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Biggest printer of inserts in Germany counts on Avalon VLF thermal platesetter for efficient printing in XXL formats

For nearly three years now, the well-known web offset printing company Kraft-Schlötels has been using a Lithoman 80-page twin-web press. A second 160-page high-volume machine is to follow shortly. For the efficient and reliable imaging of the corresponding large printing plates, an Avalon N40-70 VLF thermal platesetter from Agfa Graphics is used at the Wassenberg site.

Lars Liebenow, Pre-Press Department Head, KS Kraft-Schlötels GmbH, in front of the Avalon N40-70 by Agfa Graphics

WKS, the company that arose from the 2009 merger of Westend Druckereibetriebe in Essen and Kraft-Schlötels GmbH in Wassenberg, has become one of the leading web offset printing companies in Central Europe, as well as the biggest printer of inserts in Germany. The company, which employs about 335 workers at the two sites, specialises primarily in high-quality high-volume web offset printing and serves customers in all European countries. Its printing equipment includes eight high-performance web presses with 32 to 160 pages by manroland web systems.

Before the Lithoman 80-page twin-web press was installed, Kraft-Schlötels exclusively used printing equipment up to 1.98 m width. With the installation of the 160-page machine featuring a total paper width of 4.5 m, also the pre-press was forced to adapt to the new dimensions; the existing pre-press stage could not handle platesetting at that size, as its platesetters were exclusively designed for smaller formats. For this reason, the company was looking for an appropriate CtP system for imaging large-format printing plates. It was easy to define the main parameters and requirements for the new system: The Wassenberg site had always relied on thermal technology, and the company wanted to stay with it in the future. During the evaluation phase, the team at Kraft-Schlötels extensively reviewed the respective offers of three possible vendors for the required plate format.

"Altogether, three overall concepts by various CtP vendors were submitted for evaluation, and Agfa Graphics' offer ultimately proved the most convincing and has provided, in collaboration with Systemhaus Steuber, the most conclusive overall concept," explains Holger Backes, Director of Project Development at WKS Print Partner GmbH, when asked why Agfa Graphics was chosen for the investment. "The technological aspects of the platesetter itself met all of our requirements. Moreover, the service component was an extremely important point for us, and Agfa Graphics clearly provides the best performance in terms of service."

Complete bundling tipped the scales

A further criterion contributing to the decision was Agfa Graphics' bundling of all the components needed for platesetting. Altogether, 16 different suppliers were involved in the installation of the 160-page machine in Wassenberg, from the foundation up to the printing machine itself. This included some suppliers who unfortunately underwent insolvency during the installation phase.

"We wanted the latest technology for the printing machine at each and every point. As a result, we now have printing machines by manroland, splicers and dryers by Goss, a chain by Müller Martini, the post-press by Rima, air conditioning by Engie, and many more separate components. Agfa Graphics' overall concept immediately won us over, meaning that we were not even tempted to bring other players into the game," reports Dr. Ralph Dittmann, Executive Manager at WKS Druckholding GmbH.

"Unfortunately, insolvencies are not a rare occurrence in our field. With this in mind, it was very important for us to have a single vendor and point of contact for our pre-press stage. In response, Agfa Graphics offered us a comprehensive package consisting of plate, chemistry and platesetter. This puts us in the comfortable situation of being able to buy everything from a single source, and to have just a

single point of contact to turn to when the need arises. After the installation of the high-volume machine, we breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that we finally had a vendor who would offer a complete solution. We did not want to combine products of different manufacturers for platesetting, development process, chemistry etc. on our own again," explains Holger Backes.

Significantly increased plate throughput

For Kraft-Schlötels, the installation of the new Avalon N40-70 platesetter has led to an immense increase in plate throughput. While before, depending on the size of the format, six to ten plates could be imaged per hour, the new large-format thermal platesetter currently manages a throughput of 20 to 25 plates per hour.

"These days, the performance of these units is so high that even companies of our size really only need one single platesetter. As a back-up for the big machines, we have a second platesetter available at our site in Essen, about 90 km away. Yet performance and availability of the platesetter are absolutely crucial, since it makes no economic sense to install a second CtP system of this size here in Wassenberg. You have to consider that we have a relatively manageable plate throughput - at least as compared to the printed paper volumes. After all, we specialise in high-volume web printing and yet very nearly achieve the dimensions of intaglio printing," explains Lars Liebenow, Pre-Press Department Head at KS Kraft-Schlötels GmbH.

