

PRINT-ON-DEMAND:

THE NEXT STEP FOR FRAME SHOPS?

PART I: A FULL-SERVICE ON-LINE SYSTEM

by Patrick Sarver

Digital print-on-demand systems offer inventory-free print sales for frame shops—plus some exciting new business opportunities. If the idea of owning your own digital printer seems a little daunting, you should nonetheless take a look at the possibilities. The move can make economic sense, allowing you to print your own digital posters instead of buying them from art publishers. The idea is that you can eliminate or reduce your print inventory by doing prints on demand. It can also give you a way to scan your customers' photos and turn them into prints for framing.

In the past few years, digital printing has advanced at a rapid pace, which means that many frame shops can now afford a digital printer that produces quality prints. An increasing number of images are available for digital reproduction. Plus, the current crop of systems is being designed to make art printing as easy as possible.

There are essentially three methods of setting up a print-on-demand digital printing system. The first is an on-line system, in which the images are stored at a remote server and delivered through the Internet. The second is the closed-

box system, in which the images are stored either on a CD or in the internal memory of the system's processor. And the third is scan-to-print, in which you can scan an image in your shop then print it on your digital printer. (The closed-box system and scan-to-print options will be covered in an upcoming article.)

An on-line system is linked to images through the Internet, with access provided only to authorized dealers. Orders are placed through any PC or Mac hooked up to the net. Images that are ordered are transmitted to a separate "box" that translates and sends them to the printer. Images, including the addition of new ones to the system, are managed at the site of the company

providing the service.

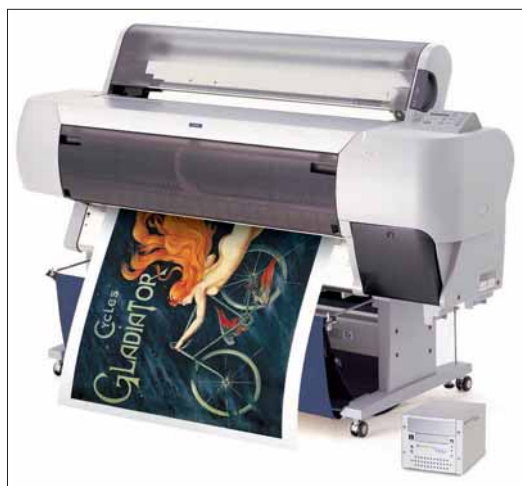
A closed-box system operates as a standalone in your shop, and any changes or additions to the images provided are made to the hardware or the CD itself. There are usually a set number of images provided with the system. Everything is pre-loaded in that box. Images that are provided on CD can be subject to unauthorized copying, however, which means you need to keep the disk secure.

Scan-to-print can be added to both the on-line and the closed-box systems, and it generally requires a separate scanner and computer workstation with image-editing software, such as Adobe Photoshop. The print quality depends on the level of the scanner and your ability to use

Adobe Photoshop. Since both closed-box and on-line systems have a database of high-resolution, professionally scanned images, their image quality and resolution are usually better than those produced by scan-to-print.

ON-LINE SYSTEMS

Currently, there is only one company providing an on-line print-on-demand service: Brightcube Solutions of El Segundo, CA. "Our system delivers images through a broad-



With a print-on-demand system, you can offer art images quickly and keep less inventory in your shop.

band DSL or cable line from our servers to a printer in a frame shop," says Elizabeth Wenner, vice president of Internet development. "Customers can look at the images in the data bank, either online, in a catalog, or from prints on the wall. Using an existing computer, a shop can then request an image, specifying the print size and the paper or canvas that will be used for that print. That image then travels electronically in an encrypted digital format to the Brightcube box in the shop. The box then attaches the right color profile to that file, processes the image, and feeds the data to the printer."

"The printer will start printing without the owner having to do anything other than loading the paper," Wenner continues. "Depending on the size of the file, it will start printing in two to 15 minutes. Depending on the printer, the print could be done in 20 minutes. And because the Brightcube box color manages the image to match the printer and inks being used, they can get consistent prints every time. We can remotely change and update images, print sizes, and printer profiles. We also have a system for reporting on the number of prints made."

Brightcube profiles its images for five different printers: the Encad 736 Novajet, the Muto 3000 series, the HP 5000 series, the Epson 7500 and 10000, and the Roland eight-color Hi-Fi Jet. "We're also looking at adding the Encad 880," says Wenner. "It has adjustable print heads that allow you to do some exciting point of purchase opportunities—and it prints on thick, rigid board, including matboard."

This system currently offers a

selection of about 1,000 images from leading publishers, with more being added on a regular basis. The database also contains images from individual artists, including hundreds of photographic images. "In addition, there are about 150 free promotional images that have no usage fees. Another 1,500 images are in the queue, as the staff does the necessary electronic preparation work," says Wenner.

To protect these images, the company's network server operates in a secure environment through a virtual private network. It has multiple authentication processes, firewalls, user ID passwords, and encrypted images.

Brightcube cites a number of advantages for its on-line system of print ordering and printing for frame shop owners:

No print inventory— or shipping costs

"Frame shop owners dislike inventory or having to pay for two pieces when they only need one," says Brightcube President Al Marco. "You have dollars tied up in inventory that has never been slated for sale, with the possibility of damage to those prints, so managing the inventory is also a risk. With print-on-demand, you have no inventory to manage."

