

Idealgraphics expands its offer for retail and events thanks to direct printing on fabric

With a new 1,200 sqm facility and a fabric printing, cutting, and stitching workflow based on an ATPColor DFP-56EW, the Piedmontese company is diversifying and growing.

by Lorenzo Villa

Son of a dynasty of restaurateurs, passionate about computer science and electronics, Riccardo Alibani began working in events and concerts in the early 2000s and developed a passion for the graphic and communication aspects of that world. In 2006, together with his future partner, he went to Rome to visit an exhibition about photography and digital printing. Exploring the booths, the two were struck by the potential of large format printing and made a sudden and shared decision.

"Coming out of the pavilion, we set out to create a company specializing in graphics, digital printing, and fittings. On the return trip, we started planning the necessary investments," Alibani says.

Idealgraphics was born in 2007 in a small room in Cerano (NO), where they installed a Mimaki JV3 printer, a Mimaki CG-FX cutting plotter, and a calender. In the following months, to cope with the growth in volumes, the company bought more Mimaki JV33 printers, and in 2009, it moved to a 400 m² site in Trecate (NO). In 2011, Sabrina Infante, an expert in business management, joined the company and became a 50% partner with Alibani.

With 90% of their clientele being agencies, Idealgraphics established itself as a trusted service for the creation of complex projects and expanded its fleet with a DGI Megajet 3.2-meter-wide solvent printer, a Mimaki UJF-3042 for customizing gadgets, and a Xerox X2 for printing paper for lamination and billboards. In 2012, the company installed its first UV flatbed printer, a Grapo Manta, and a Kongsberg XP44 digital flatbed cutting table. The Grapo Manta was replaced in 2014 with an HP Scitex FB700, joined later by HP Latex LX850 and LX1500 printers. The breakthrough came in 2018 when Idealgraphics purchased a swissQprint Nyala and a Kongsberg C64 flatbed cutting table. Despite the impact of the pandemic, the company decided to take on a double challenge in the summer of 2020:

introducing dye-sublimation printing on fabric, with an ATPColor DFP56-EW, and purchasing a new location. In addition, since March 2021, the flatbed printing department has been enriched with a swissQprint Nyala 2.

With a team of 5 people, Idealgraphics has developed a turnover of one million euros (2019).

Multifaceted and dedicated to solving complex problems

Thanks to a multidisciplinary and close-knit team, Idealgraphics can realize turnkey projects of any kind, starting from the customer's idea and managing graphic design and CAD drawing, photo retouching, printing, finishing, and installation, all internally. For ancillary works, the company has set up a small department in the new premises to carry out carpentry work, as well as creating and shipping kits. Typography and promotional clothing, on the other hand, are partially entrusted to partners.

"It happens that an agency orders ten panels from us, and the next week asks for 600 more. Only by being prepared for such peaks can we be effective," Alibani explains. "Clients see us as a problem solver, fast and cheap, who never says no."

Although the production of panels, shaped materials, posters, and displays constitutes the most relevant portion of the turnover, Idealgraphics focuses on realizing multi-material projects, point of sale and shop-in-shop fittings; supplying lightboxes with artwork replacement service; and providing solutions for interior decoration.

"We know how to be competitive, but we make every effort to get out of the logic of price. That's why we don't have a catalog of references, but we build each product in a tailored fashion so that it is unique and difficult to imitate," explains Infante. "To do this, we had to equip ourselves with all kinds of printing and finishing technology, and above all, the skills to use them to the fullest."

Printing on fabric, from intuition to strategic project

Through 2019, the use of polyester fabric for indoor and outdoor applications was also an exception for Idealgraphics. The company, in fact, periodically produced polyester products printed with a 3.2-meter-wide HP Latex 1500 and purchased sublimation-printed flags and banners from a subcontractor. But the printer's interest in fabric printing was rekindled when that contractor decided to go out of business.

"We had already perceived fabric's potential for growth, especially in the field of exhibition and point-of-sale set-ups, but we had other investment priorities," Alibani explains. "Initially, we were thinking about a new partnership or a compact machine. But then we decided to get serious."

