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A Clear Vision

Self-confident startup graphics and tradeshow exhibit company merges talents, explores niches and grows.

BY CHERYL DANGEL CULLEN



Cheryl Dangel Cullen is a marketing and graphic design consultant who writes for several major graphic design, printing and paper publications. She is the author of a number of books, including Challenging the Big Brands: How New Brands Win Market Share with Innovative Design, Promotion Design That Works, Identity Design That Works, and The Best of Annual Report Design. She lives outside Chicago.

Walk into EPI-Colorspace and what you see is a full-service digital graphics facility with an emphasis on tradeshow displays, museum exhibits and P.O.P. graphics. “Our greatest strength, however, is listening to our customers,” stresses EPI-Colorspace president Jim Moore.

“We’re truly a one-stop shop for people who are doing exhibits and trade shows,” according to Larry Olsen, managing director of digital services.

The company is young (it will celebrate its first year anniversary in May this year) but it is self-possessed and confident of its clear vision. The firm is composed of two companies that Moore, with the help of silent partners, was able to purchase last year when they both struggled through the post 9-11 economy.

At the time, Moore and Olsen were working for one of the companies, 10-year old EPI, which was heavily involved in design and advertising. Moore arranged to purchase parts of the company and retained several staffers. He also purchased parts of Colorspace, a company started in 2000, and EPI-Colorspace was born.

RIGHT ON TRACK

Today, the Gaithersburg, Md.-based company has 23 employees, made of up former associates as well as former competitors from all aspects of the imaging industry from finishing to professional photography. Moore isn’t disclosing any sales figures, but says, “We’re on track with where we expected to be and we’re growing. We’re expecting five to seven percent growth in 2004.”



Wall coverings is a relatively new digital imaging concept. This exotic wallpaper was custom produced for an exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum using self-adhesive matte vinyl and a Roland printer.



Working with museums requires careful installations.

The company's business comes from government agencies, associations, Fortune 500 companies and graphic design firms, which is surprising since EPI-Colorspace also offers design and layout services. Their areas of expertise include preparing and creating collateral material, conference and tradeshow graphics, as well as posters and banners. "While we do design, we're not their competitor. We're their partner," Moore emphasizes.

The company also has digital retouching artists on staff and offers illustration, photography, and digital photography among its services, but, by far, it is EPI-Colorspace's tradeshow graphics that represents the bulk of its business.

SMOOTH WORKFLOW

Major projects are headed-up by an account or project manager, who sits down with the client and EPI-Colorspace's primary exhibit designer, Patrick Stone, to develop a plan of action. They'll work together to come up with design for structures. At that point, they'll get their warehouse people involved to agree upon the logistics. "Everyone on our staff has a clear picture of what we need to accomplish and when," says Olsen. A customer service person or account representative handles smaller projects and oversees the job as it travels through the workflow.

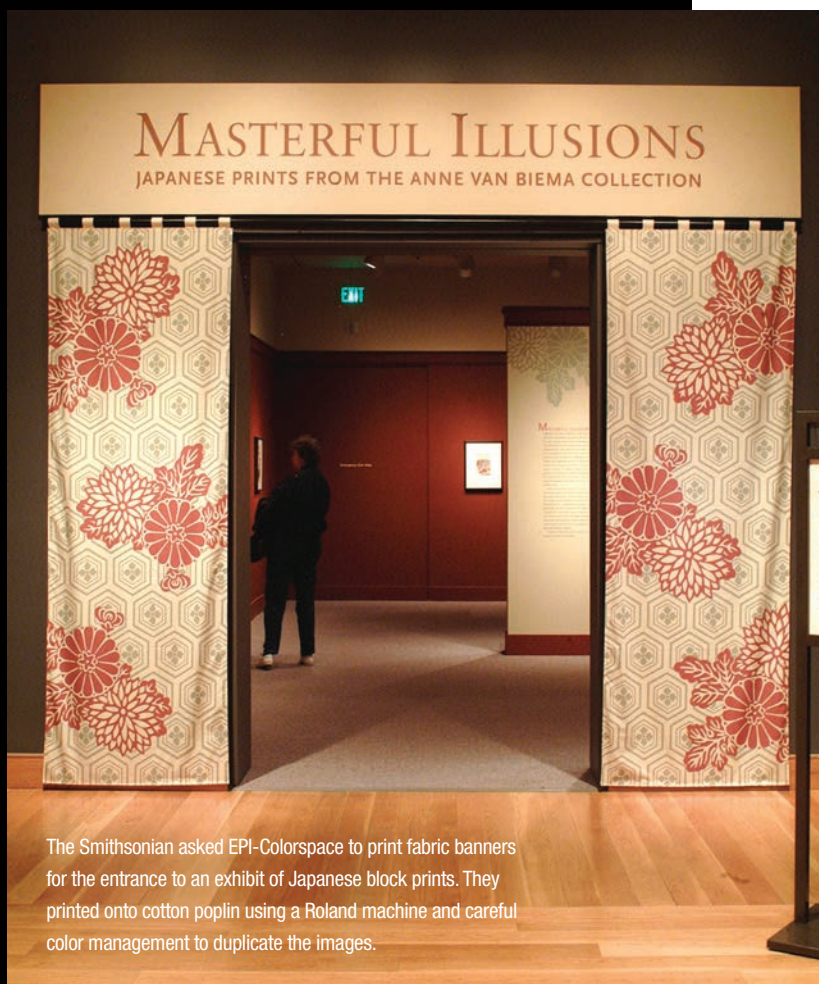
"We'll design projects from the inception or take designs from a design firm and format them properly for output," Olsen explains. These jobs can be small in scale or large.

