



Small orders: big profits

Since investing in a Brother GT-541 direct-to-garment digital printer, Acorn Printing's small order department hasn't looked back. Images spoke to **Clive Horlor**, the company's managing director, about his decision to 'go digital'...

The last time *Images* visited Acorn Printing, in January 2007, the company had just installed the first M&R Diamondback press in the UK. Talking to Clive Horlor, Acorn's managing director, it transpired that he had travelled to SGIA 06 in Las Vegas a few months beforehand with the intention of investing in a direct-to-garment digital printer for the company's small order department. However, after talking to exhibitors and other visitors the plan changed: Clive came to the conclusion that 'd-to-g' still had some way to go before it became a viable option for his business. He elected to automate the company's screen printing operation instead, returning home to the UK the proud owner of the new Diamondback.

Fast-forward to January 2008 and the UKL Trade Show in Swindon. Clive journeyed south from his Midlands printshop to visit the event and soon fell into conversation with the GS UK representatives who were demonstrating the Brother GT-541 digital printer. Clive decided that the time was now right 'to go digital' and the Brother was the machine he had been looking for: the small order department took delivery of its newest piece of kit a few weeks later, on January 31, 2008. Clive has no reservations about finally taking the plunge into digital: quite the opposite in fact. "In the six months from installation the GT-541 has printed 10,000 garments and has already paid for itself!" he reports. And who wouldn't be satisfied with a return-on-investment period of just six months?

White garments only

So what prompted the move into digital at this particular time? Clive explains that Acorn had been looking to 'get into digital' for more than three years, but his research had identified "major problems" with the earlier direct-to-garment digital systems – mainly related to white ink printing, but also with general reliability issues. "That put me off, but I've long seen the need and the niche for this type of printing, and never more so than at the moment. It's not ready to take over from screen printing, but there is definitely a niche for it in small volume printing."

Clive had seen the Brother machine over in the States and considered it the "best of the bunch", but it is designed for printing onto white garments only and he had assumed he would need a printer for lights and darks. However, the Brother got Clive thinking: following his return from Las Vegas, he implemented a market research survey aimed at discovering the viability of investing in a white garments only printer. This involved Acorn's small order sales team recording the details of every order, including a breakdown of the T-shirt colours, what colours they were printing, the number of shirts and so on.

The results of the research were illuminating, as Clive explains. "I liked the Brother – of all the machines I looked at it was by far the easiest to use in terms of reliability and service – but I still wasn't convinced that it was the right time to make a move into digital until the white ink printing was available. However, the survey confirmed that it was viable – in fact, it has turned out to be far more viable than I had at first imagined. As well as printing onto white T-shirts, we're also printing onto yellows, reds, sky blues, light greens... It has actually opened up a far wider spectrum of week than I had initially anticipated."

Clive declares himself to be "over the moon" with the purchase. "It's easy to use – we treat the GT-451 as a normal inkjet printer – and it's so reliable – not one thing has gone wrong with it in over 10,000 T-shirts," he comments. Clive is quick to add, however, that the GT-541 is an "interim



The Brother GT-451 – a "brilliant machine," according to Acorn Printing's Clive Horlor. The direct-to-garment digital printer has boosted the productivity and profitability not only of the company's small order department, but also its screen printing service.

purchase" until Brother launches a digital printer that can print both CMYK and white inks, (and, hopefully, offers an inline pre-treatment system). "We'll be the first in line to buy that printer when it becomes available," says Clive.

The major benefit of the new digital printer is the labour-savings, Clive explains. He suggests that alternative new technology – transfers, cut and print and so on – is labour-intensive in comparison to the Brother. More over, Acorn was able to put the machine into full production within minutes of installation. "We had an order for 120 shirts to print and we asked the customer if we could hold it back and print it on the new machine," says Clive. "We were printing the job within five minutes."

