

Heeter Makes Industry-Leading Embrace of Inkjet with the RICOH Pro VC60000

Here's the story of how one company took the shortest, straightest path to the kind of printing its customers really wanted with the help of production inkjet.

By Patrick Henry

Tom Boyle, vice president of sales and marketing at Heeter, notes that when “personalizing” a marketing piece means no more than adding a monochrome imprint in just one section of it, the contrast between the personalized matter and the rest of the content will be noticeable — and not necessarily in a pleasing way. For a marketing services provider that produces as much custom-printed work as Heeter does, there had to be a better solution.

For almost three years now, the Canonsburg, Pa., company has found it in the full-color, fully variable output of a RICOH Pro VC60000 continuous feed inkjet press. The device, Boyle says,

delivers the speed, print quality, and high-volume productivity Heeter needs in order to make sure its customers are getting the most impactful printed communications the company can offer them.

Established 70 years ago, Heeter is a data-driven business that provides printing, direct mail, fulfillment, e-commerce and data management services to a client base that includes the gaming, health care, insurance and retail industries. What these customers increasingly want, Boyle says, is print that not only looks good but speaks to the characteristics and behaviors of individual recipients.

Digital imprinting over static offset shells wasn't a satisfactory



answer, and while Heeter's variably printing toner presses offered good quality, it was limited in terms of format size and output speed. The alternative was production inkjet, an emerging technology that combines the flexibility of digital printing with the offset-like quality that customers expect and the high-volume robustness that Heeter's workload demands.

Print quality, says Boyle, was the "guiding principle" of the company's search for the right inkjet platform, a process that took about eight months. Heeter looked at every commercially available inkjet press it could evaluate, requiring each vendor to run samples of client jobs on the device being tested. Another criterion was the range of stocks the presses could handle in both coated and uncoated paper.

As a blue-ribbon test, Heeter showed the vendor prints to the customers whose work it represented. The evaluation ended with the selection of the RICOH Pro VC60000, installed in August of 2015 and placed into full production a few months later. Heeter then owned not only the press, but also the distinction of being the first printer in the U.S. to adopt it.

What the RICOH Pro VC60000 brings to markets served by companies like Heeter is game-changing productivity. Its piezo drop-on-demand inkjet architecture, developed and manufactured by Ricoh, enables the press to achieve resolutions as high as 1,200x1,200 dpi. A web width of 20.5" provides a generous printing area that can be imaged in CMYK at speeds up to 492 fpm.

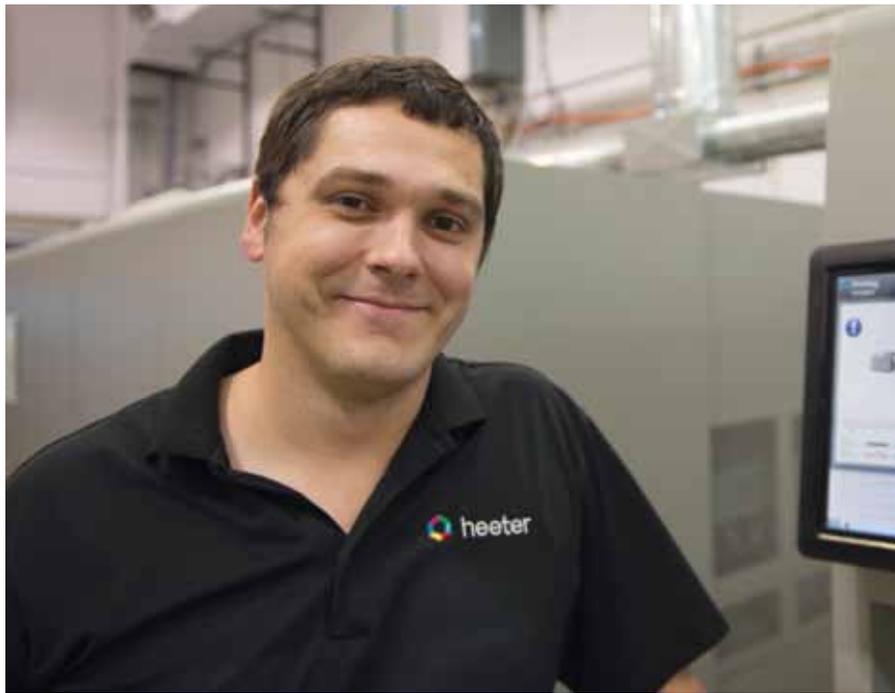
The substrates Heeter can print on it range from 40-lb. uncoated to 9-pt. coated. The RICOH Pro VC60000 is also a heavy-duty platform, rated by its manufacturer for up to 40 million impressions per month.