Wideformat imaging was part of the business plan from the outset, but "it is something that we're emphasizing in this new model," says Moore.

To date, Moore hasn't had to purchase any new equipment. All the equipment at EPI-Colorspace was purchased from the two defunct companies. Fortunately, Moore and Olsen were both involved with the equipment purchase when they worked with their former employer. "So we were pretty aware of what we were buying at the time," Olsen adds.

PRIZE POSSESSION

One of EPI-Colorspace's prize possessions is its Durst Lambda $\pi 50$ ($\pi 50$), a digital photo imaging device which provides true photographic output from digital files in widths up to 50-inches using standard paper materials as well as Duraflex and Duratrans. It handles the printing of most of the company's trade show exhibits, banner stands, P.O.P. material and



The Smithsonian asked EPI-Colorspace to print fabric banners for the entrance to an exhibit of Japanese block prints. They printed onto cotton poplin using a Roland machine and careful color management to duplicate the images.



Covering the walls in the lobby of EPI-Colorspace is an example of the company's digitally produced wallpaper.



This wall covering at the visitor Center of George Washington University, Washington DC, was produced on self-adhesive matte vinyl using a Roland Hi-Fi Jet printer.

fairly large duplication jobs. "The Lambda is extremely accurate from the standpoint of color fidelity," says Olsen. "It's also very fast and has very repeatable results."

"We knew we wanted a digital photo writer," he says, remembering the decision-making process at the old company. "We chose the Lambda because of its higher productivity. It didn't have the size limitations of other photo imagers we saw back in 2000."

"From an ROI standpoint the device was paid off in six months," says Moore. "It is really our workhorse here — even with the inkjets we have."

That's saying a lot since EPI-Colorspace has three large format Encad NovaJet inkjet printers in production, ranging from 50- to 60-inches wide, as well as a 50-inch wide Roland Hi-Fi Jet printer. The Encad machines are used for printing onto a wide variety of substrates not suitable for the Lambda — for applications including tradeshow and conference graphics, banners and outdoor signage.

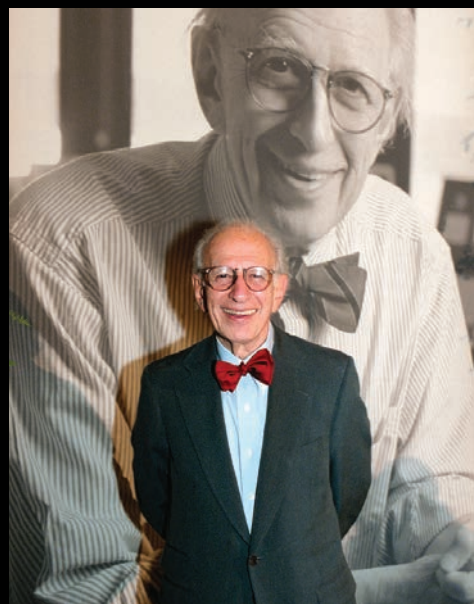
The decision to assign a job to the Lambda or one of the inkjets is largely based on the number of copies required. "If it is for a single booth, we'll do it on the NovaJet versus the Lambda, which is gen-

erally reserved for higher production jobs," says Olsen.

