



Best of the Best Top Shops of 2008

By Denise M. Gustavson

Between December 2007 and February 2008, readers of *Wide-Format Imaging* submitted nomination forms for an opportunity to be included in the prestigious list of the Top Shops of North America. The forms were collated and compared and the final list is included on page 18—ranked from highest to lowest by 2007 total year revenue as reported by the shops.

No two of the businesses are alike and their backgrounds are as diverse as their product mix. And this year, all of them hail from the US. Some have a single location, while others do business out of multiple locations over a wide geography.

The companies averaged out at a little over 22 years old, with our oldest topping out at 82 years (OCB Reprographics, 1926) while The Image House came in as the newest, established in 2005. This year's list includes 93 total locations, with 22 more planned for 2008—double the number from 2007.

The Top Shops offer a range of capabilities to their customers. As an average, 50.50 percent of the top shops' output is wide-format (36-96 inches in width), followed by grand-format (96-inches plus) at 26.74 percent, medium-format (24-35 inches) with 15.03 percent, and the remaining 7.74 percent in small-format, 14-inches and smaller documents.

While banners and signs (22.03 percent) make up the largest application on average for the shops, engineering drawings (13.28 percent), exhibit and trade-show graphics (11.47 percent), and retail and POP displays (12.38 percent), are bringing in a lion's share of revenue for these companies. Fine art applications (8.79 percent), backlit (6.60 percent), fleet and vehicle graphics (6.12 percent), billboards (5.41 percent), posters (5.28 percent), fabric and textiles (3.91), and specialty applications (3.47 percent round out the rest of the applications. But what's next?

Presidents and owners mentioned various applications and technologies that are on the horizon for 2008 and 2009. Flatbed printers were on the minds of nearly half of the top shops—some as new installs, others for additional capacity. Vehicle graphics and custom interiors—including wall murals, wall graphics, and textiles—were also hot topics for many. According to Paul Lienthal, president of Pictura Graphics, he is looking to expand his company's custom graphic applications to include corporate environments and interiors as well as various branded environments and solutions.

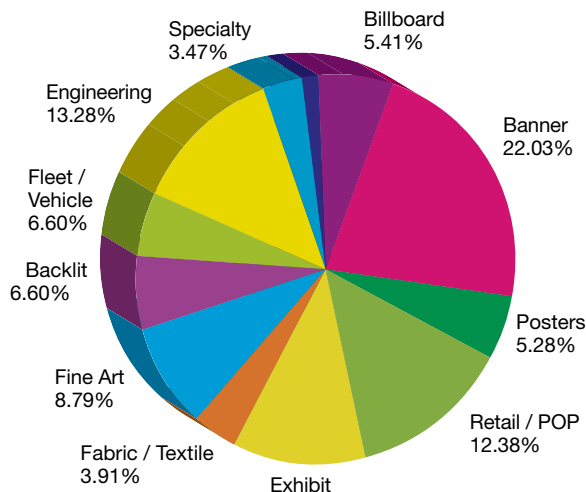
What technologies will impact their business the most? For some, it's all about the software—from online document management, archiving solutions, web-based CRM systems, and web-based online ordering systems. Variable data applications, electronic signs, and scanning systems were also top of mind.

But what seems to be an even larger focus has been the environment—both for their businesses internally and for the products they are producing.

"Ferrari Color expects to continue its movement toward more sustainable printing options," said Kirk Green, president of Ferrari Color. "During 2007, we changed out almost all of the solvent printers in favor of more friendly UV print options. As more businesses look to create their messages with a sustainable approach, we expect to continue offering the choices these discriminating firms require."

"The expansion of existing 'eco' imaging materials and technology to meet the demands from our clients and the marketplace," said Lienthal. "There is a distinct need to keep abreast and invest in state-of-the-art technologies to be a long-term, sustainable company."

Applications



Business Challenges

The road to the top, though, is not an easy one to make. Time, effort—blood, sweat, and tears in some cases—and money has been invested over the course of years and for some, decades. But with an uncertain economic forecast for the coming year, where do these shops see their greatest business challenge going forward? For some, it's keeping up with technology. For other's it's the need to continually meet and exceed customer expectations—day in and out. Hiring and keeping quality employees are also high on owners' minds.

