Tall Order

Find out what happened when a special job came through that required a lot of color prints in a short time frame.

BY BILL MOGENSEN

LIKE MOST OF US in this business, Dan Walker was impressed by large-format inkjet printers, and watched as the industry emerged and matured, first as a technology only available through service bureaus, then as something that only the largest shops could manage to buy, and not until recently as something that a small shop or individual could afford.

Proper justification is usually the last impediment to a purchase of new technology such as a *big printer*... and until one can justify such an investment one must rent the services of others, and be subject to their control over a large part of the project.

Dan Walker is Network Art Service and as the name implies, Dan provides art services for various TV networks, motion picture studios and production companies. His wife, Arliss runs the office, but Dan wears all the other hats, and many are needed.

His current work load includes graphics for television shows such as *Married with Children, Muppets Tonight, The Jeff Foxworthy Show, Ned & Stacey, Debt*, and a host of others. Recent motion picture work includes *Casino, Leaving Las Vegas*, and the soon to be released *Romy & Michele*, and *One Night Stand*. His services are provided for as many as 50 shows at any given time.

Network Art Service is located at the eastern edge of Burbank's media district that is also home to Disney Studios, Warner Brothers, Universal, NBC, dozens of small production companies and support industries.
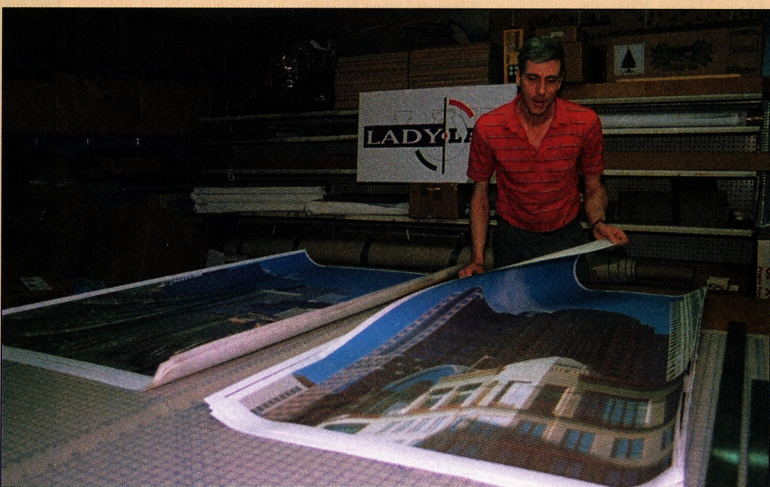
Dan Walker of Network Art Service has made digital inkjet sign printing an integral part of his sign production capabilities.

Photos by Marshall Spiegel

Simplified diagram of the two systems working together. The design station has the most peripherals, and is physically about 30 feet from the production machine, which is next to the ENCAD NovaJet.
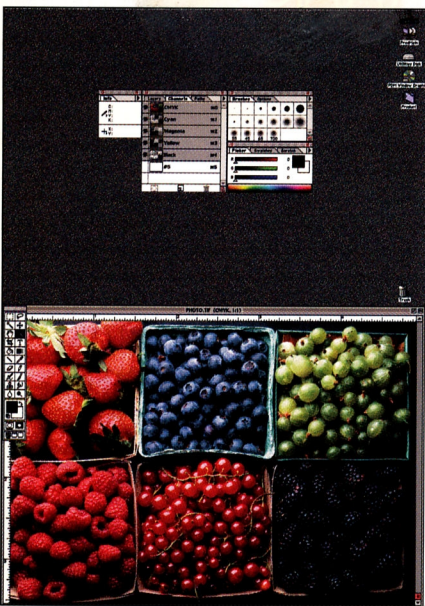
The creative and production end of the business is primarily a one-man show with part-time help used occasionally when necessary.

