

The drupa that Wasn't

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By now, everyone knows that drupa 2020 has been postponed until 2021 because of the Coronavirus pandemic. This is the second time that the date for this massive print technology expo has been moved. As many of you will recall, the drupa organizers had hoped to set the show on a three-year schedule rather than the traditional four-year cycle, but that idea was not very popular with exhibitors and was soon shelved. Ironically, drupa would not have been impacted by COVID-19 if it had taken place in 2019, three years after the previous event. This must be a frustrating thought for the drupa organizers.

Another likely point of frustration is the pleasant weather that Düsseldorf has seen this June—extreme summer heat has been an issue in the past, but this year, with no exhibition taking place, the weather has been ideal. As the Germans would say, *Schade* (too bad). With the next event expected to occur in 10 months (April 20 – 30, 2021, Düsseldorf, Germany), some might be wondering if the world will be fully ready to embrace the crowds and travel associated with an international mega-event like drupa. Furthermore, in late-breaking news, Heidelberg announced that it would not be participating in the upcoming drupa event. If other large exhibitors decide to follow suit, this may result in another postponement.



The postponement of drupa 2020 was necessary given current conditions, but I'm not sure the exhibitors were as bothered by the change as the drupa organizers. The exhibitors have another year to plan their booths and make a splash with their announcements. Without drupa, though, we attendees are missing the excitement and phenomenal marketing bluster of the myriad technology demonstrations. Remember drupa 2016? Some of the technological demonstrations and development partnerships that caught my eye included:

- **A Xerox collaboration with Koenig & Bauer's sheetfed division for a 40" sheetfed digital printer to be used for folding carton applications:** This device, called the VariJET 106, uses a modular design to integrate inkjet printing with in-line options for functions like coating, cold foil application, rotary diecutting, creasing, and perforating. Although the device was not shown at drupa, the announcement of the collaboration was a significant statement for both companies. Unfortunately, the collaboration was over by April of 2019. Durst and Koenig & Bauer have since announced a joint venture agreement, and it will be Durst's technology, not Xerox Impika's, that will be in the VariJET 106. The first Koenig & Bauer Durst VariJET 106 is scheduled to be installed at a yet-to-be-announced beta site in December of this year.

- **Canon’s technology demonstration of a B2+ format, 3,000 sheet per hour, cut-sheet inkjet printer called “Voyager”:** The device, which was targeted toward commercial and photo print environments, was to use Canon inkjet heads and was expected to be available as a product in 2018, but that didn’t happen. Now, in 2020, no one can say for certain if the Voyager technology demonstration will ever make it to market. There is no mention of Voyager on Canon’s website anymore; the last sign of activity was when Canon shared seven-color Voyager print samples at the Print 18 trade show in Chicago.
- **MGI AlphaJet technology demonstration:** MGI offered technology demonstrations of AlphaJet during drupa 2012 and 2016. The 2012 demonstration bore little resemblance to what was shown four years later—at drupa 2016, AlphaJet used an intriguing racetrack concept for its paper path. Designed as a circuit, the sheet goes around the track as many times as necessary (e.g., if it requires multiple hits of clear UV ink for a dimensional effect). This station-based modular process brings a bit of a manufacturing perspective to industrial printing, which was underscored by the inclusion of a station for printed electronics. The last mention of AlphaJet on the MGI website was a technology demonstration in 2018 at Paris All4Pack of something MGI called the “AlphaJET Industrial Print Factory,” which combined B1 inkjet printing and six embellishment functions (white UV pigment ink, inline substrate sheet priming, 2D/3D UV clear varnish ink, three curing methods, aqueous CMYK printing ink, and variable embossed foil decorating). It is very likely that AlphaJet development continues.
- **HP Indigo Digital Combination Printing:** This technological demonstration combined an Indigo WS68000 and a UV inkjet unit developed by JetFX for a label printing application. It presented another example of how special effects and embellishments were being shown all over the drupa 2016 show floor. What made this demonstration stand out was that it involved hybrid printing using liquid electrophotography and UV inkjet. Most of the hybrid examples at drupa 2016 involved inkjet (usually aqueous) combined with offset, which makes sense because it combines the manufacturing capability of offset with the variable capability of digital print. Why make a hybrid combination of two digital printing methods? The answer in this case is that UV inkjet can be more effective for spot gloss, white overprint, dimensional, and foil effects than electrophotography. At Labelexpo Europe 2017, HP Indigo introduced something it called GEM technology, which is the product name for what was shown in this tech demo at drupa. The first U.S. beta site of GEM was announced in September 2018.

These examples underscore a reality associated with trade show technological demonstrations—some announcements come to market as planned and on time, but they are the exception. Others never make it as products, and even those that do typically take years longer to reach the market than originally stated. Landa’s S10 is the textbook example of this, but it is by no means an isolated exception.

The most unfortunate part about the “drupa that wasn’t” is that we missed the technological demonstrations, which always show us how system vendors are stretching the boundaries of what is possible. These aspects will certainly catch my attention when drupa 2021 comes around. Although tech demos are fun to contemplate, print service providers would be wise to focus on the products and technologies that are possible now rather than focusing on system vendors’ dreams for the future.