Expanding this idea, this summer, Brightcube will also begin offering printable matboard. "It won't be necessary for frame shops to stock all the different colors of matboard, just white or cream," says Wenner. "You can use an Epson 10000 or Encad 880 for four-ply matboard; the Roland can handle two-ply."

Availability of different print sizes

"With poster catalogs, there is typi-

cally only one size and one paper," says Wenner. "With Brightcube, you have four or five sizes to choose from, ranging from 16"x20" up to 30"x40". Very often, a customer will love an image but say that it's the wrong size. With this system, your chances of selling to that customer are increased."

Choice of various substrates

Brightcube offers two different types of poster paper, Prophoto Gloss and Prophoto Silk; a watercolor-like art paper called Eclipse Satine; and the Arno Smooth and Textured Art canvases, which do not need a coating. "You're no longer limited to just one paper," says Wenner. "Our Eclipse Satine just won Best of Show award for ink-jet paper at the Digital Printing Industry Association Show."

Opportunities to upsell framing

"When you frame a poster, it's going to be a \$99 frame job, typically," says Marco. "If you frame a canvas, that's going to be more in the range of a \$300 to \$500 frame job. So the opportunity to increase the average retail by suggesting printing on canvas is significant."

Ability to print free samples

"One great selling feature is that the framer can print out a sample print without being charged," says Wenner. "The only way to see what a real poster from a catalog looks like is to order the actual, full-size poster. With Brightcube, a shop owner can print samples, typically in the 16"x20" size. The images are watermarked with the word "sample." A customer with a fabric sample can request a sample image and compare it in person to see if it's a real match."

Customers can print samples at no charge before they decide on which paper and size they want. The framer pays for the cost of materials.

Low price on materials

"We make our own papers," says Wenner. "So shops get excellent pricing. We have new poster paper that lets shop owners print their own 24" x 36" posters for less than \$2. With the usage fees, it costs \$7 to \$10 to make a print from the image bank on poster paper. You'll pay a little more for an art-paper image and a little bit more than that when you print on canvas. But there's also more perceived value in prints on art paper and especially on canvas."

Users of this system can also upload their own images for printing. "If frame shops or galleries are interested in publishing their own prints or those of artists they have relationships with," says Marco, "Brightcube technology enables them to create editions in different sizes."

The user sends in a high-resolution, digitized image file on CD to the company. Wenner explains, "We'll edit the image into the different sizes and make sure it is profiled to print on the various media choices. This takes about a week. Most people have the images drum-scanned or with a high-resolution flatbed scanner or direct capture digital camera comparable to those used by professional digital studios. We want high-quality file for quality output. Only the frame shop sending the image would have access to it through the personal image portion of the website."

Another aspect of the Brightcube system is that it offers a selection of point of purchase and point of sale

marketing materials. "If you go into the 'my account' section on the Brightcube site, you can see the pre-made marketing materials that are available," says Wenner. "There are sales signs, clearance signs, Brightcube Solutions dealer signage, tabletop signs, and banners. Promotional materials are available to shop owners on demand, including seasonal materials. You can customize all these with your own gallery name," she adds.

Frame shops can use the banners along with the printing capabilities to create some interesting marketing materials, says Marco. "For example, people can come in or walk by a gallery or frame shop where they see a banner that says, 'You'll like our framing even more when we tell you that the art is free.' They make \$100, \$200, maybe even \$300 on framing. So if the art is free, who cares, because it costs \$6 to \$12 to print. And it could be done on canvas and the customer would be tickled pink. This is a new way of making money. If signs like that bring in one new customer a month, the machine has paid for itself for the year."

For the framer looking to expand his or her services, a print-on-demand system can be a promising choice. Wenner says, "You can turn the images you send to us and print them as a fine art book in addition to, or instead of, printing them as posters. Items like gift certificates or newsletters can also be done on a separate workstation and printed on your printer.

"By talking to galleries and frame shops, I have learned that they appreciate the opportunity to make more money using any system that makes sense to them," says Al Marco, presi-

dent. "The ability to buy a wide-format printer as low as \$4,000 to print their banners and signage in addition to posters without the expense of inventory is really important to them. From our perspective, we really don't care which machine people buy or use. We just want them to be happy."

"We do have rental programs, leasing programs, and outright purchase programs for printers," says Wenner. "Roland has put together a great rental program for us, for example. You can get into a top-of-the-line printer for \$300 a month. For Roland printers, we refer customers to their distributors. For other printers, we will sell or lease at the standard prices they would pay through other channels. For example, we are dealers for Epson. For Encad or HP, we sell direct or will send you to a distributor."

"If framers attend an industry show, they can play with the equipment and see how it works," says Marco. "I like to think of our system as training wheels into digital," he adds. "It allows shop owners and galleries to do their own giclées and become knowledgeable about the equipment. Once they have the equipment, they can also plug in Photoshop and do it themselves. We're not just a training wheel company, of course, because this system has been pretty sophisticated to create, but it allows framers to get comfortable with the technology." ■

Next Time: Closed-Box Systems and Scan-to-Print