

Webprint, The Netherlands: Prints and photo books on genuine photo paper

Top quality at top prices

With his white hair and white beard, the founder and CEO of Webprint, Ton Marsman, does not exactly match the stereotype of a top manager of a young Internet company. In fact, the entrepreneur, who has enjoyed a colorful career in the electronics business, was involved in 1979 in the design of the first PC and later introduced the German trading company Conrad Electronics to the Netherlands. After that, in the 1990s, he did pioneering work in a printing company



Ton Marsman, founder and CEO of Webprint B.V.: "Many providers think too much about their own business and not enough about the customers."

with the introduction of digital presses. Today, he could easily enjoy his retirement and, being a passionate cook, tend to his small restaurant, but instead he has a good reason for devoting his time to building up a fast-growing business with digital imaging services: "It is unbelievable fun to implement a strategy for this interesting market that differs entirely from that of the established players," he told INTERNATIONAL CONTACT. "I have never understood why it is that the photo industry has such attractive products to sell but doesn't really do anything with them."

"It's all to do with quality"

Marsman knows what he is talking about, because back in 1998 during the time he spent in the graphic arts sector, he produced the first photo books by digital printing. After leaving the print shop, he hit on the idea of utilizing his experience for the digital photofinishing business: "We wanted to produce photos with digital presses and thought it would be a good idea to write the EXIF image data on the reverse," recalled Webprint's CEO. "But to be frank, it

was a disaster, because we got between 30 and 40 percent of the orders back from the customers because the quality was too poor. Photo books produced with digital presses look quite reasonable at first sight, but when you cut out a picture and look at it on its own, you will be shocked at how poor the quality actually is. The customers were completely right not to accept it."

Marsman acted quickly and acquired an Agfa d-lab.2, which was delivered and installed in record time. "Agfa helped me very efficiently at that time and it's a shame the company has disappeared from the photo market," said Marsman. "With the minilab, we not only solved the problem of producing good prints, it also allowed us very quickly to begin printing first photo calendars and then photo books on genuine photo paper. Of course, there were people who warned us against it, because it is not very easy to write on the calendars. But our success proved us right. The customers are primarily interested in good picture quality."

The production of photo books on genuine photo paper was, of course, initially very hard work, because the pages had to be laminated by hand and then further processed using bookbinding techniques. In the long term this turned out to be too expensive, because, second to quality, an efficient workflow is the most important factor for success, the CEO of webprint pointed out: "There is little point in haggling with your paper supplier to get a square meter one or two cents cheaper, because having an efficient, ideally fully automatic workflow is far more

important for being able to offer top quality at the lowest possible price."

Marsman, who, through his activity in the graphics industry, had considerable experience in developing customized solutions for his own workflow, was already thinking about how to build efficient machines himself. "But then, at the 2006 photokina, I saw exactly what I needed on the Imaging Solutions stand, namely an automatic solution for the production of photo books and photo calendars on genuine photo paper," he said. "We immediately sat down with the people there to discuss the workflow." Shortly afterwards, Fujifilm brought out a new photo paper with a thinner paper base called Crystal Archive Album Paper, which it had developed specifically for the production of photo books. It was immediately clear that Webprint would invest in the workflow to produce purePhoto books.

At the company's headquarters in Hengelo, the photo book and calendar pages are now printed with a widePrint printer from Imaging Solutions in sizes of up to A4 full-format 21 x 29.7 cm. The widePrint is connected in-line to a VSP 25 paper processor. The prepared, folded photo book pages are then automatically processed in the Imaging Solutions' fastBook unit to create the finished book blocks, after which they are trimmed on three sides and inserted into the covers using conventional bookbinding units. "Just from looking at them, you can recognize the quality of the purePhoto books, because the hard covers are also made of true photographic paper and padded to underline the high-quality look of these



The Imaging Solutions units: here the widePrint digital printer, which is connected in-line to the VSP 25 paper processor, and the automatic fastBook station for automatically producing book blocks are important for the efficient production of photo books on genuine photo paper.



