

First Major 2011
Sign Printer Expo
in Europe

graphispag,
Barcelona

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Introduction to the Barcelona 2011 expo

I always enjoyed attending VISCOM Madrid (even though they could never settle on one standardized name for that or any of the other VISCOM expos in Europe). But people in Spain discretely warned me in 2008 that the expo that year would be a zilch, and it turned out to be so lacking in exhibit booths that it was an embarrassment. Fortunately I heeded the discrete tip and did not attend. Sadly VISCOM Spain or VISCOM Madrid or SignMadrid or whatever it was called never recuperated. I never returned in 2009 or 2010 either.

Then people kept talking about Graphicspag 2011 in Barcelona, and how big it will be this year. Since FLAAR has an employee in Barcelona, this makes it easier to attend an expo here. So here we are with the FLAAR Report one day before the show even opens (as is the tradition at FLAAR Reports). Now after the first day we are updating the report. There will be photographs as soon as we have time to download and do the photographs. So return once a week for the series of updates as we expand this report.

The first day attendance was so-so. Low and slow in the morning; then picked up in late morning. Then empty during the long Spanish hours of almuerzo. Okay after that. Second day attendance was twice the number, albeit (as in Italy) about 20% or more students. But at least it made the aisles look crowded.

Comments

Not one single solitary Chinese printer.

Not one single solitary Chinese ink company.

Not one single solitary Chinese media or substrates company (though I know a lot of what media is exhibited really comes from China, even in the Fortune 500 brand name companies).

But no Chinese solvent ink printer. And ZERO Chinese UV-cured printers.

This is unfortunate, that premature printers, that simply were inadequate in their day, now spoil all Western Europe for the newer better models from the two or three Chinese companies that finally woke up to realize that Western Europeans need a printer that actually functions more than a few weeks before wearing out (I have seen the early models Infiniti-branded Aeromatrix UV printers which began to fall apart after a few months; this was six years ago). The DuPont UV printers, and TeckStorm and TechThunder also ruined the market reputation. This is unfortunate since now those manufacturers have improved, but no European distributor is willing to risk offering these printers. And even Teckwin's own distributor in Germany no longer exhibits anywhere but perhaps FESPA last year. Will be interesting if they exhibit at FESPA 2011 (if not, that's pretty much the end for European potential). This is why I need to visit factory and end-users before we issue recommendations on UV-cured printers.

Canon plus Océ are in one booth for the first time. Previously Océ was allowed to continue as 100% Océ. Hard to judge how Canon will handle the total change from copiers and office printers to the world of signage. Océ did an excellent job on their own.

Xerox booth looked empty: no wide-format inkjet any more. They simply were too conservative to survive. The office is not the place to attempt to sell wide-format: HP, Canon, and Epson own that market. You have to do better than those, and Xerox merely rebranded Mutoh-Europe printers, which are good for what they are, but being an office printer is not their forte. Curiously, Xerox did not have much else in their booth either. Even the Kodak booth looked more alive than Xerox booth. Canon-Océ booth looked twice as alive as the Xerox booth. Sad, as it would have been helpful to create competition if Xerox (and Kodak) had survived in the world of wide-format inkjet. It was as much their management style as it was their technology that causes these companies to fail in the wide-format inkjet marketplace.

No rebranded Mimaki flatbed in the Fujifilm booth; only two rebranded Océ Arizona printers.

No new generation of latex ink from HP. Since I have now seen several latex inks which are better in color gamut and need only half the furnace required for curing HP latex ink, I was hoping that HP would counter with a better latex ink themselves. But nothing visible in the HP booth.

UV-Cured printers at the first European expo of 2011

Agfa has a 3.2 meter UV printer, and the flatbed with roll-fed on front. Gandinnovations tried to get that finished but never really got that one organized before the company imploded.

Two Agfa :Anapurna printers are at the expo. One in the Agfa booth and one elsewhere. Neither had any information on what model it was on the front of the printer itself. Very confusing. Why can't they put the name of the printer on the front. If the name is on a drop-down door that when open hides the name, then perhaps there should be a better place to put the model name. Increasingly I have noticed the lack of the name being visible on the :Anapurna printers.

Durst is launching the Omega 1, a printer with no "Rho" name. Very small width; I will need to learn more about this. Otherwise they show their monumental 5-meter printer. Nothing like this is exhibited any more by HP Scitex; not often do you see any of the NUR printers at the expos any more. HP simply flies printshop owners to Israel or Brussels or Barcelona or Atlanta.

EFI Rastek exhibits their H652 in the booth of Spectralgraf.

Fujifilm Advance HS X2 and Fujifilm Advance in booth of Fujifilm. Not one rebranded Mimaki flatbed in the Fujifilm booth.

HP Scitex FB500 in Dugopa booth and another HP Scitex FB in their own modest HP booth.