In practice, many of the small runs that the company would have put on its screen printing presses are now being put on the Brother machine, including runs of up to 100 pieces. This has benefited not only the efficiency of the small order department, but has increased the capacity and profitability of the screen printing department too.

"The manual machines are no longer tied up with the smaller orders, which means we are now able to move the medium-sized jobs – 100 single-colour prints, for example – over to the manual presses," says Clive. "With the medium-sized runs going onto the manuals the automatic is freed up allowing us to go for larger jobs. We're now regularly putting through orders for 1000, 2000, and 4000 shirts on the Diamondback," he adds.

Unique prints

Digital print jobs to date have included an order for a multicolour cartoon print onto children's T-shirts. "We couldn't have screen printed that anyway, and we've repeated the job three or four times already, and it was profitable to do it," says Clive, by way of illustrating the Brother's strengths.

The new printer was also used to print samples of a full-colour Barack Obama T-shirt, for the American-owned, UK-based company, World Post Services. Acorn subsequently printed and supplied several thousands of



The Brother printer is ideal for producing repeat, short run orders of prints such as this full-colour children's cartoon design.

the T-shirts for sale to American ex-pats in Europe, and then supplied the artwork and positives to the company's American T-shirt printer which produced the design for the US market. ([www.ihaveaobamadream.com/.](http://www.ihaveaobamadream.com/))

Other jobs have included the printing of the T-shirts for the opening ceremony of the World Cross Country Championships in Edinburgh. "There were 80-odd countries competing and the runners from each country who led their team into the stadium were wearing a T-shirt printed with their country's flag. Every single one different. We couldn't have done that without the Brother," Clive points out. "It has made it easier to satisfy the small order business – not only in terms of productivity, but also profitability."

There are limitations with any system, and the Brother is no different. Clive declares himself, (and his customers), happy with the machine's print quality, although he concedes that it lacks the "sharp edge and real vibrant colour" of a screen print. Balancing this, however, is the softer hand of the digital prints, which Acorn's customers like. "For small batch work it is brilliant. We've had no returns from the 10,000 prints we've produced on it to date, and no washfastness issues either," Clive confirms.

Moving on and up

The installation of the Brother printer has coincided with Acorn's relocation of its artwork, embroidery and internet sales departments into the building adjacent to its existing printshop, in Canley, Coventry. The new set-up, which occupies 5000 sq. ft., delivers greater efficiencies, a better showroom, better production and room to expand, Clive explains.

Consolidating its operations onto a single site has also promoted the opening of a Trade Counter and Acorn is well on the way to establishing a separate workwear supply service, alongside its internet-based garment decoration business. The Trade Counter at Acorn House carries Dickies and many other major brands of workwear, along with the DeWalt brand of footwear and clothing, and operates as a one-stop-shop for local businesses' industrial clothing needs.

Clive is looking to recruit a sales rep to visit local factories and develop this side of the business. "Ironically, we are travelling in the opposite direction to most other garment decoration businesses," says Clive. "We started out as an internet-based company – we've been trading online under the Acorn name since 2000, (the original website was launched in 1997). Whereas most people are now going onto the internet, we're saying 'we've established our internet business, now let's start looking locally'," he concludes.

As a last word on the company's move into digital printing, Clive has this to say: "The Brother 'does what it says on the tin'. The GT-451 is

completely engineered from scratch, so the heads are designed for what they are going to do, (that is, print onto textiles). I'm delighted with it, it's a brilliant machine, and I'm looking forward to the day when Brother releases a machine for printing white inks. I just wish I'd thought of selling the GT-451 myself!" **f**

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Acorn printed 80-odd unique country flag T-shirts for the opening ceremony of the World Cross Country Championships in Scotland. "We couldn't have done it without the Brother printer," says Clive Horlor.



The company's new Showroom and Trade Counter, (above, centre). Acorn has recently moved its operations onto a single site and launched a new workwear department. The existing printshop (above) is located directly next door, which makes for more efficient working.