"The most significant challenge facing us is the same challenge faced by our entire industry: economic stability," said Scott Perkinson, Perkinson Reprographics Inc. "Fluctuations in the economy often steer a company's focus from what's really important. In our three decades in business, we've weathered economic storms by strengthening our service and focusing on meeting customers' needs rather than going into a bunker mentality, which only serves to aggravate economic challenges. We'll manage the economic downturn by continuing to focus on what has made us successful through the years—serving our customers with integrity, knowledge, and quality. Everything else is a detail."



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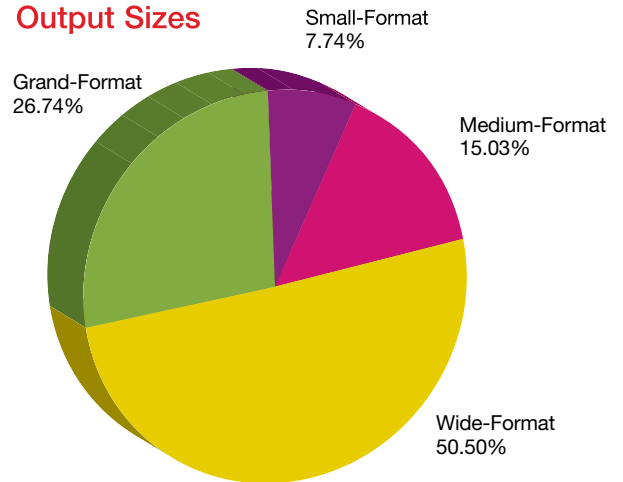
"Fiscal pressures will prompt our clients to cut non-compulsory budget items such as advertising, marketing, and travel, which are part of our core markets," said Spencer Jacobson from NYC's ImageKing VS. "We will reevaluate our company's projections for growth and profitability which in turn, will challenge us to make needed equipment and technological investments that we require to remain ahead of our competitors."

Mike Tardy with Dimensional Screen & Digital has similar thoughts. "The biggest challenge for us is to maintain profitability in a market where many of our retail accounts are concerned about the economic future. Budgets are being scrutinized and we have to find creative ways to stretch their advertising dollar."

"The printing industry is built on a dual platform of change and communication," said Jittu Sarna, Inkjet International. "We believe the challenge will be in uncovering new opportunities, new applications, and new customers amidst an apparent environment of 'pullback' due to the current economic situation."

"Economic unsurity, changing markets, globalization, shifting technology, and even politics will most certainly cast their lights on our industry," said Kevin O'Hea, Academy Reprographics.

Output Sizes



"While we wait for the economy to plot its course, we cannot sit on our hands to await the outcome. I must take all of the information available to me and decide what tact we should take. We will continue to thrive with a firm plan in mind, but, in the words of the U.S. Marines, 'Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome'."

For all wide-format print providers, technology plays a huge role. Keeping up with technology and making sure equipment is in tip-top shape is very important. Staff also plays a huge role. Between hiring the right person to making sure they are properly trained, personal issues could either be a perfect solution or a business disaster.

"We have a high dependency on technology, which is operated by a modest, but highly-skilled workforce. It is therefore vital that our printers and staff are quick and reliable, and both meet these requirements," said Nancy Ross, Precision Color. "The challenge is to add value through services and to continue delivering high-quality prints with ever-shorter turnarounds, at competitive prices."

"We are always trying to blend our technology with the right people to operate them," said Scott Snoyer, FastSigns. "It is like the old saying, 'you are only as strong as your weakest link.' We strive to be the best in whatever area we are operating in so strengthening the chain is always in the forefront."

"Since our beginning as a small blueprint company in 1972, being responsive to change has been one of the primary reasons for Triangle's success," said Reg Garner, Triangle Reprographics. "Against the flow of today's economy, we've made a significant investment to embrace wide-

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format, flatbed printing technology. The challenge over the next several months will be finding new vertical markets and understanding the applications for our Durst Rho 800 and Kongsberg Cutter that is scheduled to arrive in April 2008. Training our production staff, salespeople, and customers on all that it has to offer will certainly be challenging."