Lars Liebenow shows the cars, filled by pre-press team with the respective P970 plates, which the printer then only has to mount into the press. The rail system's coding guarantees the plates will be assigned to the correct level.

Kraft-Schlötels uses about 2500 plates per month, over three shifts, in the three formats of 48, 72 and 160 pages. This translates to about 70,000 m2 of imaged plates a year. The Avalon platesetter is additionally equipped with an automated plate changing system to provide the necessary efficiency when changing plates.

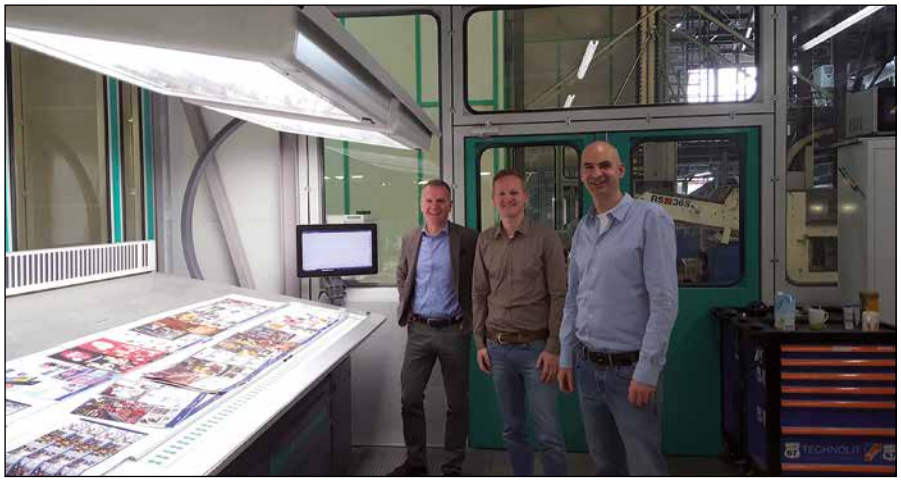
Custom-designed plate transport system

The issue of plate handling and transport to the respective print tower of the press presented a certain problem in daily practice that was associated with the use of large-format plates. With four floors in a single machine, it is extremely important that every plate is delivered to the correct floor every time; human error may inevitably lead to the odd mix-up from time to time. For this reason, the Wassenberg team decided to investigate in plate transport solutions from various vendors; however, they did not find a solution that convinced them beyond a doubt. So Kraft-Schlötels went ahead and designed its own plate transport system, together with a local metal construction company. The result was a well-thought-out solution that was precisely designed to meet the Wassenberg site's needs.

"An issue we had to address was how to transport a plate of this size from the platesetter to the printing machine without damaging it. We finally found the solution in our self-designed suspended cars, transporting the plates up to the machine and then handling the plates by elevators to the appropriate floor," reports Holger Backes.

In practice, with this custom-designed plate transport system, the prebent plates are first hung in the respective cars by the pre-press team; the printers then retrieve the plates when they are needed and run them to the press over a cleverly designed rail system, That does not leave any room for mix-ups because the plates are transported all the way to the printing press in a no-touch manner and distributed to the individual floors by robots. The printer then only has to take the plates and insert them into the respective printing mount.

"At our company, the pre-press workers organise the distribution to the print tower and mount the plates in the car system for the press operator. Assuming the pre-press stage correctly sorts the plates after bending, the press operator cannot send them to the wrong spot in the press, because the cars' rail system is designed in such a way that the number of the rail is the same as the number of print towers, in order to rule out any mix-ups. This way, the error rate is effectively zero," describes Holger Backes with satisfaction.



From the left: Thomas Scheibe, Sales Manager Germany at Agfa Graphics, Lars Liebenow, Pre-Press Department Head, KS Kraft-Schlötels GmbH, and Holger Backes, Director of Project Development, WKS Print Partner GmbH, at the control centre of the 160-page Lithoman, which was installed in 2013