Heeter had a number of good reasons to choose the press, but Boyle says that if he had to identify the single most important factor, "it was the quality." On uncoated stock, the printing is indistinguishable from offset lithography. In Boyle's opinion, detecting the difference vs. offset on coated papers approved for the RICOH Pro VC60000 would take an exceptionally sophisticated eye.

When this kind of quality joins hands with the power of variable-data output, the effectiveness of printed communications begins to multiply.

"Color has an impact," Boyle says. "Study after study shows that those things get noticed, get responded to and produce higher ROIs." This is especially true in the company's fast-growing gaming segment, where casino customers want a high-end look in printed items that they can change to suit the various promotions they are running. "Now you're presenting a fully customized color piece, personalized and tailored to the individual. With variable messaging, you can do a myriad of subsets of tests to see what's going to pull."

Once the RICOH Pro VC60000 was fully up and running, Heeter didn't hesitate to give it all the work it could handle. Postcards on uncoated stock, for example, print economically in quantities from 50,000 to millions.



Jani Viczian, lead operator for Heeter, stands with the RICOH Pro VC60000 in Heeter's facility.

Boyle says that besides running "a ton of direct mail" on it, the company uses its inkjet workhorse for marketing and membership materials as well for as booklets and short-run books.

Nearly 80% of this volume contains variable data. Boyle points out that although the RICOH Pro VC60000 can also print static content, it shouldn't be thought of as a substitute press for jobs of this type. That is why the company has moved what he calls "a fairly significant chunk" of work from its cut-sheet toner presses to the inkjet platform, including what used to be the monochrome imprinting.

Now, everything that needs variable content can have it in full color, in a single pass, in a fraction of the time that printing and overprinting formerly took. Offset jobs that were static-only gain the added dimension of VDP when they migrate to production on the RICOH Pro VC60000.

Supplementing the press is near-line finishing equipment from Standard Hunkeler, including units for sheeting, variable perfin, stitching and short-run perfect binding. Helping to keep it operating at peak productivity are Ricoh's technical support services, which Boyle has high praise for.

Ever since Heeter installed it, the RICOH Pro VC60000 has been, in Boyle's opinion, "a significant driver of our top-line growth and our bottom-line profitability as well: a very solid contributor." It's certainly one reason why the family-owned company, which employs 90 people in a fully integrated, 95,000-sq.-ft. print manufacturing facility in Canonsburg, has achieved double-digit growth in each of the last three years.

Boyle says that throughout its seven decades, Heeter has continued to evolve, invest and expand in order to improve the products and services it provides to its customers. He sees production inkjet as a natural step in that evolution because of its cost effectiveness for Heeter and the options it creates for Heeter's customers.

