

Me & my: Sun Chemical Streamline ESL HPQ inks

By Jenny Roper, Monday 25 November 2013

Third-party inks may be less expensive than OEM, but they haven't always had the best reputation, so can Sun Chemical buck the trend?



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Third party.' A term that, particularly now we're on the home straight to Christmas, is nicely evocative of sparkly frocks, vol-au-vents and those inexplicably moreish cheesy potato snacks that only come out at festive dos.

To printers, the term is less evocative of bubbly and silly hats, and more, unfortunately, of clogged heads, prematurely faded print and all manner of other shriek-inducing issues. Though the term is gradually getting more of a positive rep in the industry, plenty of horror stories do still abound, making many reluctant to switch from OEM to third party inks.

This, until a year ago, was very much N2 Display's stance. And this certainly wasn't down to lack of imagination or unwillingness to dabble in something new.

The company has in fact evolved a great deal since it was established in 1974, rebranding as N2 in 2000 and acquiring Robert Martins Printers and Rustin Clarks later the same decade. Today, it not only offers wide-format exhibition and display work and commercial print to its range of clients. It also has a digital, cross-media arm, tasked with designing websites from scratch, analysing the data pulled in from these and integrated print platforms, and managing brands' social media marketing.

"Within that division, we offer creative, design and marketing services to all sorts of people," says production director James Martins. "We discovered people didn't want to do print campaigns exclusively anymore. Now it's often a web campaign with other elements that go into that."

"We do a lot of work on web portals, so web-to-print. Often the campaign will involve a website, then there's back-up literature available through web-to-print personalisation."

Innovative in many ways, the company was nonetheless conservative when it came to ink choice for its wide-format division, housed just down the road from the other N2 buildings due to needing more space (“When we made our last investment in large-format we didn’t have enough space in the main building. We’re about 900sqm, so didn’t have enough room for the display department, so we’re renting another 280sqm down the road,” says Martins.)

“We’d not been tempted to go for any other replica unbranded inks,” he says regarding inks used on the company’s Canon Océ Arizona and Roland DG XC-540. “The main thing that had put us off before was the uncertainty of what we might buy and the quality of inks. We’ve heard horror stories of people getting into trouble with the machine.”

It’s telling that Martins can’t remember any of the names of the third-party ink companies N2 had briefly considered before dismissing, he points out. “They were companies you’ve never heard of, so it felt like there was no guarantee with them,” he says.

Reputable player

What changed this was consumables supplier Litho Supplies approaching N2 at the end of last year about a new Sun Chemical Streamline ESL HPQ ink, designed as an alternative to the Eco-Sol Max OEM inks used on the XC-540. “Our rep from Litho Supplies came to see us because he knew we had a Roland. The difference was Sun Chemical was a bigger ink manufacturer than the other ones we’d considered, where there’s the uncertainty of whether or not they will be reliable. We’ve used some of their inks in the past, so we know and respect their position in the industry.”

Really clinching it for the company was the availability of a package which included a full audit of the Roland XC-540, and then guarantee that there would be no degradation of it over the next 12 months.

“They came in and did a full service and audit of our machine,” reports Martins. “They checked the state of the heads and made sure they were all suitable for the swap. They made sure the heads weren’t damaged and that there weren’t problems with the machine that would interfere with swapping over.”

He adds: “It was basically a guarantee that if there was any damage, they’d sort it out. You didn’t have that kind of reassurance with the other third-party vendors so we were never tempted before. And those guarantees were coming from Litho Supplies who we’ve done business with for more than 20 years – we respect them.”

This reassurance finally made switching to a cheaper ink than the Roland OEM offering a no-brainer, says Martins. The switch represented a saving of around 45%, which has apparently saved the company around £2,500 so far.

The switchover couldn’t have been easier, according to Martins. “Because the inks are basically the same, there was no flushing process. They put all the inks in and made sure we were happy, but we were still able to use our existing supply of inks if we wanted to. We didn’t have to run our stock to zero, or waste any inks,” he says. “And if we ran out of the Streamline inks for whatever reason, we could still put in the manufacturers’ inks and it would work exactly the same.”

