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Bourg finishing system helps Canadian entrepreneur bring fresh ideas to the school portrait market



When Canadian school portrait company 36Pix was founded in “Y2K,” Kodachrome® film and silver halide processing reigned supreme and students’ portraits were sent to parents on loose-leaf proof sheets in white envelopes. In the 12 years since then, high-end digital photography has become the dominant medium for capturing students’ portraits, but chemical processing and stodgy presentation methods still linger.

36Pix and its entrepreneurial president Robert Ste-Marie aim to change all that. The company is now printing school portraits on an HP Indigo 5600 Digital Press and producing personalized, professionally finished and bound presentation booklets for students and their families with the latest in on-demand digital booklet-making technology from C.P. Bourg.

Enjoying its third consecutive year on the *PROFIT 200* ranking of Canada’s Fastest-Growing Companies by *PROFIT* Magazine, 36Pix from its headquarters in Montreal addresses three segments of the school photography industry in Canada and the United States.

First, the company provides printing services for photographers servicing from 5,000 to 150,000 students annually. The company also operates Green Apple Studio – its own branded school photography unit serving pre-schools and grade schools through studios located in Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa and Toronto and through agents in Vancouver, Calgary and Winnipeg. And, 36Pix is a leading provider of “green screen” digital imaging services with its proprietary ChromaStar® green screen extraction technology, which also is embedded in Kodak® ProLab® software.

A Strategic Imperative

A mechanical engineer in the aerospace industry who worked on RadarSat 2 imaging and led projects for NASA and European space programs, Robert Ste-Marie was lured to the school portrait industry by a big market opportunity in the change from film to digital technology.

He now sees the transition to all-digital photo production as a strategic imperative.

“Over the past 50 years, school photography hasn’t evolved to where I think it should be, leaving the industry in danger of losing business to the new breed of digital photo merchandisers. The school portrait industry today requires different products made by different equipment guided by a different vision,” he asserts.

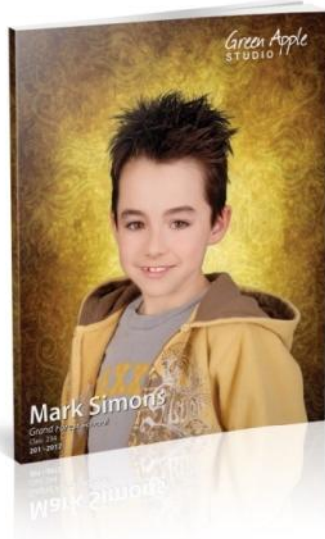


"We have a glorious opportunity to capitalize on our professional photographs taken in controlled settings and to create really stunning and saleable photographic products."

Seizing the opportunity, Ste-Marie and the 36Pix team began investigating how to implement their vision of an all-digital approach. Their efforts were quickly rewarded.

"The digital concept proved such a big hit that our market test resulted in a significant business order," Ste-Marie explains, adding the first order of business on the production front was to choose and install the booklet-making system.

The company's own investigation and a recommendation from HP led 36Pix to C.P. Bourg and an off-line Bourg BSF production finishing system installed in short order by MD Service Express, a division of C.P. Bourg partner MD International, months before installing its own HP Indigo Digital Press.



Notes Ste-Marie, "The Bourg finishers are the most critical pieces of equipment we own. If any other piece of equipment goes down, we can turn to outside suppliers. But the finishing system is driven by our proprietary workflow software and sophisticated bar-coding techniques, making it the hardest to farm out. So it needs to be reliable and work flawlessly."

Pushing the Envelope

Robert Ste-Marie admits 36Pix isn't the first school portrait provider in the world to employ digital printing technology, but he believes it is the first company to produce school portrait products this sophisticated at high volume.

"We're taking digital photo processing to the next level," he says.

Instead of using digital technology merely to print loose-leaf proofs, 36Pix is producing super high-quality saddle-stitched "Portrait Books" that photo studio customers can deliver to students' families. This "front runner" finished product features a glossy front cover and multiple inside pages with the student's photo imposed on different backgrounds and in formats from 8x10 to wallet size.