Network Art Service's clientele is about 45 percent prop men, who rely on Dan's experience and talent for creativity and design. Art directors make up another 45 percent of Walker's business, and 10 percent fall into the category of miscellaneous (like producers and coordinators).
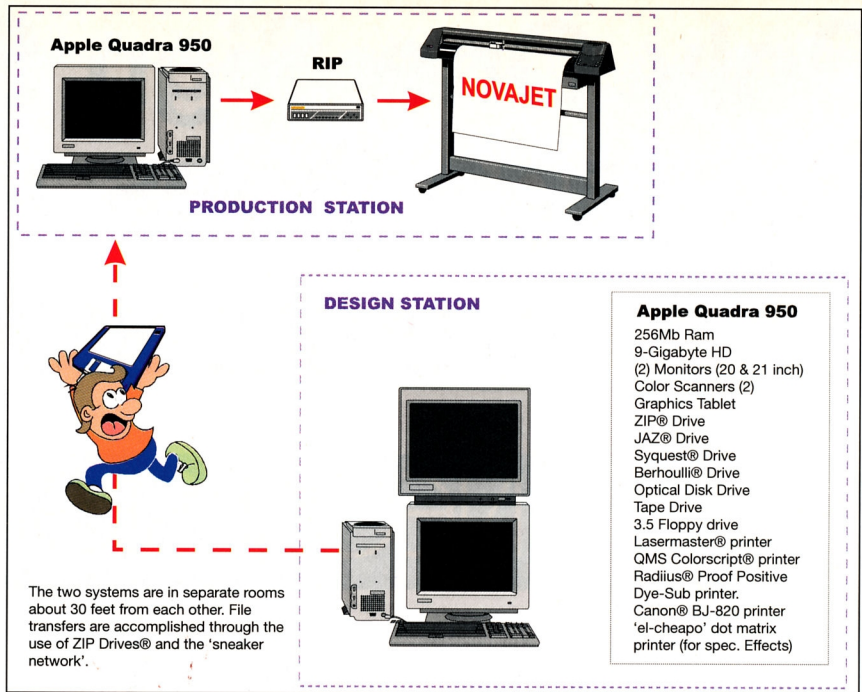
One thing that characterizes the entertainment industry is very short turn-around times. In the commercial sign business, signage is the last thing that many customers think of, and needing it yesterday is usually the norm.

In the entertainment industry, signage and graphics are usually considered early in the project. Final decisions on what is needed usually don't come until the night before the shoot... sometimes with changes coming before the last changes are done.

Everything is a *rush job* but, with the added benefit of clients that can be depended on to pay a fair price without question. However, you do have to know the unique requirements of the industry

Top monitor is used as an "out-of-the-way" desktop storage area for most of the open tool palettes. By keeping the tool palettes on the other monitor, the actual workspace is left un-cluttered. Both monitors together create virtual workspace that is twice the size of a single monitor.

and you must be able to deliver the goods, or you'll soon be out of business.

Walker's customers rely on his 24-hour availability, his extensive computer equipment and the fact that he keeps enough supplies and materials on hand to handle just about anything that comes through the door any time of the day or night.

Dan has available at his main design station just about any type of computer data storage device in use today, so he can *read and write* just about anything that a client brings in. During his busy season(s) he sometimes works 18- and 20-hour days and nights, catching cat naps whenever possible.

Dan has always tried to use the latest technology to make his make his work easier, but didn't start using computers for design work until about 1990 (except for the Gerber IV-B he bought in the early '80s).

Since then he has computerized in a big way. Three full blown Mac workstations, vinyl cutters, dye sub printer, wax thermal printer, high resolution printers, and most recently an ENCAD NovaJet 36" inkjet printer, with its own Mac workstation and hardware RIP.

THE PROBLEM

What's 14 and a half feet high, 18 inches square, lightweight but durable, and made up of 700 individual full-color and mounted pieces?