Marubu ink booth has a DYSS Lasco combo printer from Korea. DYSS lost most of their distributors several years ago, and had serious issues with printers that went to a Korean LCD manufacturer. The ink fell off the frames of the monitors after the monitors were turned on and warmed up. But that would probably happen to most UV-cured ink.

Mimaki UJV-160 and Mimaki desktop UV in booth of DigiDelta.

Mimaki UJV-160 and Mimaki JFX-1631 plus in booth of InterSign distributor.

Mutoh exhibited their Zephyr UV; a rare apparition, as it almost is never exhibited outside Europe. This is not their TS Traffic Sign but is the original model. Hybrid with pinch rollers have not been successful because ColorSpan and HP proved that most thick media does not work well in this kind of system: you need a transport belt or dedicated flatbed. But again, not even Chinese manufactures attempt to make grit-roller UV printers any more. Besides, you can get a Latex ink printer for roll-fed materials; and pretty soon newer better latex inks and resin inks will be available: the market for roll-to-roll UV-cured printers is limited and may well fade in the next two years.

Neolt offers their pinch-roller-grit-roller Asterjet 1650 in booth of Standkolor. But again, not even Chinese manufactures attempt to make grit-roller UV printers any more.

Oce Arizona 550XT dedicated flatbed in booth of Canon. This is the first time Oce was no longer in their own booth; first time Oce was inside a Canon booth.

One original model Roland VersaUV LEC-300 in the booth of distributor that also sells SIROD. One LEC-330 in Roland booth. Second same-colored printer in official Roland booth but not named LEC, instead named LEJ-640. This is a new hybrid version (with roller tables front and back). Since Roland has no real flatbed, and since Roland has no combo with a moving transport belt, the only way they can create a faux-flatbed is to jerry-rig a roll-to-roll version. But hybrid systems are NOT adequate for thick or rigid materials. The new LEJ-640 is a prototype. Not yet a production model.

In the 12 year history of UV-cured printers, no grit-roller retrofitted with tables has been successful once people realized that you need either a dedicated true flatbed or at least a moving transport belt. The ColorSpan hybrid model was successful because there were no other options at entry-level in that era. Even HP gave up trying to push a grit-roller pseudo-flatbed.

Sun Innovations from Russia had their basic entry-level UV printer on display; not their big enclosed model.

VUTEk GS2000 in booth of spacious booth of Emiliano Martin.

Flatbed printers but not UV-cured

At VISCOM 2008 the booth of GCG had a printer using the ink from Kiian Manoukian. A month before that the Kiian Manoukian booth at SGIA had a huge display of dozens and dozens of diverse materials printed with these inks. At that time it was widely stated that these inks were alcohol-based.

Then the printers, and inks, were no longer exhibited. Their US distributor staff knew nothing about them. The Kiian Manoukian booth had zilch information in 2009. Three years went by and only at one or two small local expos was the ink exhibited. The first international expo where I have seen this mystery ink since 2008 was here at Graphispag.

Now the statement is that the ink is Sol Gel: a dye-based solvent ink. It is stated this is not an ink from Prof.Dr. Trier of Munich. But until I can see the real ink factory and visit customer sites to document the success of the ink, it is not possible to recommend any of these inks. There are indeed other companies that do use the ink from Prof.Dr. Trier, and this ink is the most likely source.

These are not Staedtler Lumocolor inks.

But I can comment that these inks are of interest, albeit only for indoor use. I will complement the TCG for being honest on this aspect (that the ink is not for outdoor use).

It is stated the ink is not alcohol-based. How much the ink today differs from the ink of 2008 is unknown. The printer is a Roland on a transport belt of the same kind that I saw circa 2004-2007 in booths associated with Kiian Manoukian. Neither of these companies had any visible presence at Graphicspag: only TCG Iberia (ValJet 1600).

To what degree this ink is similar to the Asian ink used by Robert Pan is also unknown. His ink is made either in Japan, Korea, or Taiwan (but is not made by JetBest).

I now estimate that the printer is the same as in past years (by TCG) but the ink is no longer from Kiian Manoukian at all. They said it was SolGel. The fact it is a dye-solvent, and not alcohol-based, leads me to estimate it is from Prof.Dr. Trier (Munich). I had hoped the alcohol-based ink could survive, but it's tough to have an alcohol-based ink that does not wipe off!

Absent or pulled out

We were told one UV printer manufacturer would be present, but seemingly their printer is still not yet ready to be shown to the inquisitive public. At other expos they simply had an empty booth. At Graphicspag they seem to have pulled out. I do not have the full exhibitor list but two people told me the company was on the original exhibitor list.

Cutters (for what you print with your UV flatbed)

Kongsberg had a large booth, plus there is a Kongsberg XP in the booth of Durst. The FLAAR Report will be out shortly on the XP.

Zund had one cutter in a Zund booth. Aristo had a cutter in a partner or distributor booth.