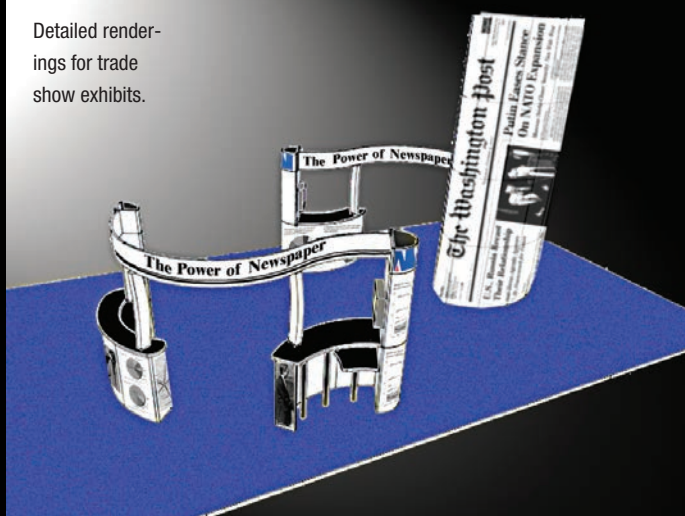
"We get the same quality out of both of them because of the way we manage them," Olsen continues. "If you go up to an image with a loupe, you'll get more photographic results from the Lambda, but for exhibit graphics, the results are very similar. We calibrate these machines so that if we had to switch from one machine to another, the quality remains pretty much equal. There are differences, no doubt about it. But at viewing distances, you'd be hard pressed to say which machine produced a particular tradeshow graphic."



These fabric banners were created for a formal event at Howard Hughes Medical Center using poly poplin fabric. The subject of one print poses with his likeness. (Photos by Paul Feters)



Detailed renderings for trade show exhibits.



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INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

The inkjets are providing EPI-Colorspace with plenty of room for innovation. They are now working with materials such as vinyl and fabric. Where the Lambda can only print on three substrates — paper, flex material and a trans — the inkjets are winning jobs that require more unusual substrates.

"We're producing more jobs on vinyl, including wallpaper," says Moore, referring to one of the company's latest innovations.

"If our clientele had to distinguish us from everyone else, they'd say they look to us to

solve a challenge put to them. They ask, *How do you cover a wall or a column?*" says Olsen.

MEETING CHALLENGES

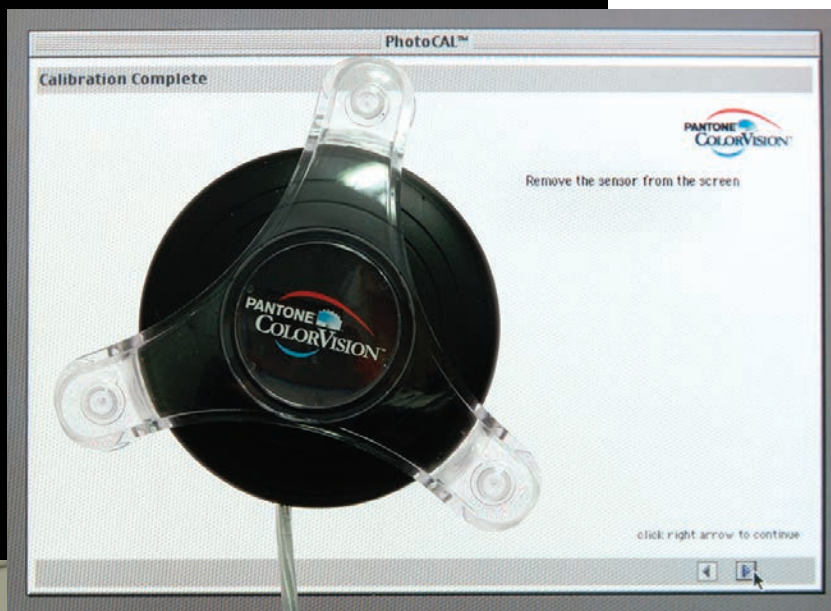
Such a challenge presented itself when George Washington University approached EPI-Colorspace to make wallpaper to adorn their visitor center. The company jumped on the job, receiving a montage of photos from the university prepared for them by a graphic designer. They assigned the job to the inkjet and produced vinyl wallpaper that covered two walls measuring 10' x 16'. The job took two 50-inch wide sheets.

