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## ALWAYS IN BETA

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# ALWAYS IN BETA

**Steve Falk,**  
President of Prime  
Data, with the  
Delphax Elan 500.

After 15 years of managing data, Prime Data moves deeper into full marketing automation by leveraging print with one of the world's first Canadian-built Delphax Elan inkjet presses

**By Jon Robinson**

In early 2015, Prime Data of Aurora, Ont., became the third company in North America to install a Delphax Technologies Elan 500 press, built in nearby Mississauga using a sheetfed inkjet architecture with Memjet Waterfall print heads and a transparent Mylar substrate transport system. Supplying data-driven marketing services for more than 15 years, Prime Data's initial goal with the Delphax system was to reduce inefficiencies associated with printing offset shells for post variable imaging.

Prime Data's Elan 500 installation is unique because it is producing variable colour marketing materials, whereas the other two Elan systems are primarily printing monochrome collection notices (California) and government forms (Québec). With its world-first printing position, Prime Data has been trans-

forming itself to operate more like a tech startup to mirror a growing shift toward marketing automation.

"We have a mantra around here, everything is always in beta... to have a tech startup mentality and keep that in the place to make everyone feel comfortable with change," says Steve Falk, owner and President of Prime Data.

Over the past couple of years, Falk has instituted several initiatives to embrace print, which currently accounts for approximately 30 percent of his company's revenues. These strategies range from investing tens of thousands of dollars in security measures to new CSR tools and from cross-media consulting to variable full colour printing with sheetfed inkjet.

## INKJET INNOVATION

The Memjet print heads employed by the Elan have 70,400 jets that fire up to

700-million drops of ink per second, hitting resolutions of up to 1,600 dpi, on a range of coated and uncoated substrates with weights from 60 to 350 gsm and format sizes from 8 x 8 to 18 x 25.2 inches. This translates into printing up to 500 A4 images per minute.

“The biggest thing [the Elan] did was simplify the process of doing batch-run direct mail, so we did not have to worry about offset shells... being able to roll it into one process where you go straight to colour imaging at an affordable price,” says Falk. Prime Data continues to leverage both colour and monochrome Konica Minolta systems for shorter-run applications. Falk explains, however, today’s highest-end toner presses produce upwards of 150 colour sheets per minute in simplex mode and are not fast enough for Prime Data’s larger variable runs. It would require multiple million-dollar toner machines to eliminate offset shells.

“There is only one sheetfed inkjet printer right now and it is the Canadian-made Delphax Elan,” says Falk, noting roll-fed inkjet options from companies like Canon Océ

and Ricoh do not fit with his current client base. “For our marketplace, [with a need] to change stocks and sizes several times a day, for the run sizes, sheetfed inkjet is perfect.” Falk explains the Elan produces full variable colour at around the same price as printing offset shells for variable imaging; while also reducing workflow issues by a factor of days. “This business is also big on testing,” he says, which is cost prohibitive when printing offset shells to reach segmentations of 1,000 households.

The ability for Prime Data to leverage data expertise through responsive print helps mitigate the risk of being the world’s first Elan user for variable colour DM. “You should not be looking only at print quality, which is what people once cared about, but you should be focusing on the quality of the print message and how it is responding to [consumers],” Falk says. “The quality of responsiveness to the person you are talking with is what gets you better sales.”

#### HANDLING DATA

Prime Data has developed propri-

etary tables and subroutines for cleaning up client data, sweeping vast fields to find potential VDP campaign disasters. “Data can be a nightmare and it can be a relationship killer if you do it wrong.” Falk estimates Prime Data might spend as much as four times the effort relative to competitors when working with customer information – and charges accordingly.

The data-sensitive marketplace led Falk to make large investments in securing Prime Data’s processes over the past two years. This involves measures like building and testing firewall security, entrance swipe cards, non-disclosure agreements, destroying computer and printer hard drives, and chain-of-custody procedures for overprint and setup sheets. The growth in marketing automation also relies on securing data transfers with tech-savvy clientele.

“What you want to do if you are a [printer] is think about how you can interact with how your clients are saving their data,” says Falk, “so communications back and forth, grabbing data at certain milestones in its lifetime.” This environment

also pushed Prime Data to establish a CSR-driven customer tracking system to respond to issues immediately, which also helps to drive the company’s always-in-beta mentality. Employees are always improving their internal systems.

Falk feels the new emphasis on online data collection has hurt print, as agencies try to hold on to as much marketing budget as possible, running email and social media campaigns. “Even though this sector has been active for over a decade online, and tried all kinds of things, they can only close 10 percent of their deals online.” He is seeing more interplay of print and online marketing automation.

“For the first time, I had a couple of people come to us and say, ‘We are missing part of the puzzle and it looks like you guys can help us. You can talk our language, take our digital world and add a print piece to it,’” says Falk, stressing the fit of the Elan press. “We are going to grow with this new piece of equipment. We would like to see two of these in here. With the trajectory we are on right now, we will probably make that happen pretty fast.” PA

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