

What's in a Name?

Why did the partners choose the name 'Tango Press?' Toth explains, "For both of us, our faith takes a lead in all things in our lives; in our families, personally, and definitely our work. A few years ago a trusted advisor and friend told us, 'Following God at work is a dance, like a divine tango. He leads, we follow as closely as possible.' We like this idea of following God's lead in this business adventure, so the name Tango Press seemed fitting." ■

Photos courtesy of Nikki Toth Photography.