"Our biggest challenge will continue to be managing our resources to expand our capabilities and capacity without diminishing the unique customer experience that we are known for," said Tom Trutna, Ink Big. "We manage growth by adding equipment when capacity levels exceed 80 percent."

"Our biggest challenge will be to continue to keep up with growing client demands. The fact that more and more clients are working with even shorter deadlines than ever before requires a much deeper base of equipment and personal commitment to delivering the best product and service in our industry," said Randy A. Crow, Source One Digital.

"Emphasis will continue to be placed upon the utilization of

new service technologies to improve upon our customers' ability to do business with us," said Lillenthal. "Customer expectations for production turnaround times continue to be aggressive, which we will proactively address through increased technological and human resources. The increase competition in the marketplace provides for alternatives for our customers if we cannot deliver on our promise. We simply have to get better and strong every day."

For Jason Sweet, XL Digital Imaging, it's more than just technology. It's also about managing customers' expectations and price control. "Without a doubt, our biggest challenge in the coming 12 months is the price pressure we are seeing in our billboard business," said Sweet. "We are dealing with it in a number of ways, including maintaining an extremely high level of customer service to differentiate ourselves."

"Our biggest challenge will continue to be educating both our clients and the reprographic industry on the benefits of Digital Services in a 'Global Economy'," said Chuck Hayes,

CEO of OCB Inc. "We must also diversify our services amongst non-traditional industries in order to not be so dependent on the AEC Industry alone. This is an exciting time for our industry, but change will continue to be imminent."

But more and more, it's the green or sustainable business practices which will be the most challenging going forward.

"Crush is excited to continue our commitment to the challenge of reducing our environmental footprint," said Barry Polan.

"In 2007, we began our green efforts on multiple phases. Phase I included simple tasks such as switching all incandescent bulbs to compact fluorescent bulbs, changing all the insulation, and adding flapper doors. In Phase II, we switched out our forklifts for electrical forklifts and our delivery vehicles for low emission vehicles. We also began purchasing power allocations that guarantee the power to be generated by wind-mills for our NY facility." Additionally, Crush/Merisel will be moving its Portland team into a new office. The space is a completely 'green' building, generating and recycling its own energy.

"This is just the beginning for us," said Polan. "Moving forward, dedication to corporate social responsibility is essential to any business that plans on succeeding."

Top Shops 2008

Rank	Company	Location	Web Address
1.	Thomas Reprographics Inc.	Richardson, TX	www.thomasrepro.com
2.	OCB Reprographics	Irvine, CA	www.ocbinc.com
3.	Crush Creative	Burbank, CA	www.crushcreative.com
4.	GSG	New York, NY	www.gsgnyc.com
5.	Ferrari Color	Salt Lake City, UT	www.ferrari-color.com
6.	Perkinson Reprographics Inc.	Phoenix, AZ	www.pri.us
7.	Sharpe Images	Winston-Salem, NC	www.sharpeimages.com
8.	ImageKing Visual Solutions	New York, NY	www.imagekingvs.com
9.	Source One Digital	North Shores, MI	www.sourceonedigital.com
10.	Triangle Reprographics	Orlando, FL	www.trianglerepro.com
11.	Pictura Graphics	Minneapolis, MN	www.picturagraphics.com
12.	Inkjet International	Dallas, TX	www.inkjetintl.com
13.	Point Imaging	Hobart, IN	www.pointimaging.com
14.	ProlabWest Inc.	Seattle, WA	www.prolabwest.com
15.	Composing Room	St. Louis, MO	www.composingroom.com
16.	XL Digital Imaging LP	Dallas, TX	www.xldigital.com
17.	Mathison's Co.	Fargo, ND	www.mathisons.com
18.	Vista Color Imaging Inc.	Cleveland, OH	www.vistacolorimaging.com
19.	Precision Color Digital Imaging	Las Vegas, NV	www.pcolordi.com
20.	Big Ink Display Graphics	Eagan, MN	www.inkbig.com
21.	Academy Reprographics	Albuquerque, NM	www.acadrepro.com
22.	MegaPrint Inc.	Plymouth, NH	www.megaprint.com
23.	Dimensional Silk Screen	San Diego, CA	www.dimensionalsilkscreen.com
24.	Fast Signs	Antioch, TN	www.fastsigns.com/210
25.	The Image House	Merrillville, IN	www.theimagehouse.net

