

Unlocking Every Photographer's Archive to Make Them Money

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Introduction:

Merlin International has been in the On Demand Color Digital printing business for 20 years. We started with the original Xeikon DCP 1 in 1995 with an eye on producing photographic quality color images using electrophotography. While we were able to produce nice images, the quality was categorized as near photographic quality. We ran through several iterations of Xeikon technology over the years and in December 2012, we installed the first Xeikon 8500 in the US. The new engine promised several new features and some upgrades in image quality, including true 1200 dpi 4 bit per pixel exposure mechanisms; toner particle size in the 5 micron range and improved color gamut.

We then went into a mode of testing the image quality and decided it was worthy of some consideration for photo type production. We contacted RIT Professor Frank Cost and went through some testing and evaluation of panoramic images. The response was very positive. Frank documented his comments in a write up for the IS&T conference last year as follows:

"Merlin had just acquired a new Xeikon 8500 digital color press, capable of printing panoramic images up to 20 inches in one dimension and as long as necessary in the other. Doug was looking for test images to show potential customers the capabilities of the new machine. I told Doug that I had a new collection of panoramic images made during the 2012 Rochester summer festivals season on my hard disk that I had not yet printed or even seen at their proper size. In exchange for using the files to demonstrate the new press, Merlin printed the entire set of images at full size. With this set, I was able to show the prints to a number of colleagues, who then helped me evaluate and select a final set of prints for a gallery exhibition and publication

When we first began to evaluate the capabilities of the Xeikon press for this application, several people expressed concerns that the surface characteristics of the prints were different from the familiar silver gelatin and inkjet surfaces that still dominate fine art photography. The color gamut of the Xeikon prints also appears to be more vibrant. Judged against the accepted appearance standards of the more conventional materials, the Xeikon prints look hotter, wilder and less disciplined. My fear was that the prints might look out of place in the cool white light of the gallery, like a loud buffoonish uncle wearing a plaid sport jacket and striped pants at a black tie affair. It remained to be seen.

When the show opened, we discovered that the two characteristics of the Xeikon process that represented the most radical departures from conventional fine art practice, the printing of the entire show on a continuous roll, and the vibrant, almost electric, color gamut, elicited the strongest praise from attendees of all types. We began to realize that the Xeikon process gave the show a vitality that would have been impossible to achieve with more conventional means."

With this background we expanded our testing to include some fold out images working with the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, N Y and produced some multi-panel foldouts. These also received positive reviews from folks in the photographic community.

Another photography professor at RIT, Christine Shank, successfully produced a multi panel foldout from some of her fine art work.

Subsequent to these activities we engaged Professor Cost again to produce some black and white history photos of Rochester and produced some black and white panoramics and poster size prints. This demonstrated the black and white capability of the process.

Project Birth and Goals

After the positive feedback on the image quality, we discussed with several local photographers the issues of marketing the panoramic and poster images. The message coming back continually was that they all had several images they thought were marketable, but the process they needed to go through to select the ones that would sell was expensive and generally did not result in any profit. The characteristics seemed to be that there was a lot of intellectual property ,but to determine which ones would sell was a hit and miss process of prepping the photos and taking them to a wide format production facility. This was the model that we saw from the photographers trying to market to resellers for high quality 18 x24 posters:

- Selling Price to public \$20 to \$30
 - Selling price to reseller \$10 to \$12
- Cost from wide format \$9 to \$12 (in lots of 10 to 20)

Further, since they needed to produce 10 to 20 pieces to get the price/print down, they may only sell one or two, so their outlay might be \$90 to \$200 to yield \$20 to \$60.

These images are generally ones of local or regional interest or they are a special interest situation that have a limited number of target customers. If there are images that have wide interest and have sales of 1000 or more, a litho process would serve the need better than digital.

There were some discussions around panoramics, but the issue of framing and transportation required more work to get the pricing targets down.

The conclusion was that a process was needed that could do small volumes quickly and for less than \$5 per print.

Concept

First we made the following assumptions:

1. There are hundreds of photographers with many images that they would like to market in low volumes
2. Market sell prices for unique, high quality, 18 x 24 poster size images would be \$20 to \$30

We were then able to formulate the following offering:

1. All posters 18 x24 with bleeds
2. No proof option
3. Max time to shipment from order is 10 business days (excludes holidays).
4. Packaging in flat cardboard carton provided.
5. Shipping not included
6. All payments by credit card with order submittal.
7. All shipments occur at Merlin's convenience.
8. Shipping costs are not included in price.
9. Prints are four color process.
10. Stock is 100# uncoated text
11. Minimum order size is \$25
12. Cost per poster \$2.50 each.

13. For any poster type, a quantity of 1 can be ordered.
14. For each order there will be one ship to address.
15. When a poster is ordered, the file will be kept on site for reorder for up to one year from order date.
16. All files will be hi res PDFs
17. Max file size is TBD MB.
18. All orders will process through Merlin Photographers website.

For example:

A photographer wants to order 5 of image 1, 3 of image 2, 1 of image 3, 1 of image 4. The total cost would be 10 images times \$2.50 = \$25.

So basically a proof costs the photographer \$2.50 for an 18 x 24 provided he orders 9 other prints.

Going back to the original situation where a photographer has an image he wishes to test market, he buys 1 image and spends \$2.50. When he gets an order for the image, he can order one and has the margin of \$9 -2.50 or \$6.50 as opposed to a potential loss of \$200. This allows the photographer to test the market with his portfolio and see what sells at a modest initial investment. It provides a method to sort out the sellers from the ones that end up in storage.

Another feature of the program is that we will store the photographer's images for up to one year from the last print date and when they sign on to order, all their images in storage will be displayed and they can choose the ones to order.

The program will be limited to photographers and artists, not open to the public. We do not intend to police the users, but we will require users to be those intending to use the service for commercial purposes. All users will be expected to fall into the category of resellers for taxing purposes.

Future

Working to get the website up and running in Q2 2016. We plan to expand the site for:

1. Panoramic images up to 19 inches wide,
2. large format books up to 19 inches in shortest dimension,
3. 3. large foldouts, and
4. wall murals