



Volker Leonhardt

The Corona Pandemic Accelerated Digital Printing

If the corona pandemic – combined with major supply chain challenges – has had a positive affect on the graphic arts industry, it is the rising volumes in digital printing. According to one study, the number of digitally printed pages worldwide increased by 18 percent from 2020 to 2021. In parallel, ink sales grew 17 percent, inkjet presses were 11 percent better utilized, and 4 percent more content was printed per page.

I openly admit: the dimension of these growth figures surprised me, too. Although we have been hearing about the immense growth potential of digital printing for some time, the fact that the development has now taken place so rapidly is quite astonishing. On the one hand, the positive figures are based on an increase in the direct mail business (keywords: personalized advertising and customized QR codes). From 2020 to 2021, the number of digitally printed direct mail pages worldwide grew from around 75 to 160 billion. Experts predict that the 300 billion mark will be significantly exceeded in 2027 – which corresponds to a fourfold increase in volume within just seven years.

Local book printing has gained in importance

On the other hand, the book market has also benefited from growth in the digital printing segment. Depending on the source, for example, between 8 and 16 percent more printed books were sold in the U.S. in 2021 – a nice portion of which is attributable to digital printing. There are several reasons for this growth. It is undoubtedly due to some TV fatigue and reading on tablets or cell phones. However, I also recall the increasing success of self-publishers. Many books can only come onto the market at all these days because digital printing eliminates the

publishing risk – in other words, the capital-intensive first print run.

But it also has to do with the fact that the disruption of supply chains has made it more expensive to procure books printed in Asia. For example, container-shipping costs increased three to four times in 2021, and shipping delays often make it impractical to have books produced in Asia. As a result, local book printing has regained importance in the U.S. and Europe. In addition, because of the limited availability of offset presses, inkjet technology has benefited from the growth of the book market.

Customers want books fast

Add to this the fact that publishers are running down their inventories as much as possible to reduce their costs. In addition, reprints and backlist titles can only be produced cost-effectively using digital printing. Furthermore, on-demand printing of books makes a significant contribution to conserving resources. There is no stockpiling, no need to destroy unsold books, and no warehousing costs.

The fact that a significant portion of the books in the U.S. are now ordered from Amazon and digitally printed by the global online mail order company naturally also has an impact on traditional booksellers. Because customers are used to books being delivered to their homes within a day or two, books purchased in bookstores are also increasingly printed digitally on demand.

Automation as an answer to the shortage of skilled workers

There is another argument in favor of digital printing: the immense shortage of skilled workers is expanding into a global challenge. Because it is becoming increasingly difficult to find qualified specialists in our industry, there is only one motto: automation. The smart factory will therefore continue to gain in importance. Manual intervention will be minimized, and the production workflow from the digital press to manufacturing will be automated. With our Finishing 4.0 solutions, we at Muller Martini are therefore right on trend!

Therefore, the corona crisis not only disrupted the lives of many people, but also accelerated the growth of digital printing in a way that hardly anyone anticipated. The shortage of labor, the instability of paper supply chains and the associated rising cost of paper, as well as automation, are driving printing toward inkjet technology more than ever before. So, it's clear to me that when we look back at the pandemic in a few years, we'll see it as a digital printing accelerator.

Yours

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On the global paper market crisis, also read this [blog](#) on the Muller Martini website.