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"We see an increased movement to 'greener' production methods as one of the best things happening in our industry," said Green. "Ferrari Color sees 2008 as the year that we make additional investments in more earth friendly materials and processes. While some may see this change as challenge, Ferrari Color view this as an opportunity to provide our clients with a more sustainable approach to their graphic needs."



OCB Reprographics

MVE had more than 100 signs that needed to be color matched, proofed, printed, mounted and installed for its Open House event. OCB completed the entire project in just over a week's time. The job consisted of 68 wall mounted signs, 35 (ceiling) hang signs and a variety of hang and table top signage. Color matching was very important to this order since the images being displayed were of projects that the client had done over the years.

The wall mounted signs would be of semi-permanent use, but still would have the flexibility to be changed out from time to time. OCB used a basic mounting block glued to .5-inch black Gator with a custom painted block that would be screwed into the walls.

The hang signs needed to be removable and adjustable. They were inkjets mounted to 1/8" black Sintra and would hang from the building's T-Bar using a sign track system that would attach to the print and allow wire rope cables to connect to both the print and to the T-Bar with a custom clip attachment.

A few other signs were done on Lightjet Metallic, mounted to .5-inch black Gator. These were used for table top signage with easel backs and for a variety of custom hang signs.

For the elevator signage, OCB used nylon wires that tied into the metal structure and a gator block mounted to the back which gave the sign the look of being suspended in the air. For the lobby signage we used eyelets screwed directly into the top of the gator that attached to the existing cable supports of the glass shelving.



Cover Story: 2007 YTB Annual Convention

Point Imaging worked with display designer and manufacturer, Beryl Martin, in achieving one of the most outstanding stage set ups anyone has seen for the 2007 YTB (Your Travel Biz) Annual Convention in St. Louis, MO. Among many other things, the project called for a 60 percent to scale replica of a 747 jumbo jet and a 155-foot yacht to be built off-site then assembled on stage.

On stage, Point Imaging provided a wide range of graphics, including giant fabric stage backdrops depicting luxurious hotels and sunny skies, floor graphics to provide realistic features to the runways, and logo and window decals on both the jet and the yacht. Fabrics and decals were printed on the VUTEk 5330 EC.

In the lobby, Point Imaging provided custom multi-layered die-cut Gatorfoam panels making up customized logos that resembled wing pins. Direct-to-panel prints on PVC were used to make up the walls of the working luggage carousels. There, patrons picked up their show material and carry bags. Direct to board prints were printed on the VUTEk QS3200

The crown jewel of the project was 30 customized "winged awards" designed by Beryl Martin and constructed by Point Imaging. They used brushed aluminum Di-bond and the MGE Kongsberg Hi Speed, Hi Capacity digital die cutter to create these multi-layered masterpieces.



Mathison's Co.

For Mathison's, the challenge was to create a stage set with garage doors that opened and a DeLorean automobile that would come through the doors, allowing the master of ceremonies to enter the stage from the car—all as a backdrop for Microsoft's 2007 "Convergence" customer event in San Diego, CA. Mathison's worked with the designers at Fargo-based Spider and Company to complete the design and production elements.

The set, based on the "Back To The Future" theme, was used for the Microsoft Dynamics GP demo. The backdrop consisted of eight 4x8-foot panels which were printed directly on black core. The center two panels (garage doors) opened from the middle to reveal the "life-sized" DeLorean car. These panels were printed on white faced Structa-Board with a black core. The DeLorean was printed on the white faced Structa-Board and cut to shape, using both Gatorboard and Foamboard products for the moving pieces. Facades were built around two desks to conceal desktop computer stations. The entire set was illustrated in Photoshop, printed on a Zund flatbed printer, and cut to shape with a Zund cutter. All pieces had to be manufactured smaller than 4x8-feet to accommodate shipping requirements. Installation and assembly were done on-site by Spider and Company crew. The finished backdrop size was 8x32-feet wide.



