

# Printware

## *Edwards Printing Service* Has Computer-To-Plate Down to a Science

### *Texas Small Commercial Printer Reveals Secrets of Polyester CTP*

Larry Edwards was a professional musician when he started working in a friend's print shop before founding Edwards Printing Service, Inc. in 1978. He got hooked on printing. Today he has ink in his veins, 13 employees in two locations, including daughter Kim Edwards Puckett, the General Manager. The firm handles a wide range of commercial printing, a large and growing proportion of which is short run four-color. They also specialize in premium work such as tight-register three-color printing. Edwards Printing's main shop is in the Dallas suburb of Carrollton, Texas, and the satellite shop is across town in Frisco, Texas. The platesetter serves both shops. Both have production, but sophisticated work and process-color printing are sent to the main shop.



*Edwards Printing Service owner Larry Edwards and General Manager Kim Edwards Puckett with their PlateStream Platesetter.*

### **Before CTP**

Ninety-six percent of their work comes in electronically. Before CTP, film was made to be used to make metal plates. They used an Itek silver-halide platemaker for camera-ready artwork. But because of the quality limitations of the silver-halide camera, most jobs had to be run with expensive metal plates made from film. Artwork and plates were archived for redos. "We were having a hard time competing," recalls Edwards. "Dallas is a very competitive market, and jobs were

costing us too much. On top of that, we had some very busy months where we had trouble keeping up with the work. We needed to increase capacity. I knew we needed computer-to-plate."

Edwards Printing's presses include two 20" by 26" Komori Super Sprints, (one two-color and one four-color), a Ryobi 3302H two-color portrait press, and two Ryobi 3200 duplicator presses with T-heads. Prepress is built around Macintosh systems.

### **The Switch to CTP**

Edwards did his research on his CTP options. He was particularly interested in silver-halide CTP because the plates were much less expensive than metal and seemed to have the same run characteristics. This self-described "competent" pressman noted "if I can run them, anyone can." Most of his research involved calling printers using various CTP systems. "Manufacturers can be helpful, but they're trying to sell you something," Edwards explained. "I got excellent information from other printers, though." Based on that feedback, he selected the Printware PlateStream and SilverStream silver-halide plate material. Although it may not have been the best known platesetter, Edwards said he was comfortable the PlateStream would work because it was working well for printers that had them. He also liked the low interest rate on Printware's factory leasing program, which cut his monthly payments.

The CTP system was installed in November, 1999. Edwards Printing bought several platesetter options based on his vision of CTP for his company. He opted for an integrated combination pin-bar/Bacher punch, which accommodated both his duplicator and multicolor presses. He also purchased a "Turnkey Scanner" option for the Harlequin RIP, which allowed them to digitize camera-ready artwork from archives or provided by some clients. The direct connection from the scanner to the RIP allowed them to bypass prepress. Finally, Edwards Printing specified a film option for the platesetter as a backup for their filmsetter for their occasional remaining film need.

### **After CTP**

Edwards Printing expected to replace some metal plates with the digital polyester plates, but because the polyester plates have worked so well, they have actually been able to replace the great majority of their metal plates. The biggest challenge with the switch from metal to polyester was in the pressroom. Edwards reports his press operators, who were used to metal plates, were initially skeptical about polyester plates for their high-quality work. Edwards' personal commitment to the technology, and his ability to run the plates ensured a smooth transition. That commitment to make the polyester plates work was critical, he felt. Once the psychological barriers were crossed, there was just a short learning curve. Unlike metal plates, the polyester plates required a pre-wet, which Edwards reports is easily done with a cotton pad. He also reported that although the silver-halide fountains are not recommended for metal plates, they do work for both silver-halide and metal, saving a fountain solution changeover. While "universal" fountain

solutions are available, he saw no need to use them. Another important area was making sure the platesetter replenishment processor tanks were not allowed to run dry. With depleted chemicals, the plates look normal, but the lithographic contrast was poor, making them susceptible to toning and plugging, and shortening run length.

Edwards has found that the platesetter plates hold four-color repeatability within half a row of dots because the plates are cut and punched almost perfectly straight to gripper. With maximum run lengths of 20,000 impressions, the 8-mil polyester plates accommodate virtually all of Edwards Printing's work. Metal plates are still used occasionally as a back-up or for jobs with unusual requirements. They also use metal plates as a training vehicle for new press operators before they "graduate" to polyester plates.

With CTP, Edwards Printing's proofing has gone digital as well. There is now very little film-based proofing (e.g., Matchprints). Instead, clients are e-mailed PDFs, faxed form proofs, or sent ink-jet proofs from a color-calibrated Epson proofer.

Plate and mechanical archives have been largely replaced by electronic archives. That has meant less space, and far simpler redos. The old Itek silver-halide plate camera remains in a corner, a monument to another era. It is almost never used, but Edwards reports there is not much of a market for used camera platemakers. "Too many people looking at CTP, I guess," he chuckles.

Summing up, Edwards Printing has seen four major benefits from CTP: less expensive plates, less labor, better image quality, and faster job turnaround.

*Less Expensive Plates:* Edwards reports he could justify the CTP capital investment just with the "hard costs" of using less expensive polyester plates instead of metal plates. He also reports labor savings in both prepress and the pressroom.

*Less Labor:* Nearly an entire full-time equivalent of labor has been saved in prepress. Edwards noted that one employee was spending 90% of his time stripping. Now he can spend 90% of his time running a press. While less quantifiable, Edwards also reports considerable pressroom labor savings. Because the plates are precisely cut and punched, they are ready to "hang and run" with minimal makeready.

*Better Image Quality:* Edwards was pleasantly surprised to find that the digital polyester plate image quality, including screens and fine type, was much better than the camera silver-halide plates, and actually as good as conventional metal plates.

*Faster Job Turnaround:* "We've always said five to seven working days for a typical job," notes Edwards. "But now we're a lot closer to the five than the seven. We're able to pleasantly surprise our customers more often, and almost eliminate any unpleasant surprises. We can offer next day for a rush job where we couldn't

before."

### **Issues and Future Plans**

With CTP in place, Edwards Printing has more business than ever and is ready to expand. They are planning to add a larger press, and would like to expand their use of CTP to larger format. Wider format CTP options include an 18"-polyester PlateStream for the Komori presses.

The bottom line is Edwards has been able to improve his business' profitability even while reducing prices and offering shorter turnaround. Things are working together in his shop like a well-tuned orchestra. Not bad for a former musician.