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Pictographics Stands Out in Vegas

A formula of talented staff, technology investments, and collaboration with innovative creatives puts one large format service provider in the spotlight.

by Kim Crowley

Thirteen years ago, Craig Miller, his wife Susan, and their daughter, Christy Miller Jeppesen left careers in developmental psychology and residential treatment seeking something new and lucrative. They hedged their bets on large format printing, launching a business—Pictographics—from their suburban Las Vegas, NV home.

Headquarters remained at the Miller home for three and a half years. Then, as business grew, it moved into a leased building, and finally, the Millers built the 20,000-square-foot facility Pictographics occupies today. The company, which employs approximately 40 people, handles about 350 installations per year and expects to generate nearly seven million dollars in revenue in 2007. Installations span from Las Vegas to Munich to Paris, and beyond.

"Our business is impossible to characterize," says Craig Miller. "When we first started, we were advised to choose one or two areas of specialization and become experts in those. But I am not that good at following direction, and we took a different route." The Millers decided to offer every possible large format digital printing output option, and to do each type of application as though it were their only application. "As a result," he adds, "the hallmark of our company is quality work, and even when we compete against specialists, we are as good as or better than they are."

Miller gives credit to the Pictographics team. He adds, "Although it may be a bit counterintuitive, when you provide a wide array of services, you have to deal with a multitude of different variables and as a result, you end up with a smarter, more talented, and more agile team of people. That's exactly what happened at Pictographics."

Print to Anything

In the company's infancy, posters were Pictographics' primary output. Through the years, seven wide format printers were acquired allowing the company to offer UV, solvent, and aqueous ink output from six to ten feet in width. These units produce a wide range of items on just about any type of material. Output includes about 1,000 digitally-dyed race team uniforms per month for one client, a complete line of interior decorating products, visual merchandising, vehicle graphics, tradeshow graphics, and POP.

Miller says, "If I had to do it over again, I would name the company PTA, Print-to-Anything. The technology today is amazing, and we are printing on everything from garments to glass."

"We want to take the vision of creative professionals and turn it into reality, even if we have to invent the process," adds Susan Miller, chief operations officer.

Craig Miller tells us that at this point one third of Pictographics' business is dye-sublimation, one third is decals, and the rest runs the gamut. The shop uses a large amount of 3M media, as well as specialty wallcovering substrates. They also have three different dye-sublimation inks in use at this point, but hope to standardize to one within the year.

New Technology

As Pictographics' business expands, the Millers add technology to complement and simplify their work. Craig Miller tells us the shop is at capacity work-wise right now, and is running multiple machines. Among them, a total of six Roland machines that are five, six, and eight feet wide; and a UV-cured pigment Virtu printer from Leggett & Platt Digital Technologies, Inc.

Within the last ten years, the company has, "gotten serious about a couple of finishing categories—liquid laminates and cutting," notes Miller. For digital contour cutting, the shop employs a system from MultiCam, Inc.; a Kongsberg unit with MGE's i-cut; and a Mimaki system with optical positioning center.

Recently, one larger customer in the liquor industry was producing five to 30 display graphics per year for its 3,000 locations. When the customer expressed a desire to grow their order to 12,000 locations, the Pictographics group knew it was time to add a grand format machine to address this customer need.

"With 12,000 locations coming on line FY 2007/08...that meant we had to find a solution that would allow us to significantly step up both the speed and quality of our production," notes Miller. Having done business with EFI, Inc. since 1999, Pictographics turned to them about the time the VUTEK QS3200 was being launched.

The VUTEk QS3200 is a 3.2-meter-wide UV printer with the ability to quickly convert from roll stock to rigid materials. "The QS3200 adds a new dimension to our business," says Miller. "Beyond our ability to address this expanded customer requirement, it has allowed us to migrate all of our high-resolution poster type printing to the QS3200 and dedicate our former poster press to our growing dye-sublimation business."

Environmental Focus

This addition to Pictographics' equipment lineup also allows the company to take another step toward a more environmentally friendly, solvent-free environment. "We are very conscious of two things. First, we live on a fragile earth, and we don't want to pollute it if we can find a way that is less harmful. Our other major consideration is our employees—we love them and we want them to be able to work in an environment that is as safe and pleasant as possible," says Miller. The company is using substrates with as much post-consumer recycled content as possible, including a wall covering substrate that is 30 percent recycled content. "Not only that," adds Miller, "but it is 100 percent recyclable when it is removed from the wall."

The ability to print directly to rigid substrates also makes for a more environmentally friendly product, according to Miller, who says, "By the time you use acrylic adhesives and polyester or PVC laminates on a recyclable substrate such as card stock, it is no longer recyclable. Printing directly to rigid substrates is not only more cost-effective and faster, but it is more likely to generate a recyclable end product. Although the market has not been as sensitive to environmental issues as we would like, we believe that this will be a huge issue within the next five years."

All-Star Output

Pictographics recently produced a series of images promoting the 2007 NBA All-Star event for a hotel sponsor. Eight transparent images were printed at 1080 dpi using the VUTEk QS3200 on Lexan material and installed on glass window fronts. The finished sizes were each 38x63 inches plus an arched top piece.

The Pictographics team chose to select a rigid material like Lexan over a flexible vinyl for a few reasons. Optically clear window vinyl is not the easiest product to install and takes 24 hours to be set perfectly. Vinyl also adds the additional chore of removal. The Lexan was quickly installed and removed, and, unlike a vinyl substrate, was not destroyed during removal.

The finished product has a stained glass look that combines transparent, translucent, and opaque properties. "It is very unusual to be able to combine all three of those properties from a single direct print process," says Miller. "This ability, along with its photographic image quality, is a significant differentiator of the QS3200."

Endless Possibilities

The NBA All-Star project was designed by Flying Colors of Berkley, CA, a company that has, among various other projects, been responsible for nearly a dozen Super Bowl promotional packages. "Where our company shines is in working with brilliant artists and designers like those at Flying Colors. They have a vision of how they would like to decorate the venues; what effect they would like to achieve," says Miller. He adds, "It is gratifying to be invited to meetings early in the design process. We contribute insight and ideas based on evolving production methods and technologies. Together, we have created some unbelievable projects in a short time."

With a highly trained staff, the latest technology, and partnerships with innovative designers, there are endless possibilities for what the Pictographics team can produce. The formula the Millers have created will continue to make them shine in Las Vegas.

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