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Composing Room

One of the Composing Room's more recognized projects was for the Albert Pujols Restaurant.



Pictura Graphics

Pictura Graphics collaborated with Extreme Makeover: Home Edition for the reveal of a custom-designed home makeover for the Swenson-Lee Family of Minnetonka, MN. Pictura Graphics was asked to provide digital printing solutions in several rooms throughout the home of this family who came together after four of the children became orphaned by their mother's tragic death. Some of the solutions ranged from a floor graphic of a team sport logo in the boy's bedroom, to printed and canvas-wrapped frames hung along the stairs, to a three-panel wall mural at the entrance of the home.

But it was Ty's "secret playroom" where the graphic possibilities exploded. Pictura printed, profile-cut, and installed more than 60 4x4-foot, over-lapping abstract flowers on the walls. The flower pattern was also used to produce various sizes of dye-sub fabric pillows, blanket and extra printed material to cover a group of ottomans. To finish out this room, Pictura created a "graphic playhouse" for the children. A custom design was printed to rigid sheets, which were then strategically cut to fit together to form a house with cut-out windows and crawl spaces, a functional front door, and pop-out windows.



GSG

FAO asked GSG to create sets and bring the Harry Potter movie and books to life in store fronts. GSG's team of POP experts were responsible for the creation, architectural drawing, elevation and 3-D implementation of the project. Approximately 300 square feet was printed for the job on GSG's HP 10000 with Eko Ink. The two-day installation was done completely by GSG's in-house installation team.



ImageKing VS

ImageKing worked with Dancing with the Stars to create a unique graphic billboard. The goal was to have it look like model was shaking her hips. The concept was to have the skirt moving in the breeze. The client also had a specific Pantone color. ImageKing used clear material with the eight-color VUTEk printer and first surface mounted the graphics to a durable semi opaque backing. The material was then cut to look like a grass skirt, scaled to enormous proportions, then fastened to the flex wall mural.



Photo Credit: Kevin Beswick, Commercial Photographer - People Places & Things Photography - Grand Rapids, MI

Source One Digital

Source One Digital took a 4,000 square foot studio and turned it into a state-of-the-art design center for Eastbrook Homes. The center was designed to give a warm and interactive environment that was visually exciting for potential new construction home builders. Source One Digital produced the displays and signage, which allowed customers to walk through the space. The displays consisted of sub-surfaced mounted prints, full color wall photos, and dimensional letters. Window transparencies were also printed that gave the effect of exterior views within the enclosed studio. The Eastbrook "better by custom design" Home Creation Studio has received national recognition for being one of the top design studios in the country.



Inkjet International

Inkjet International's project involved more than just printing. The Advertising agency on record for Starbucks had created a marvelous concept. Usually, printing challenges revolve around speed of turnaround on a volume order. Other times, the requirement is deeper, requiring exacting finishing synchronizing and linking separate printed pieces as if they were one. This year's Starbucks campaign, called for a scarf to be draped and linked between two wallscapes. The visual effect was very appealing and catchy.

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ProlabWest

During 2007, ProlabWest had a number of challenging and unique projects. But this one was rather challenging because of the sheer size of the banner required for the launch of the Boeing 787—given that the Prolab West facility is geared more toward traditional POP signage.



FastSigns

The centerpiece of the O Project is a 300x15-foot banner printed on DuPont Tyvek. The banner wrapped the historic Maury School building. The image, based on a drawing created by Rosemary Covey, shows a crowd of shouting faces looking out at an unseen event. The printing was completed by FastSigns in Antioch, TN.



Crush Creative

Harrah's Entertainment, in conjunction with the World Series of Poker (WSOP) selected Crush Creative as the graphics partner for this event. Crush worked with the team to create a graphic environment that not only would show well on site, but on television as well. Crush utilized both exterior and interior signage to encompass all rooms of the WSOP.

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