They've also reproduced a scene from a piece of artwork as wallpaper and did another job with a repeating pattern, much like typical wallpaper that is used for home décor. In fact, the walls in EPI-Colorspace's lobby feature the company's logo in a repeating pattern. To date, the largest wall they've covered is about 26' x 10'. Such a project uses a sheet that is typically less than four feet wide to make it easy to handle during installation.

Another challenge came when the Smithsonian Museum brought in an exhibit of handmade Japanese block prints. EPI-Colorspace was asked to reproduce one of



A couple of finished tradeshow displays for Galludet and the AARP. Most of EPI-Colorspace's tradeshow graphics are produced using the Lambda.



the tapestries digitally onto fabric material. They scanned an image of the block print and printed onto the fabric using one of their inkjet machines. The final piece was hung at the entrance to the exhibit.

"The client was very demanding," Olsen remembers. "The fabric had to look like the original. It's tough when you are trying to create something digitally to match something that was made by hand years and years ago."

Not everything in the shop is oversized, however. EPI-Colorspace also has an arsenal of digital imaging equipment for high-speed, short-run color prints, copies and v-graphics. This small-format equipment is designed to print sizes up to 12" x 18".

BREAD AND BUTTER

However, the company's bread and butter is in its wide format tradeshow, museum and exhibit graphics, where services extend to providing the

EPI-Colorspace is very big on color management. They use special tools, such as this Pantone ColorVision monitor calibration tool and for calibrating media, X-Rite's spectrophotometer and Profiler Pro software to make sure all their equipment works together to produce optimum, consistent color.



Working closely with tradeshow business clients assures a positive client experience — and repeat business. Here, Exhibit Designer Patrick Stone discusses an exhibit with Sales Representative Pat Ivers and Exhibit Services Director Peter McGuire.



A tradeshow exhibit with large graphic panels gets assembled in the finishing room.



Between the Lambda, the three Encad NovaJets and the Roland Hi-Fi Jet EPI-Colorspace can handle many kinds of printing applications.



EPI-Colorspace's prize possession — a Durst Lambda π 50 (pi50) photo imager.

necessary hardware, rentals and accessories, storage and drayage, and exhibit management.

"In the trade show arena, there are a lot of major players," says Moore. "We're very nimble, so we're able to provide a high level of service very efficiently and quickly. Plus, we're very affordable. Clients come to us when they do their first trade show and we keep them. Change is difficult for people and we're very customer-oriented. We make sure that first trade show experience is exciting, not frightening."

The company has won over those first-time trade show promoters via a thunderous marketing effort that includes e-mail blasts, direct mailings, word-of-mouth and most surprising of all, a schedule of radio advertising on three stations. It is still too soon to tell how successful the radio spots will be, but "we're hopeful that they will work well for us," Moore says.

LOOKING AHEAD

With nearly one year under his belt, Moore finds it hard to predict where the company will be five years down the road, but one thing is certain: "We're going to have to keep pace with technology. Five years from now, people will still be doing trade shows, P.O.P., wallpaper and all the things we're either providing or developing," he says. "The difference will be how they are produced."



These outdoor posters announcing a National Portrait Exhibit were created the Lambda using paper and a heavy overlamine.



Wayside graphics for this historic exhibit in Yorktown, Va. are vinyl mounted to an overlaminated Lexan.

“The equipment that we use will change. The quality will continue to improve as will the speed. Productivity will continue to increase.”

On its fifth anniversary, Moore predicts they’ll still be big into wide-format imaging, whether it is for trade shows or museum exhibits. Either way, “we’re a company that likes to push the envelope with the technology that exists. We are usually involved in a situation where someone is coming up with something that is innovative and they’re coming up with something that hasn’t been done before — and they want to know if we can do it. We’re used to working as a team to solve these things.

“People are always putting their heads together around here to work things out for our clients and we try to get the most we can out of our equipment here. Color management is our strength.”

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