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Bliss hopes to find bliss with production plant

Wis. publisher expects to capture business now going to other printers.

By Hays Goodman
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JANESVILLE, Wis - The floor-to-ceiling glass wall showcasing Bliss Communications' new Koenig & Bauer AG Comet press reflects the robust production firepower the newspaper publisher now wields in the southern Wisconsin marketplace.

The press, housed in Bliss' 54,000-square-foot production facility, went on-edition last fall, producing the flagship Janesville Gazette and other periodicals printed by the family-owned publisher.

Besides adding color capacity, Bliss hopes that the infusion of new equipment, which includes prepress systems from Kodak and Nela and postpress systems from Muller Martini Mailroom Systems Inc. and Quipp Systems Inc. will allow it to bid on jobs that currently go to commercial printers or other rival newspapers, said Chuck Flynn, vice president of production.

Dario Designs Inc. designed the $22 million facility, which was built by local contractor JP Cullen and Sons.

The Comet replaced a 40-year-old machine that provided only limited color capability, Flynn said.

The KBA Comet press and associated equipment are visible through this self- supporting glass wall nt Bliss Communientions' new 54,000 square-foot production plnnt in Janesyille, Wis. Inset, The Comet features a 2-over-2 former configuration, and has five 90-degree KBA Pastoline reelstnnds and a double KBA KF 3 (2:3:3)

Long time coming

The project had been a long time coming: three years, in fact. Bliss envisioned first selecting a press, then essentially designing the building around it.

To that end, the Comet is arranged in a 2-over-2 former configuration, rather than 3-high, Flynn said. This allowed Bliss greater page flexibility without having to add roughly 12 feet more of height to the building.

The 21-inch-cutoff Comet sports five KBA Pastoline reelstands positioned at a 90-degree angle and a double KBA KF 32:3:3 jaw folder.

"The air in this room is being changed at a rate of 63,000 feet per minute," Flynn said about the press hall's design. "This was a big consideration, because in our old pressroom we didn't even control humidity at all. Now we're controlling temperature and humidity in very narrow bands; temperature is held to within about 4 to 5 degrees, and humidity is within 7 or 8 percent."

Fewer variables enable more accurate and repeatable printing results, he said.

"In order to do that, we have a whole mezzanine of HVAC equipment that runs the length of the building. The press heats up as it runs, and if it's too cold to start, you've got quite a difference in ink laydown from beginning to end. So you really have to control your processes."

Alliant Energy supplies power to the facility via two substations, allowing a degree of redundancy that was less expensive than the original plan to protect the plant with a 1.5-megawatt backup generator.

Construction of the plant wrapped up last June, a date that was altered several times, Flynn said. Bliss had to delay construction one month because steel for the roof was unavailable. Assembly was also pushed back because of a viciously cold Wisconsin February, and in spring 2007, a series of downpours further held

Bliss Communications press operator checks registration at the publisher's new production facility in Janesville, Wis.

up construction.

According to Flynn, early results have been promising. The Gazette recently passed the SNAP test with a score of 95 percent and the press crew is eager to meet the coveted 100 percent score. Currently, the new press is running with a "tweaked" ICC color profile carried over from the older press.

Color key factor

The Comet is cloaked with controls from EAE as well as a closed-loop color control system from QuadTech Inc. Crews are about halfway through the process of implementing the QTI system, Flynn said.

Color is an important ingredient in Bliss' plans. Where the old press could only produce 10 pages of color, the Comet can produce 32 pages in full color; splitting the towers delivers another eight spot color pages, Flynn said.

With a typical Gazette containing 24 to 48 pages, Bliss can easily pump the paper with as much color as needed.

"Essentially we have two presses here," Flynn said describing the Comet's configuration.

"We have one tower on the east of the folder, and three towers to the west. We have expansion capability on the east end for adding one more tower, and we can add three more reelstands. So, we'll have a maximum at some point in time when we're lucky enough to get the business to drive it, but we expect at some point in time we'll be able to do 64 pages."

The new plant also features two Trendsetter News 50 thermal computer-to-plate systems from Kodak and an associated punch bender from Nela.

"That made a huge difference in registration issues, right up front," Flynn said about the equipment, which replaced an older fllmsetter.

"It took away one generation of degradation of color, through the variables and variances that we don't have to deal with anymore in the page process."

The prepress area was constructed before Bliss had opted for thermal CTP, so Bliss installed fully motorized black window shades to protect the area from outside light.

Files are transmitted between the production site and Bliss' downtown Janesville editorial headquarters through a 200 megabit-per-second microwave link. A conventional T1 line, with 1.544 megabit-per-second capacity, serves as backup.

Company president Skip Bliss said the expansion was driven by internal business factors, but also that "The KBA Comet is a very flexible press and is well suited to a wide variety of print products ... we definitely will seek out commercial printing work."

Bolstered postproduction

The new plant also features beefed-up packaging and distribution, anchored by a 16:2 SLS-3000 inserter and associated postpress equipment from MMMs and two PackMan wrappers, stackers, bundle distribution equipment and conveyors from Quipp. " O u r preprint volume has grown so much since our [original] building was constructed, and our SLS-1000 inserter was so overwhelmed that we had to revert to hand inserting, so there are tremendous efficiencies to be had," Bliss said.

Flynn said the new postpress equipment performed well during the heavy Thanksgiving holiday period, enabling crews to package the Nov 23. (Friday) edition of the Gazette in less time than anticipated.

Touts delivery system

Flynn also cited the facility's new Quipp Grip III gripper conveyor as critical. "The gripper is the big thing. Picking them up off the press and making it a good stack, that we can put down here and get ready to feed in, so we get a good edge to run through the jackets is the beginning of the process. Getting consistency in the product is critical to getting inserts and jackets and packets to run correctly in the inserter. So the gripper and the Quipp 500 stackers are critical."

The double-out folder allows Bliss to essentially split the press into two pieces, often producing the same product but in two simultaneous streams.

"Our conveyor system allows us to handle both of those streams, one on the belt conveyor and the other on the gripper conveyor. The Quipp gripper conveyor picks them up and drops them into stackers that we use. We actually hand stack down off the stackers, as we're not coupled directly to our inserter."