

Digital Dogma



*No flexo, no offset, no screen. Just digital labels
with fast turnaround.*

By Jack Kenny

As defined by one dictionary, *dogma* is “an authoritative principle, belief or statement of ideas or opinion, especially one considered to be absolutely true.” This is the story of a company called Digital Dogma, founded not long ago by a cheerful pair of cousins, who can’t help but laugh every time they tell the story about how their business got its name.

“We were just throwing out a bunch of names one night,” says Matt Walsh. “We wanted to have ‘digital’ in the name, of course, and I liked Digital Generation.”

“So we sent an email to my brother – he’s a good businessman and we include him in a lot of discussions – with some of the names we were thinking of,” adds Paul Mulcahey. “And he said, ‘Those sound like a bunch of dogs! How about Digital Dogma?’”

“Dogma is a belief,” Walsh says, “and we have a deep belief in digital.”

By digital, he means digital label printing. Digital Dogma, located in Santa Fe Springs, CA, USA, a suburb of

Los Angeles, prints only using HP Indigo digital presses. No flexo, no offset, no screen.

Mulcahey and Walsh started the business in 2003 fully intending to produce only digital labels with rapid turnaround, and today they have a successful company that supplies their own customers as well as the trade. Their shop is a spacious place, with a large lounge and a gleaming production area that has the aura of a showroom for HP Indigo presses and the finishing equipment of AB Graphic International.

As far as the industry knows, only two digital-only label converters exist in North America (Lightning Labels of Denver, CO, USA, is the other). What was the impetus to take such a risk and embrace digital printing to the exclusion of all other processes? Mulcahey’s answer is simple: “We wanted to see the future.”

The cousins have a rich past together in the flexo industry. “In 1956, our grandfather, Paul Walsh, started Universal Label, not far from here, and through the years

our dads got involved,” Mulcahey says. “We grew up in the family business, working part-time through school, working summers. Then in 1991 my dad was forced to retire because of a heart attack. Matt came on board to work in sales, and for 10 years we were together at Universal Label, working for Matt’s dad. Universal is mainly a trade shop – not much direct sales, mostly broker work.

“We wanted to get into digital printing, and we proposed the idea to Universal Label. I was in charge of the plant, which has eight presses. We had Label Traxx installed so we were evaluating everything: job costing down to the penny, materials, everything. We did a lot of short run work. Based on that, I came up with the idea to go with the Indigo. I really got interested when HP got involved. I had experience with other manufacturers in the flexo world: foreign support was not there, providing parts, I had a lot of headaches with that. When I saw HP jump on board with Indigo, that’s when I came on.



Matt Walsh (left) and Paul Mulcahey entertain a visitor in their comfortable office in Santa Fe Springs, CA.

“Universal Label turned it down. They are strictly a flexo house, and wanted to stay with what they knew,” Mulcahey adds. “That’s a fair decision. We felt that it was time to move on. We wanted to see the future.”

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Paul Mulcahey (right) and Matt Walsh

“My dad understood what we wanted to do, and was happy for us,” Walsh recalls, adding that there was no drifting of business from the old company to the new. “We actually do trade work for them. Our capabilities allow them to sell a product they couldn’t sell before.”

“Universal Label’s type of work is mostly two- and three-color, spot color work, not much process work, so there wasn’t much competition between us,” says Mulcahey. “We’re still very close with them.”

So there they were, with an idea that had occurred to only one other company. “We didn’t have any customers, any whales, per se,” says Mulcahey. “It was kind of the theory of ‘build it and they will come.’”

And no flexo. “A digital press is such an expensive piece of equipment to buy and start a business with, so we wanted to focus our efforts 100 percent in feeding the beast, rather than trying to do flexo and do a lot of different types of printing,” says Walsh. “It’s hard to try to do both. Our efforts are very concentrated on bringing orders in for this press.”

They did the usual startup dance: borrowed some money (“not a lot,” says Mulcahey), didn’t take salaries for nearly two years, refinanced a home. Their first home was subleased space in a plant with another company whose business methods differed from theirs, so they were eager to find their own accommodations early on.

“That first year it was just Paul and me,” says Walsh. “Paul would run

the press and diecut. I’d be on the phone during the day doing sales, talking to trade sources trying to generate business. Then I would rewind at night, and he would be printing at night.”

“The first two years we got to work at 7 in the morning and would go to bed at 1 o’clock the next morning. Then we would do the same thing the next day, and the next.”

“It was exciting, though,” notes Walsh, “because right off the bat, sales were starting to come in. With our backgrounds in print since we were little kids, we knew a lot of people in the industry, so that helped.”

Walsh focuses on sales, and Mulcahey on production and accounting. “But we both do sales,” Walsh says. “Now that we have employees we have more time to look at sales.”

“I think it’s great for production people to do sales,” Mulcahey adds.

More space, new equipment

Digital Dogma’s first HP Indigo press, acquired in 2003, was a ws4000. The second, a ws4050, came along in 2005. “In the old Indigo days, before HP, they wanted you to buy two presses so that one of them could be down for maintenance. That’s actually why we bought our second press,” Mulcahey says. “The down situation is good; general maintenance is about a half hour a day. If a machine goes down, for the most part it’s just for a day. There have been several times when one press is down for a day, and we needed the other press. We are not at capacity with these presses. We run only one shift, and we have only one and a half operators on them now. I’m not a big night shift guy.”

In 2006, Walsh and Mulcahey moved into their new home in Santa Fe Springs, an expansive 7,000 square foot space. With business continuing to grow, the roster of employees has expanded to six (in addition to the owners): Heather



Nick Clesceri operates a rewinder

Long, inside sales; Maria Montes, reception; Mark Puente, art; David Saxton, press operator; Nick Clesceri, rewinder, and Rafael Quiroz, diecutter.

Digital Dogma's shop contains more of AB Graphic's finishing equipment than it does presses. There are two Digicon diecutting and lamination units; a Digicoat, for applying the coatings required on all substrates used on the HP Indigo machines; a high end inspection rewinder, and another rewinder. "We went with AB Graphic from the start, and we are certainly glad that we did," says Mulcahey. The company also uses only flexible dies from Kocher + Beck, and manages the business flow with Label Traxx from Tailored Solutions.

The company prints some wine labels, and also labels for the gift market, nutraceuticals, cosmetics, and food and beverage. "We are definitely a regional company right now," says Walsh, "and we provide a very quick turnaround." A good share of the business is with the printing trade, he adds, and 900 to 1,000 feet of material is about the average for a print run. Substrates are divided equally between paper and polypropylene.

Mulcahey and Walsh are looking forward to a special delivery in the near future. They have acquired a WS6000 HP Indigo press, probably the first one sold in the United States. They went to Labelexpo Americas in Chicago back in September and took a look at the new machine, and decid-



ed that Digital Dogma wanted one. It's an industrial strength digital press, faster than its earlier siblings and with a much longer repeat. "The week we got back from Labelexpo we were getting quotes for 30" labels. It was bizarre," notes Mulcahey.

Also on the agenda for the future is, possibly, a second plant. "We are toying with the idea of opening another location, we don't know where. We have some thoughts about surrounding states, maybe up north, though we don't want to get into the wine market. We are kicking that around. When we bring the 6000 here we might move one of the others out." ●

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