The shift in thinking was sparked by a comparison between latex and UV prints on polyester — less vivid, as well as prone to scratches and creases — and those produced by sublimation, whose optical, chromatic, tactile, and mechanical results are surprising.

With the path now marked, the choice of formats and equipment was less obvious. For example, is it better to have a 5-meter machine, to capture a broader range of processing, or a 3-meter machine, more compact and compatible with the existing printing and cutting flow? Is it better to print directly on fabric, perhaps with an in-line sublimation unit, or print on transfer paper and use an external calender for sublimation?

Idealgraphics concluded that the most suitable choice is a 3.3-meter-wide printer for direct-to-fabric printing, with an in-line sublimation unit. Specifically, the company relied on the Italian manufacturer ATPColor, from which it purchased a DFP56EW, capable of producing up to 119 sqm/h at 600 dpi, with a drop size of 7 pl. The chosen configuration is CMYK plus two channels of TCT penetrating fluid, used to print flags and double-sided backdrops in a single pass.

"By analyzing our job orders, we concluded that 5-meter prints represented a minimal portion of them. In addition, we needed a compact, low-energy system," Alibani explains. "We chose ATPColor for a mix of quality, performance, compactness, ease of use, low investment values, and low energy consumption."

Obtaining printed fabric ready to be finished translates for Idealgraphics to more intuitive operations and less need for operators to load and unload rolls.

"The fabric market is still marginal, and overinvesting or burdening our workflows would have been illogical," Infante points out. "We want the best technologies, but they have to be compatible with the budget and not impact the price of the finished product too much."

Additional pluses of ATPColor's offering include no annual service contracts and the simplicity of routine operator-performed maintenance.

Ready to serve new markets

As for most printers, the textile proposal of Idealgraphics does not come from explicit customer demand but from the desire to offer a new and distinctive product.

"So far, only a few fitters have spontaneously asked us to replace PVC with fabric, but most customers are beginning to perceive its aesthetic value," Infante points out. "Eco-sustainability, although not a priority, is also an issue."

Idealgraphics progressively expands its collection of fabrics that includes materials for high-quality flags, mono-elastic polyesters for tubular displays, backlites, and fabrics for backdrops with white or black backs. To these are added flagpoles, profiles for lightboxes, and structures for drop flags. In parallel, the company team has developed a workflow to prepare and optimize files, color management, printing, and finishing. For cutting, Idealgraphics exploits the 3.3 m format of the Kongsberg C64, equipped with a conveyor belt and RotaCut tool to cut the fabric. For sewing, the company initially collaborated externally with a seamstress, then permanently inserted them in the staff.

Six months after installation, the DFP56-EW is already active 8 hours a day, six days a week—an achievement made possible by the introduction of new products and the migration of orders from latex and UV. With the hoped-for restart of trade shows and events in the second half of 2021, the goal is to double current production volumes.

Lightboxes are among the most successful products, while in the decorative field, the company has designed tables, lighting fixtures, furniture accessories, and fabric wallpapers.

Triple the space and sustainability to keep growing

To reduce the environmental impact of its products, Idealgraphics purchases polyester produced from recycled raw materials and supports customers in developing the cleanest methods for disposing and recycling the printed material. Thanks to the use of the fabric, light and easily foldable, the printer has also considerably reduced the volume and weight of its shipments, which have long been characterized by cardboard packaging and PVC-free bubble wrap.

In April 2021, to support increased orders from agencies, direct customers, and other printers, Idealgraphics moved its operations and equipment to a new 1,200 sqm building, which the company purchased and renovated. With more space and a production layout

optimized for handling, printing, and packaging large semi-finished products, the company aims to consolidate its extra-large fabric printing offerings for booth and point-of-sale displays and further diversify its product and service portfolio.



The 3.3-meter-wide ATPColor DFP-56EW sublimation printer installed by Idealgraphics in 2020.



The swissQprint Nyala UV printer.



Direct-to-fabric printing and dye sublimation on ATPColor DFP56-EW.



Material cutting with Kongsberg C64 digital cutting table.



Fabric stitching.



Realization of a backlit box with fabric printing.



The Idealgraphics team: on the left, Riccardo Alibani, and in the middle, Sabrina Infante.



The new company headquarters in Trecate (NO).