Probably the largest photo book in the world was produced at Webprint as an eye-catcher for an exhibition – naturally on true photo paper.



The expansion plans at Webprint go beyond the traditional consumer market. The new portal www.i2print.nl is aimed at the B2B segment. Here, digital signage articles will be offered, also printed on true photo paper.

wonderful photo albums.” Soon, the company’s equipment will be supplemented by the new fastCCF unit from Imaging Solutions, which will cut the printed photo book pages from the processed paper roll, crease and fold them in the middle and then press them flat. “In this way, we can reduce the amount of manual intervention,” said Marsman. “That’s our chance as a newcomer. Even now, our turnover per employee is five times as high as that of established photofinishing companies in Europe.”

Unusual business model

Top-class print quality and a smooth workflow are of course not an end in itself for Webprint, they are the prerequisites for its business model to be so successful. Unlike most of its competitors, the Dutch company is not primarily interested in the customer initially ordering as many prints as possible. Anyone who registers on the company’s Internet site can first of all upload as many images as he or she wants. “It



Digital photos on canvas are among the biggest selling imaging products at Webprint. They are produced by ink-jet printing.

doesn’t cost a thing, and we store the images for life at no charge,” explained Marsman. “It is initially important for us that we have as many images as possible on our servers, as we can then motivate our customers to do something with them, such as order prints, photo books, calendars or other imaging products.” Security is ensured: Webprint not only saves the images on servers located in a former strong room of a bank in Enschede, it also mirrors the data to other servers in Zwolle and Amsterdam, so that the images does not get lost even in the worst of all possible accidents. Every image is saved in full resolution and in three other formats so that the right file size is available for every application. The Webprint business model also makes it particu-



The company aims to move into a new building with nearly 10,000 square meters of production space by September.

larly easy for consumers to use the company’s services: Uploading the images, ordering prints, creating picture products, photo books, calendars and greeting cards functions quickly and easily directly via the browser without any need to download and install client software.

Marsman’s motto of “top quality at top prices” is clearly visible with the standard prints: A 10 cm/4“ wide photo costs just 5 cents, a calendar in A4 format can be ordered for 12.95 euros digitally printed or 14.95 euros on true photo paper. The premium photo book, the purePhoto Album, costs 24.95 euros in 20 x 20 cm format with 26 pages.

“If you have a well-functioning workflow, you don’t need high prices to work profitably,” said Ton Marsman. And his success proves him right, because Webprint is already operating at a profit and intends to continue doing so despite further strong growth: “We are modest,” explained Marsman, “we want to earn an average of one cent net with every print we process.” That doesn’t sound much, but represents a quite considerable sum if Marsman achieves his target of gaining a 2.5 percent share of the European print market because that would make around 500 million prints and exactly the same number of cents.

International expansion

Via its Internet site www.webprint.nl and its cooperation with partners including communities like Facebook and Flickr and trading companies like Kruidvat, Webprint has already become one of the largest photo processors in the Netherlands. It is expanding internationally both through its own web site and through its cooperation with trading partners. The orders are always generated online, but are also delivered to the photo outlets for retail customers if desired.

Webprint also operates its own direct service portals at the address www.photofun.com in Belgium, Germany and Denmark and, since quite recently, in the United States, where the company has established a branch in Dallas, Texas. At present, the orders are still being processed in Hengelo, but a local production facility in the United States is currently at the planning stage.

Ton Marsman is confident that he can meet his growth targets. In the last four years, he has succeeded in turning an enterprise that began literally with a “garage size” production area of 16 sq.m. into a service provider with a production area of 1,500 sq.m. And because the present location in Hengelo is bursting at the seams, Marsman is aiming to move in this September. By then, the new production hall the size of a soccer field in nearby Oldenzaal should be ready. By 2011, Webprint is hoping to achieve sales of 100 million euros with a workforce of 70.