



## IPS and the professional market

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If you use a professional lab, chances are that it's using Kodak Professional Paper, and the chances that it has been supplied by Australian-owned Independent Photographic Supplies (IPS) are even better.

Well-known in the retail minilab business, and probably equally well-known to your local pro lab as one of its key suppliers, IPS is a name most professional photographers wouldn't necessarily be aware of – although it is a Gold Level Sponsor of both the AIPP & NZIPP Professional Photography Associations – but IPS plays a pivotal role in photographic printing both here and in New Zealand.

IPS first hung up the shingle just over 10 years ago. The business plan of principals Stuart Holmes (ex-Kodak Professional, Fujifilm and a full AIPP member, *pictured right*) and Rob Voysey (30+ years in all aspects of wholesale and prolabs) was to pull together 'the Best Bands In Imaging', specialising in the photo lab sector of the industry. No studio lighting, or tripods, or camera bags – the focus was always on photo printing equipment, consumables and support.



They've also pulled together a formidable team of 'the Best Brains In Imaging', mainly recruited from Kodak, Fujifilm & Agfa Professional Divisions, as those companies withdrew from offering a full service to professional customers.

While Fujifilm was playing footsies with mass market retailers like Harvey Norman and Big W (consequently trashing the business of many of its small minilab customers, but that's another story) and Kodak was going through it death by a thousand cuts, IPS was building bridges with pro labs, school photography businesses and the suburban minilab survivors.

Within its portfolio is Kodak Professional Paper – both AG-X and now digital press stock; high-end printing and processing equipment from the likes of Colenta (film and paper processors); ZBE Chromira wide format silver halide printers; Rockwell chemical mixers; and wide format fine art media from



## Hi Ho Silver



Stuart Holmes is confident that there's plenty of life yet in Kodak silver halide papers, and a development pipeline which will see new products emerge as competing ranges stagnate. 'I think that Kodak has stated categorically that they have a long-term vision supplying AgX products, and that's proven by the

fact that right in the middle of Chapter 11 (bankruptcy proceedings) they introduced Kodak Premier Endura. Their flagship paper, Kodak Supra Endura was replaced by a newer, high technology product.

'Here we are now in 2014 with the new Premier Digital Pro Paper, which will be embraced by the volume users.' (Among whom are Schools Photography Labs.)

He noted that the competing Fujifilm Crystal Archive paper was launched in 1999 along with Frontiers and there's been little development since then.

'That was good, but that was then – that's 15 years ago now. There's an impression out there that this (Frontiers and Crystal Archive) is new technology, but it's not.

'It was a sea change back then. Dry printing with high quality dry lab materials is the new sea change.'

A dry argument  
Dry photo printing technology in the form of wide format and even inkjet minilabs could be said to be challenging silver halide in quality terms. Until now, Indigo/NexPress/Fuji Xerox colour photo printing has been regarded as 'near photo quality' – maybe not up to professional standard. But Nulab's announcement this month that it was ditching its phalanx of minilabs and replacing them with two Indigo 7600 digital presses restarted that debate.



Noritsu 'Drylab' D1005

At the lower-volume end of photo printing, Stuart sees dry minilabs as one aspect of that sea change he referred to.

'People are staggered when we reproduce difficult images on a Noritsu dry lab. Invariably the results are more saturated, with better sharpness, better shadow detail more highlight detail and overall punch. So things have changed.

'As revolutionary as Frontier was in 1999, we are at that point again.'

And with improved Kodak AgX media coming out now, there will be another lift in silver halide quality – it remains a moving target.

'Right now we are in midst of rolling out a replacement for Kodak Brilliance

paper called Premier Digital. It carries the same professional backprint, has a slightly heavier feel than the current Brilliance and it has improvements – whiter base colour, more skintone friendly. It's a good product. We are confident it will be a smooth changeover.'