A new game show (*Shopping Spree* on Lifetime Cable) was starting up and in about 40 days they needed 700 18" x 18" color photographic images mounted onto 1/4" thick Fome-Cor® panels that would be used by contestants on the show. (The 700 cards would reach about 14 1/2' tall if they were stacked in a pile).

Printing, cutting and mounting the 700 cards would be one thing, however the real problem was the source of the images. The cards were to depict various prizes and the source of the images ranged from snapshots, brochures, and pictures in catalogues. Each image had to be scanned, cleaned up, color corrected and enhanced so that all the images appeared consistent.

Walker (who himself stands 6' 8") took the job knowing he'd have to find a way to get it done or risk losing his reputation, and maybe a lot more. As the images needed for the cards became available, he started scanning them and getting them ready to print. The images were all sized, so the main objects on each card would cover about the same amount of area on each of the 18" x 18" cards.

The problem now was to find a printer. Dozens of telephone calls and some intense cramming convinced him that an inkjet system would provide what was needed.

He wanted to stay with a Mac-based system, and his research showed that the ENCAD inkjet would interface nicely.

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Now the problem was acquiring the machine, getting it dialed in, and starting production.

Being short on time, he had to rely on the dealer (Montroy Supply Co.), the manufacturer, and leads from other users to provide the necessary advice for installation and setup.

Walker decided to purchase a Mac Quadra 950 for exclusive use on the ENCAD, as his current system would be tied up with other projects, including scanning and image preparation for this new show.

He also decided to use a Prime Option (Image Box EX) for the hardware RIP (Raster Image Processor) to act as the *print manager* for the inkjet. This way, files could be downloaded to the RIP, which would free up the Mac for further file preparation.

In order to transfer files from one machine to another, and to avoid possible delays in getting a network up and running, Walker decided to use ZIP Drives on each machine and use the ol' *sneaker network* to transfer the 100 MB disks back and forth between the two rooms where the systems were located.

Once the hardware was in place, the *dialing-in* process began. Walker had decided early that this job would require the large ink (500ml) delivery system so that he would be able to print rolls of material at a time without having to change ink cartridges.

A good two days were spent trying different papers in order to obtain the desired result. All of this experimentation can get expensive, but testing is necessary in order to learn the machines and their capabilities.

After a number of test prints, where the colors came out completely different than expected, Dan obtained a color correction program called ColorBlind™ that

builds color correction tables for various types of output media. The selected tables are downloaded to the RIP when it's time to print.

The ColorBlind program also requires the purchase of a densitometer, in this case the ColorTronII®. Although expensive, it's well worth the cost if you want consistency, and speed.

Another piece of software that Walker found to be indispensable is a product call PosterWorks®. PosterWorks is a production tool for large format digital printers that excels in composing, scaling, tiling and color correction for images composed in design software. It accepts almost all popular formats and outputs directly to any PostScript™ printer or RIP.

THE RESULT

After spending what seemed like an eternity of researching, trying, buying, testing, rejecting, testing again, config-

uring, scanning, printing, mounting, and so on, the job was done without any days to spare.

As the prints came off the printer (with crop lines already established) they would be adhered directly to the pre-cut 18" x 18" Fome-Cor panels, trimmed to correct size with an X-ACTO® knife and sent on their way.

A matte finish was desired to cut down on unwanted reflections from the studio lighting. Adhesive-backed presentation paper was chosen as most stable for printing and for adhering to the Fome-Cor without wrinkles or bubbles.

The schedule was so tight and the quantities so large that Dan was actually completing prints up to an hour before taping.

The customer was very satisfied and the job paid for the equipment (and more). Now Network Art Service can offer large-format digital printing in addition to everything else.

Walker constantly finds new ways to utilize the printer almost daily. Large format digital printing is very popular and becoming more so each day, and soon will become as common-place and expected as vinyl lettering is today.

Bill Mogensen operates Mogensen Design in Shadow Hills, Calif.   SB

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