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 Graphic Arts Monthly  
December 2006 ([return to TOC](#))

## Picture Perfect(ing)

Postcards butter the bread of an evolving firm, which has added a digital press, 48-hour turn times and, now, a new perfector.

By **Mark Vruno Senior Editor**

The only thing out-of-the-box about Modern Postcard is its unconventional thinking: definitely not its products. First off, the company thinks of itself as a solutions provider or a marketing group, even as a direct mail company: but not a printer.

While some may view postcard printing as a commodity, not here. "We don't view ourselves as competing with a printing house that is going to do 2 million copies of a particular postcard," says CFO Bill Lofft. "That's not our business. We're not in the commodity business. We're in the value-added business."

Creativity and graphic design are two of the value-added services that Modern brings to its diverse customers, who buy primarily postcards, trifold mailers and sell sheets. With annual sales of about \$40 million, Modern produces more than 100 million postcards per year: mostly on the 4-color Komori Lithrone 40RP installed in the then brand-new building almost nine years ago and a 6-color LS-640P perfector with coater added in early 2005.

As we went to press, installation had begun on a 4-color Lithrone super perfector with double-coating technology—only the second such configuration in the U.S. The new press, which will allow for both sides of the sheet to print and then coat simultaneously (without flipping), is scheduled for a March startup.

All postcards run 32-up on 12½-pt. Inspired, a No. 1 grade coated card stock that International Paper mills specifically for Modern. That kind of direct-mail volume warrants two letter carrier offices in its 75,000-sq.-ft. Carlsbad, CA plant, near San Diego. The printer employs a 240-line screen for all its 4-color products.

Modern's full range of offerings is rounded out by list services, finishing (trimming, scoring, folding and perforating) and mailing, including

## GAM Editorial



Modern Postcard went digital/variable earlier this year with an HP Indigo press. It also is adding another Komori 40" sheetfed perfecting press. This one, a 4-color super perfector with double coater, is expected to be up and running by Q2 2007.

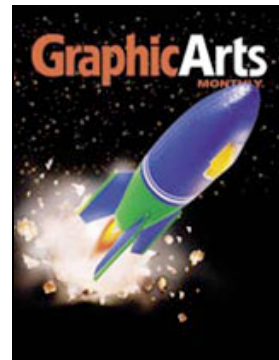
### Modern Smart Factory

Along with its Komori Lithrone S-640P and 440RP Reverse Printer (above), a new LS440SP is being installed in Modern's sleek, 75,000-sq.-ft. plant. After outgrowing leased spaces over the course of almost 30 years, Hoffman built a new facility in 1998. "As spectacular as the building is, I'm most proud of our people," says the CEO. "This building is 1/20th, 1/30th of the cost of the people who are ... going to be spending a third of their life [working] here."



**100 million a year and counting** Modern figures it has produced more than 1 billion postcards since the late 1980s. Customers can purchase 500 4¼ x 6" two sided flats (4-over-1) for as little as 26¢ a piece. Standard cards run 32-up on 12½-pt. Inspire, a No. 1 grade coated card stock that International Paper mills specifically for the company.

## Current Issue



### Digital Color Presses

By *Noel Jeffrey*

Configured for spot or process color, today's robust digital print engines extend the range of color on-demand.

### Mixing It Up

By *Mark Vruno*

This premier, Chicago-area 40" sheetfed printer is evolving with the digital times.

### The Forty Inchers

By *Tom O'Rourke*

What do eightup presses have in common with six-ups? Lots of innovation as both benefit from advancing technology.

### Direct-To-Plating

By *Hal Hinderliter*

Violet, thermal, ablative, chemistryfree, lowprocess no-process, polyester, metal: plate and setter choices are abundant.

### Wages Up Modestly

By *Lisa Cross*

Trends in salaries find employee pay hikes for industry workers do not keep pace with general business averages.

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By *Mark Vruno*

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presorting, inkjet addressing at speeds up to 20,000 names per hour and the USPS Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS). Founded in 1976 as the Iris Group (now the parent holding company), the company has evolved from one, to 16, to 250 employees in its 30 years in business. Entrepreneur/CEO Steve Hoffman started Iris from his one-bedroom apartment, offering high-quality, real estate photographs at competitive prices.

Today, department managers at Modern have budgets to surprise productive workers with spot awards: \$20 here, movie passes or a Blockbuster card there. Energized employees get to choose their own rewards. This progressive approach to staff morale isn't all fun and games. The company personifies consultant Sandy Asch's "Six Principles of Organizational Excellence." In addition to fostering a fun-filled atmosphere, her principles promote personal accountability and productive communication. Hoffman also subscribes to W. Edwards Deming's philosophy of statistical process control, as well as to kaizen, the Japanese term for "change for the better" or "improvement" used in lean-manufacturing circles.

Five years ago, Modern's headcount spiraled upward as it sought to keep pace with growth. But by instituting best practices, the company got a handle on labor costs. It also reduced turnaround time from three weeks to as little as two days. "And we did all this through attrition," notes production manager Jason Anderson. "There were no layoffs."

Postcards weren't the firm's mainstay until the early 1990s, when recession hit hard and brought the once booming Southern California real estate market to its knees. Hoffman had a vision and stayed the course, despite resistance from his wife, a fellow photographer, and Jim Toya-Brown, an artist/designer who's now senior VP and part owner. While the pair initially didn't want any part of postcards: what they deemed an inferior product: Hoffman pointed out that glossy brochures just weren't affordable to the masses.

Modern Postcard has had a digital workflow in place for nearly a dozen years: before most people had e-mail. The company also was an early adopter of Adobe InDesign (since 2000) and its corresponding PDF-based workflow. In prepress, Modern features Kodak equipment, including a Prinergy workflow, Trendsetter and Lotem platesetters and Excel plates.

"Two years ago, the majority of our work was four-over-one," says Anderson. "Now, it's less than half." The growing trend toward twosided, multicolor jobs led to the recent addition of the perfecting press. Since running on the S40P 18 months ago, the company has seen a 35% reduction in makeready times, Anderson adds.

Contending that variable-data printing is the next evolution, Modern Postcard added an HP Indigo digital press this March. "We believe the need for variable data will grow as customers become savvier at data management and employ uses beyond simple personalization," says marketing manager Fred Hernandez.

Anderson adds that the firm is considering additional offset capacity. "We're very interested in Komori's LS super-perfecter technology as potentially our next press purchase," he says.

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perfecter, a digital press and 48-hour turn times.



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