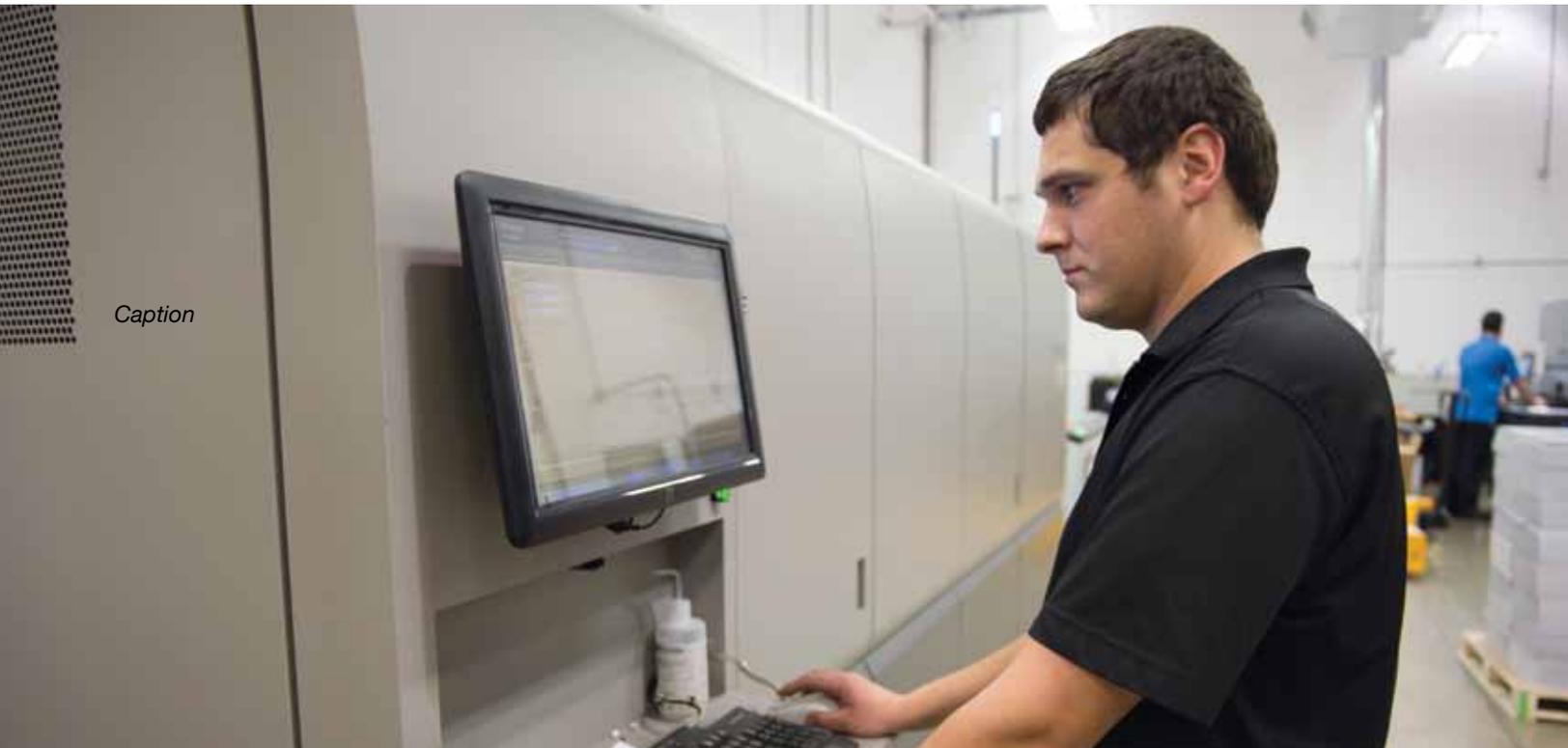
Leveraging the inkjet opportunity with the help of the RICOH Pro VC60000, he concludes, "just makes more sense." 



Production Inkjet Press

Buying Advice

The tips you need to know before you start the purchasing process for a high-speed production inkjet press.



Caption

By Denise M. Gustavson

So, you're in the market for a high-speed production inkjet press. With this segment of the industry on the rise, it's no surprise that you might be looking to invest.

Evaluating and installing a digital press can be a complicated process. A lot can go wrong — or right. What can you expect as you start down this road? Is it smooth sailing or are there speed bumps along the way you need to know about? We spoke with Kirk Schlecker, VP of Operations of Canonsburg, Pa.-based Heeter, one of the RICOH VC60000 early inkjet adopters for his advice on the challenges, pitfalls and triumphs they had when the company first installed its high-speed production inkjet equipment.

1 How did you research and evaluate inkjet presses prior to making your decision?

Kirk Schlecker: We looked at it from a quality comparison to cut-sheet toner devices on the market. We knew we couldn't go backwards from a quality perspective and this requirement ruled out most of the inkjet web presses on the market.

2 What would you do differently if you were buying an inkjet press today?

Schlecker: Since we were early adopters, today we'd be able to talk with more customer resources. Nothing else we didn't understand or would have done differently.

3 What lessons have you learned after using your inkjet press for a while now?

Schlecker: Papers — Inkjet treated uncoated papers are our best quality option, use considerably less ink than untreated, color consistency across the web is better and the sheet is cleaner.

Inks — They are much better than expected. Probably the most durable ink on the digital market and they hold up to scuffing in the mail stream very well.

Speeds — We've had one speed upgrade to our press since purchase. Very pleasing... We are currently running 500 fpm at 600x600 on uncoated.

Expectations — Exceeding expectations.

Training — Training is on-the-job learning.
Maintenance — Daily and planned weekly with vendor resources.

4 Have you gotten the types of work and the volumes that you expected?

Schlecker: Actually, we are pleasantly surprised about the volume of static book work we've been getting.

5 Any other issues that you can caution other managers about?

Schlecker: Be careful with the heads as they are the No. 1 consumable item that customers don't pay for.