Kongsberg and Zund are at the high end, and one or the other, or both, tend to be at most international expos. Sometimes an Aristo is exhibited. Occasionally a MultiCam or AXYZ are exhibited (each of which is more from the world of CNC routers). We prefer to cover digital equipment rather than mechanical equipment.

Then at European expos you get several French and Italian flatbed CNC or laser cutting brands. Since these are rarely exhibited in USA or Latin America, these other brands are not evaluated. But at Graphicspag the export manager of Cielle asked us to look at his new digital-signage oriented cutter, the Kappa 200X300. When a company manager asks to have their product added to our worldwide coverage, if the product fits with the product range that we are interested in, we are glad to add them (keeping in mind that even with a staff of 20 people, we can't evaluate everything or even list products that are outside our area of interest, such as cutters that use water pressure).

So in the next update of this report we will add photographs of the Cielle KAPPA 200X300.

Textile printers

Agfa exhibits the AquaJet which is improved over the system they inherited from Gandinnovations. Agfa has worked to get rid of pre-Agfa issues with this printer (first by switching to DuPont ink). Now I have been told they have switched to still another new ink (this is the fourth ink set that has been tried).

This is a typical situation when a company is not a textile company from the beginning. Gandinnovations had a comparable issue: they were a solvent printer and UV-cured printer company. Textiles were not their original strength.

ATPColor, MTEX, DigiFab and d-gen would be examples of dedicated textile printer companies.

Two MUTOH Viper textile printers: one with a real belt; the other with an only partial faux belt (just stuck on the front; the printer is simply a normal solvent printer (but using textile inks) with the faux belt pushed against the front). Both seem to have Italian-made media handling systems, as is the tradition in Europe.

D-gen has their traditional printer hard at work. This is the two-unit model (fixation unit out in front of the printer itself).

Not as many textile printers as exhibited in expos in Italy, but the booth of DigiDelta shows the new MTEX printers: two of them: 3.2 meters and 1.6 meters, with sublimation unit made in Europe (not in China). The FLAAR Report on the MTEX is previewed in their booth. The longer version will be issued later this week or next week.

The DigiDelta booth also exhibits self-adhesive media from Decal, a related company. The FLAAR Report preview on this media is available in the booth as a hand-out. The PDF version will be available by next week.

Venue

Barcelona is a great city to visit but the expo location is far from what makes Barcelona so visitor-friendly. The airport is a challenge for your patience level as well (and if you are stuck passing through the over-sized Madrid airport you want to ask whether architects every have to use the monstrosities that they design). my father did the Dallas-Ft Worth Airport, St Louis airport, and two airports in the Arab countries, plus his company, HOK, did Heathrow Terminal 5, and at least the first four airports are user-friendly).

But once you survive Spanish airports you can experience the pleasant life style in Spain. And at least the Madrid airport is photogenic (albeit stupidly over-sized for actual people who are stuck having to get from one gate to another).

The Barcelona expo halls are nicely arranged, but one major faux-pas of the organizers is to emblazon the name Graphicspag 2011 on every single booth front.

This is annoying to see this several hundred times in each aisle. Plus, the needless repetition of Graphicspag 2011 detracts from the name of which company is attempting to advertise their own presence. We do not need to be reminded in every booth which expo we are attending. What an attendee wants is to know the brand name of the booth: period.

Another issue with the organizers is that none of the aisle banners at Graphicspag tell you what aisle you are in. Why can't organizers ORGANIZE their expos. And they wonder why manufacturers and distributors don't want to exhibit and why print shop owners prefer to shop in the Internet.

Expo organizers also make the mistake of having trade shows too long. If offset press manufacturers demand long shows, then let them exhibit for weeks. But there is no excuse to have wide format inkjet printer industry stuck with exhibiting for more than 3 days just because offset presses need a week to set-up and another week to take down.

A nice thing about Barcelona are the hotel prices: albeit not as cheap as hotels in Birmingham or elsewhere, at least Barcelona hotels do not gouge attendees as do hotels in Duesseldorf for DRUPA and any other expo in that city. Plus, the hotels in Barcelona are within walking distance of the expo center. However Milan has the best, hotels are in the historic center and there is convenient Metro to the expo center which is outside the city. There is no Metro to the Barcelona expo center, a rather unfortunate situation.

Best booth design

There were several booths that had see-through walls of fabric material. The back wall of Konica Minolta booth is a good example of an excellent booth design.

The FEDRIGONI Club booth had an attractive pure black front and nice end wall decoration. The booth hostesses, in addition to being among the best looking at the expo, had innovative decorations on their blouses.

There were several booths that were so empty of things to look at one wonders what these companies offer.

Potentially illegal act by lamination equipment distributor

One company unscrewed the Made in China metal plaque on the back of their laminator. This laminator is made by the best laminating equipment company in China. So there is no excuse for the Spanish distributor for removing the Made in China tag. The machine had four holes where the screws were removed. I highly suspect this is illegal.