The inside front and back covers promote a broader range of photographic products and services – many of which can be purchased online. These include beverage mugs and large flip-style saddle-stitched calendars with the student's portrait set in a choice of 300 different backgrounds. There's also a 20-page "Story Book" for younger children, which showcases them in a personalized fairy tale or adventure story featuring their photo and name throughout.

Portrait Book front covers feature a full-size portrait of the student printed with variable data – name, school and class information – as well as a field tastefully identifying the photo studio. Content pages of the Portrait Books are printed one side on Kodak® Professional Endura® paper by the HP Indigo press, allowing families to cut out and use the resulting proofs. Covers are printed on coated cover stock and laminated on one side, providing a glossy professional finish.



The Story Books and calendars are intended as keepsakes, with personalized content pages printed two sides on a fine-grained medium-weight coated stock. 36Pix discretely adds the photo lab's identifying information to the covers.

Winning High Marks

All the booklets are saddle-stitched and trimmed full-bleed using the C.P. Bourg BSF booklet-making system. 36Pix is also relying on the Bourg BSF production line to finish all its brochures and other printed materials.

The BSF system features a Bourg BSF Sheet Feeder and BCM Bleed Crease Module on the front end that supply the digitally printed and side-trimmed content pages and laminated cover sheets to Bourg's award-winning Bourg BME Booklet Maker for saddle-stitching and face-trimming. A Bourg SQE Square Edge accessory applies the finishing touch by giving each booklet a squared spine for the crisp look and feel of a perfect-bound booklet that stacks easily and lays flat.

In operation, stacks of digitally printed covers and content – produced by the 7-color HP Indigo 5600 at up to 90 pages per minute – are loaded virtually hands free into the BSF's upper and lower sheet feeding compartments from a Bourg-designed stack cart featuring an innovative air-table design. Once loaded, the BSF takes over, feeding up to 6,000 sheets per hour to the Bourg BCM and BME finishers connected downstream while ensuring the integrity of each uniquely printed set.

36Pix's Bourg BME is a versatile, large-format stitch-fold-trim document finisher able to produce in portrait or landscape format up to 5,000 unique booklets per hour, each up to 120 pages thick. Finished sizes can range from CD jackets to oversized booklets and calendars up to 11.8 x 14.5 inches. Among the BME's many innovative features are a totally visible and straight paper path and a unique folding technology that adapts to the thickness of each booklet to achieve the best fold with the least pressure.

The BME and other Bourg finishers are also equipped with innovative and proven non-impact paper transport systems to assure that volume production of often delicate color materials digitally printed on coated stocks is achieved without making a mark.

"From an equipment standpoint, we had to learn a lot about digital printing and finishing in a short time," says the 36Pix president. "But HP and Bourg provided solid training and support. Plus their equipment's ease of use and high level of automation also made for short learning curves, allowing us to come up to speed on digital production methods fairly quickly."

The beautifully printed and laminated 36Pix Portrait Books and Activity Books are testimony to the company's quickly acquired know-how.

"Our booklets are much more exciting than loose-leaf portrait sell-sheets and they have a longer shelf life," says Ste-Marie. "They commonly end up on kitchen tables and coffee tables where they can inspire parents and grandparents to see the range of possibilities and place additional orders for prints, calendars and other products."



‘The Ferrari of Printing and Finishing’

Having validated the new process, 36Pix has geared up for full production this fall, when it anticipates processing 2.5 million images using green screen extraction, servicing 500 pre-schools and 150 grade schools directly through its Green Apple Studios (known as La Pomme Verte in Quebec), and printing 150,000 Portrait Books and Story Books.

“We bought the Ferrari of digital printing and finishing equipment and it performs accordingly,” asserts the 36Pix president. “Our new approach is bringing our entire business to the next level. With it, we’re winning additional work for our printing services and green screen technology segments and new contracts for Green Apple Studios.

“And if our volume grows higher than expected, we know the HP and Bourg equipment can handle it.”

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