The IPS warehouse in Sydney

As IPS offers a range of media – professional and retail silver halide papers, dry lab and wide format inkjet, thermal media, as well as digital press stock, it is 'agnostic' when it comes to the merits of the competing technologies. Stuart Holmes says that silver halide still retains the crown as the best medium in terms of quality, while conceding its reign is not infinite.

'I think with dry labs it's probably a matter of when, not if – but it depends on what it is. The product we've been involved with, the Noritsu Dry Lab – it's provable that the gamut is every bit as large

and in some areas a bit larger than silver halide, so the ability to reproduce colours is there and so is the ease of operation, the lack of chemistry, the OH&S aspects, the carriage of dangerous goods...'

'Having said that, in my own opinion silver halide is still king. It still offers the absolute pinnacle of reproduction and quality, and all other products are compared to it.

'And it's cheap, too! Silver halide has had all R&D costs washed out of it. It's cheaper than it ever was. Kodak photographic paper has never been as reasonably priced as it is now. Kodak was never a cheap paper, we all know that. Kodak had a position in the market that it defended to the hilt, and the price of products has been coming down significantly. Things have never been better placed for an industry to re-invent itself.

- So Silver Halide is a moving target when it comes to the cost of competing media as well. Which is why IPS continues to offer sophisticated silver halide equipment.

'If you continue to make it available and support it, there's still a very vibrant market for wet technology – there are labs which are using ZBE Chromiras now, and we have many opportunities for sales going forward. Successful competing products like the Kodak LED printers, Durst Lamdas and CSI Lightjets are now reaching end of life in terms of parts and



ZBE Chromira ProLab

serviceability and the ZBE

Chromira is a perfect superseding product. ZBE I

believe is the “last man standing” in wide format silver halide labs.

‘Likewise with Colenta – we have quite a number of active Colenta customers in Australia which we support and we have sales leads as well.

‘We just don’t push the boxes out and hope for the best. We’ve got marketing, technical support, we’ve got the World Class brands ZBE Colenta, the Rockwell auto chemical mixers from the UK, the bulk chemical products, the large lab support components.

‘We have collected them under one roof for the reason that we will protect those brands and we will make sure they are available for the market. We still believe that they have a vibrant place in the photo industry and we are not going to let them fade away.

IPS lobbied hard for Kodak to retain Professional papers in Australia, firmly believing that both the perception and reality of a professional difference mattered to labs and their professional customers.

‘This was a big part of what we bring to the Kodak relationship. Kodak was going to release a gold back-marked paper (the premium minilab paper, Kodak Royal) and we very strongly demonstrated to them that it would need to carry on with the more recognisable Professional backprint. It’s a very saleable point.

‘Now, in the days of digital printing, people are looking for something to hang on to. The Kodak professional backprint gives a product assurance that it’s not just being printed on anything.

‘And that’s the argument why a Pro backprint works – because it actually does work.’

Indigo blues



Stuart acknowledges that digital press photo printing is now a technology to be reckoned with, and IPS also distributes Kodak Endura EP Media, a premium double-sided, photo-quality press paper. He is highly critical of ‘print service providers’ – often businesses from a printing rather than pro lab background – who use cheap stock to print photographic work.

‘How “near” is the near photographic quality which these dry presses and Indigo presses put out? There’s a lot of “Emperor’s New Clothes” going on here. It’s not photographic quality and it can be proven.

‘Kodak and others have designed high-tech coated papers to go through Indigos and their competitors – Kodak NexPress for that matter – which turn out quite a respectable result. It’s still not true photographic – but a lot better

‘But there seems to be some dichotomy between people prepared to spend a million dollars on a digital press and then not prepared to spend 25 cents on a sheet of SRA-3 paper to run through it. So by spending seven cents a sheet they deliver their customers a rougher quality – say the difference

between Vogue magazine and TV Week. That I don't understand.

'If you are prepared to spend \$1 million on a press surely to spend, say, 12 cents on an A4 sheet would not seem to be a big ask.'

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