And work exactly the same the inks have. The team hasn't seen any improvement in finished results or drying times, but this wasn't the point. The OEM inks were performing brilliantly. The Sun Chemical inks have just enabled the company to produce exactly the same kind of high-quality work, but at a reduced cost.

Martins explains that a quality result is really crucial to N2's wide-format clients.

"On the Roland, we do self-adhesive vinyl, exhibition signage, vehicle wraps and a lot of POS posters for the cosmetics industry – that's quite high-level, high-end work where the colour is important," says Martins, explaining that the six-colour Roland with light magenta and yellow is excellent for achieving realistic skin tones.

"We're looking for the highest-end print. We're a short-run, bespoke marketing company," he continues. "All our print comes from low-volume high-quality work. We're looking for the best representation of vivid colour and detail and we've noticed no difference in colour replication."

No difference

The company also hasn't noticed any difference in drying times, a crucial factor, says Martins, in these fast-turnaround times. "Because it's solvent-based ink, before you laminate you usually wait 12 to 24 hours for it to vent off. But it's touch dry and serviceable within half an hour to an hour."

And there certainly haven't been any issues caused by ink inconsistencies. Martins reports that using an eco-solvent Roland ink had already reduced the burden of ongoing maintenance work for the N2 team. The Streamline ink has held its own in this respect too.

"Both the OEM and Sun Chemical inks are eco-solvent; they don't require lot of cleaning of the heads. We had a machine before where it was purely solvent and that was a daily clean whereas the eco-solvent is much more environmentally friendly. You don't have to flush it through regularly, so before it was half an hour a day, whereas now it's half an hour a week," says Martins.

He adds: "You would notice if there was something physically wrong with the inks like they were thicker or the drying properties were wrong and were clogging the heads up. That would have become evident in the first six to 12 months and our heads are in exactly the same condition as they were when we started back in January."

Martins would, then, highly recommend fellow XC-540 users make the switch. Sun Chemical adds that this ink can be used on a wide range of Roland printers including the VersaStudio, VersaCamm, VersaArt and SolJet ranges of inkjet printers and printer-cutters. The Streamline wide-format solvent portfolio also features products for Mimaki, Mutoh, HP and Seiko printers.

Certainly for N2 Display the words 'third-party' do in fact bring positive images to mind. For Martins and his team the savings made and the reliability of prints produced are well-worth celebrating.

SPECIFICATIONS

OEM equivalent Eco-Sol Max inks from Roland DG

Compatibility A wide range of Roland printers including the VersaStudio, VersaCamm, VersaArt and SolJet ranges of inkjet printers and printer-cutters

Cartridges Available in pre-filled 440ml cartridges or 1-litre bottles for Sun Chemical's refillable S-Tech bulk systems

Other manufacturers' printers supported by Streamline inks Mimaki, Mutoh, HP, Seiko and Roland DG

Price Pre-filled 440ml cartridges: £55; 1-litre bulk system refills: £75. HP9000/10000, Seiko 64S/100S 1-litre pre-filled cartridges: £90

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Company profile

N2 Visual Communications was originally established as Notaprint in 1974. It rebranded in 2000 and bought Robert Martins Printers and moved from Loughton in Essex to Hoddesdon Hertfordshire in 2008, acquiring Rustin Clark printers in 2009. Today the company is split into three divisions: exhibitions, commercial print and cross-media. Clients include JJB Sports, Millie's Cookies and Pret a Manger.

Why it was bought...

The wide-format arm of the firm N2 Display decided to switch from Roland DG Eco-Sol Max OEM inks on its Roland DG XC-540 to use Sun Chemical's Streamline ESL HPQ inks at the start of the year. The company had toyed with the idea of saving money with third-party inks in the past, but it only felt confident enough to take the plunge when Sun Chemical, a company of significant size and reputation, offered the option.

How it has performed...

The ink has performed perfectly, reports production director James Martins, with no difference in finished result, drying times or maintenance, between this and the OEM ink. "We've noticed no difference in colour replication or drying time or anything. It's as if we are using the OEM inks," he says.