

SLP trots out N.C. plate facility, affirms commitment

By Tara McMeekin

Editor

Southern Lithoplate Inc. this month will flip the switch on a multimillion-dollar, 50,000-square-foot manufacturing facility that will boost by 33 percent the company's capacity to meet newspaper and commercial printer demands for digital and analog plates.

The Litho Center, built on SLP's existing Wake Forest, N.C., corporate campus, boasts 75 million square feet of plate output capacity, said Steve Mattingly, SLP's vice president of marketing. The plant will produce SLP's flagship Viper thermal newspaper plate and Cobra commercial thermal plate lines.

"It's independent of the facility we (now) have in Wake Forest — with its own air, its own water and its own power," Mattingly said. "If the Wake Forest facility goes down, we've still got the Litho Center running and they're redundant with each other."

The Litho Center brings to three the number of SLP's plate facilities, including the Jackson, Tenn., plant the vendor acquired when it snapped up Citiplate in 2006. In addition to the Citiplate violet line, SLP integrated production of the Viper and Cobra lines in Jackson.

All told, SLP now has some 300 million square feet of serviceable plate capacity among the three sites, Mattingly said.

Commitment to newspapers

The Litho Center reflects SLP's commitment to newspapers, Mattingly said, and comes even as the industry continues to wrestle with economic challenges that plague publishers and vendors alike.

"Newspapers are trying to figure out how to handle rising paper costs and decreasing ad revenues," Mattingly said.

"Despite the unsettled marketplace, Mattingly said SLP has seen digital plate consumption surge over the past three years, fueled in part by newspapers tapping into commercial revenue streams.

"Our analog customers from 2004 who are now digital in 2007, are buying 45



Photo: Southern Lithoplate

Southern Lithoplate's new in-line lithoplate graining facility at the Litho Center in Wake Forest, N.C.

percent more plates in 2007 due to additional commercial, color, zoning and niche products," he said. "If newspapers go CTP, they'll make significant strides in driving bigger profit dollars."

SLP has long touted its CTP Alliance as a one-stop shopping tool that publishers can leverage as they migrate to digital production. The Alliance, formed in 2006, includes SLP, Screen USA, Prestelligence Inc., Polkadots Software Inc., ProImage and Nela, all of which agreed to market and support each other's products.

"The vendors we've partnered with are developing products that we've asked them to develop based on what customers are telling us they need," he said.

Customizing to demand

Screen's PlateRite 2000LE CTP plate-setter, for example, was developed specifically for the SLP CTP Alliance. The plate-setter is suited to the smaller publisher, with an output of 26 plates per hour.

"We customized it from the PlateRite 2000S model based on what customers asked for," said Marc Crawford, Screen's

product manager for output solutions. "This was specific to the CTP Alliance, and it's also based on what Southern brings to the table."

Nela's Classic II bender, meantime, caters to Alliance customers as well.

"The CTP Alliance enables us to get in touch with the small- to medium-size newspaper operations, and to customize our offering for this industry sector," said Jurgen Gruber, director of sales. "We are constantly striving to better understand the needs of this changing market and provide them with product offerings that specifically meet those needs."

Workflow vendors ProImage, Prestelligence and Polkadots have also come to the table with scaled back, less-expensive versions of their flagship products, which are offered through the Alliance.

Driving down costs

The partnership has succeeded in driving down costs associated with deploying CTP, Mattingly said.

"We're stripping down the bells and whistles that don't need to be there and we're offering fully featured products

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with upgrade path potential, and the market is paying significantly less for it," Mattingly said. "Two years ago there was not a platesetter in the market for less than \$100,000, including [those from vendors that cater to smaller papers] and now they're between \$65,000 and \$95,000."

Software and plate prices have followed suit, he said.

SLP also touts the 24/7 support offered through the Alliance.

Jim Lillagore, regional production director for the Hickory (N.C.) Daily Record, said partnering with a vendor that

makes itself accountable for all aspects of service was a requirement for the Media General daily, because he's familiar with the finger-pointing that can occur when multiple vendors are involved.

Although the Alliance didn't exist when the Daily Record initially converted to CTP, the paper has been an Alliance customer for the past year and got first-hand experience dealing with support when one of its plate processing ovens went down.

"Within hours SLP brought one to us from their facility outside of Raleigh and the paper did go out on time," Lillagore

said. "Other problems have been minor in nature but most of the calls are made in the middle of the night and we have received immediate response." —*NT*

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SLP to continue analog, violet lines

Southern Lithoplate Inc. will continue to supply both analog and violet plates, but has no plans to beef up those product lines.

"There is upside pressure on analog plate pricing because of aluminum and energy, but we're not going to quit making the plates," said Steve Mattingly SLP's vice president of marketing.

Despite the fact SLP has capacity

for violet on one of its new lines at the Litho Center, Mattingly said SLP will limit violet production to its Jackson, Tenn., facility.

"We have no intentions of manufacturing more violet plates because thermal is a better solution," he added.

SLP engineered its three platemaking facilities to mirror each other, ensuring an uninterrupted supply of

plates, Mattingly said.

"We can make Viper plates on any manufacturing line we need to make them on rather than having to keep particular lines to particular technologies."

SLP is also a developing no-process technology for both thermal and violet plates, Mattingly said, but won't release it to the market until it's "bulletproof and affordable."