

Cream of the Crop

By Bill Schiffner

Flatbed cutters give shops innovative, cutting-edge solutions that help get the job done

Cutting and finishing continue to be vital elements in the overall print/production process for sign shops and print service providers (PSPs). With the vast array of digital printing equipment and media choices currently on the market, many print providers are now finding that cutting and finishing solutions are no longer a one-size-fits-all deal anymore.

Depending on the application and substrate being utilized, shops can now choose from a wide selection of routers as well as the growing crop of digital flatbed cutters with various cutting heads. In addition, automation and physical handling of the final product is also being looked at more closely since each product and system provides a different set of workflow possibilities.

Over the past few years, the rise of the flatbed cutter segment has become an important new area for growth. With a number of new flatbed cutter options available, *SDG* offers an overview of some of the current product trends in the market, as well as a look at the most important features to have on your machine if you are shopping for a new system or upgrade.

Modular Systems are Key

He says if you are producing a wide variety of projects, having a system that is modular and interchangeable based on your production is key. “Laser, router and knife tools will allow you to accept any job coming in without the need to outsource--but production volumes in different applications can shift, so being able to adjust these tools quickly and easily is important to keeping up production volume. In addition, having an easy to use, intuitive software system is important to optimizing your workflow. As you go from job to job, you want to keep your processing time to a minimum. Not having to toggle between different software systems and operator’s windows keeps that transition smooth.”

He points out having an intuitive interface minimizes operator training and reduces the risk of employee turnover. “From a results standpoint, you want a mechanical platform and control system that not only produces jobs quickly, but works together to produce high cut quality and accuracy.”

Colex Finishing Inc.’s Maureen Damato says that the Colex Sharpcut excels at being one of the most versatile and user-friendly machines on the market.

Look for Versatility

Maureen Damato, sales dealer account manager at Colex Finishing Inc., Elmwood Park, New Jersey, says one of the most important things to look at when searching for a new flatbed-cutting table is versatility. “It doesn’t matter if you are searching for your first flatbed or an additional one to expand productivity. The question you need to ask yourself is ‘Can this new

flatbed cutter process all of substrates you need it to?’ Asking this question while shopping around for a flatbed cutter will narrow down the selection. Things to look for are the variety of cutting tools and which of these will process your current and future materials. A machine with all the ‘bells and whistles’ doesn’t always mean it can manage your workflow.”

Software

She adds that the second most important thing is the software that runs the cutter. “Is the software compatible with your design software? How user friendly is the software for your operators? If there is a problem in the cut file how easy is it to address? These are all questions you should be asking yourself when considering a new flatbed cutter. There are many different flatbed cutters on the market. For the most part they all will do the same thing. Some may route better while others are better at knife cutting. What really sets them apart is the software that runs the cutter and the customer support for that software package.”

Damato reports that flatbed cutters are getting faster and faster just like wide-format printers. “The newer flatbed models coming out on the market are faster than their predecessors. There are new features like QR codes and material databases that reduce job setup time as well. Overall, the machines on the market today are faster and more productive than the machines of yesterday.”

Colex Sharpcut

Damato says that the Colex Sharpcut excels at being one of the most versatile and user-friendly machines on the market. “Our software is very intuitive and compatible with a wide range of design software and RIPs. Our flatbed cutter has the ability to cut paper products, foam, plastics, composites, aluminum, copper, adhesive vinyl, and much more. We take great pride in our polished edges on routed acrylic. Unlike our competitors who need to make multiple passes using a diamond-polishing bit, the Colex Sharpcut is capable of getting a polished edge on the first pass with an inexpensive carbide bit. This not only saves you time but also money on consumables.”

She adds that the most popular tools in the graphic industry are the Oscillating Knife for Foamboard, Creasing Wheel for folding corrugated, Kiss cutting for vinyl decals, Coroplast Knife for coroplast and corrugated, and the 3Hp Router for rigid material.

Colex offers the Engview 2,000 Resizable Templates which are user friendly. “Shops no longer have to stock a supply of custom size boxes and can print and cut any custom box required. This software is a great value at \$1,500,” she points out.

AlphaGraphics Scores

Jeff Bittner, owner at AlphaGraphics in Wood Dale, Illinois, reports that the Sharpcut has made a big difference in his business. “Adding the Colex Sharpcut to our arsenal of equipment has been one of the best decisions we have made for our company,” says Bittner. “We originally looked to Colex to solve a very specific need and it was a perfect fit. We knew it had other capabilities beyond our initial requirements, but what we didn’t know was how much that would impact our business. We very quickly learned that we could keep more of our sign business in house, which in turn reduced lead time and increased the bottom line. We have been very pleased with the Sharpcut and the support from Colex,” he concludes.