

David Thomas, Managing Director of ArtSystems, the specialist wide format printing and imaging distributor looks at the issues facing copy shops looking to invest in inkjet printers.

With such an array of inkjet solutions from different manufacturers available, how can a bureau owner decide which one to invest in? The decision should be based on a number of criteria.

Firstly, take into account your customer base and their present and future requirements. Is most of your work CAD based line drawings and office documents, or high end graphics such as posters? Or are your customers' needs diverse – do you need to invest in more than one machine to maximise sales turnover, such as a desktop plus a large format?

Good suppliers should be able to explain which systems are aimed at which market. Basically, for CAD output speed, accuracy of lines and resolution are the most important features – take the hp designjet 500 and 1000 for example. For printing graphics, it's important to have more RAM in the printer, six colours rather than four, postscript compatibility and a larger hard drive size. This is because graphical documents can be huge in memory size compared to CAD drawings and need more processing power.

On the consumables side, large ink reservoirs for cost effectiveness and greater unattended printing times are key for graphics production. The ability to switch between dye and UV inks is also a bonus for moving between different poster printing applications – the hp designjet 5500 would make an ideal graphics solution for all these reasons.

Capital cost and return on investment also come into the equation, and need to be carefully calculated (see panel). Copy shops looking to invest in complete solutions should look at the finance options on offer, such as that made available by ArtSystems via our resellers, to reduce the initial capital outlay and help with return on investment.

On a similar track, find out if your old printers can be traded in. Hewlett Packard have a trade in trade up scheme on designjets from the 800 42" and above - www.artsystems.co.uk/tradein.htm can be used to find out the trade in values.

But don't just take into account current needs – future growth is key to success. You should be looking to expand your services, whether over a larger geographical area or into different markets. For instance, you may decide to expand from a mostly CAD arena into graphics, or increase your throughput of a similar kind of work by expanding your clientele base.

Considering future requirements means not only buying the right printers, but also software such as the RIP. A basic RIP that comes with a printer is often enough to handle your initial requirements, but it's better to invest in an external RIP such as Onyx RipCenter, because it is modular RIP and can be upgraded to accommodate multiple printers from multiple manufacturers, and

process several jobs simultaneously. This functionality is important for future requirements, as you may find yourself adding a printer such as the eco-solvent Mutoh Rockhopper to your portfolio for outdoor signage – and you won't want to have to invest in another RIP too. A RIP such as Onyx will be able to run both your desktop and wide format printers.

As a distributor we bundle products (including hardware, software and support) to provide complete, tried and tested solutions – such as a hp designjet 5500 with Onyx RIP plus a GMP Excelam laminator and Fotoba Digitrim. These bundles also ensure that should anything go wrong you have one point of call, rather than different manufacturers simply blaming each other – total system responsibility.

Deskjet printers add another dimension to purchasing and workflow. You could buy a desktop printer which is high on speed for monochrome printing, but you may also want to handle graphics such as A4 posters. Look out for printers such as the hp designjet 10, 20 and 50ps which are six-colour and are ideal for low volume A3+ colour printing in addition to CAD output.

If you find you are putting a lot of A4/A3 work through a desktop printer, it could be worth looking at utilising the RIP functions such as the nesting capability of Onyx. You could then print multiple copies on your wide format printer, which would be faster, even including trimming, and as such, more cost effective than using the desktop.

You may also find this a good option as wider format printers such as the hp designjet 5500 are compatible with a more comprehensive range of media, giving a wider choice for your customers. Also, take into account the restrictions in productivity and format size which come with desktop printers. Developments are always being made – for instance, hp has launched the designjet 100 for CAD and GIS output, which can now print up to A1.

It's a matter of understanding your business needs and ambitions, and then managing your workflow in the most productive way.

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