



28.05.2019 / Erik Kurtz

„So why don't we try this for a change“

With creative hardcover and softcover solutions, Germany's leading book producer Kösel has made a name for itself beyond national borders as an innovation leader. As this Muller Martini blog's guest author, Managing Partner Erik Kurtz, who was named German Printer Manager of the Year in 2016, explains the 425-year-old company's recipe for success and is confident that printed books will continue to play out their strengths in the future.

„How is it that your company has been honored as German Book Printer of the Year several times already and regularly wins awards for the best books of the year in several countries,“ I am occasionally asked. The answer to that question has many aspects, of course. But there is one point that is especially important to me: A special feature of our company is that all of us enjoy doing special things. We're not like other companies, where a special request or a unique solution makes everyone say: "Oh no, don't come to me with that. It's much too complicated and will only disrupt our processes and our rigid procedures." We think the exact opposite.

180 people in the development department...

Even more frequently I am asked about the size of our development department. I usually reply mischievously: "180 people." This is because everyone who works for us enjoys developing ideas. I get personally involved in this work, too, contributing a number of ideas and designs. But the important thing is that everyone at our company abides by this philosophy and contributes to it.



When someone comes to us with a new idea, our managers, machine operators and sales reps enjoy doing something that's a bit unusual. We also have very competent consultants on our sales force who take a look at the customer's idea and can offer some initial guidance as to what is possible and what isn't. And then we often do a test on the machine. We take the material, the machine operator plays around with it and then says: "We could try to do it this way. That would be another idea." Everyone experiments and plays around with it. Of course, we are driven by figures and have to provide results. But allowing employees to play around like this has been our recipe for success.

Thinking in the processes and tasks of (end) customers

However, to do so, you need to understand what customers want, which means: listening and accepting what is important to them. We delve into the processes and tasks of our customers and their end customers, and then develop a technical solution based on them. So the process we're involved in is a creative one, but at a technical level.

There is a quote by the American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson about this that I really like: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." In line with this saying, we want to convey our enthusiasm for developing and producing beautiful books to our customers as well as to inspire this enthusiasm in them and their customers (readers and book buyers).



Winning the battle for readers with added values

The hallmarks of many of our books are exclusive finishing, such as shiny, matte or soft-touch foils, digital spot lacquering, one-color or multicolor hot foil embossing, rounded corners on the book block and cover, laser die cutting, and personalized printing of the trimmed edges of books using Kösel edge coloring. Such added values are particularly important in view of the need to compete with digital media for readers: The crucial question is always: How and where do customers make a decision to purchase?

If the purchase decision is driven solely by content, then I'll download an e-book or enter what I'm looking for on Amazon – in this case, spot lacquering or foils are not important. However, added values do have an impact on the purchase decision at the point of sale. So Kösel really shines when it comes to special bookbinding processing. Such processing includes, for example, a flexible cover, special layflat behavior, a unique book shape, or



special materials that are not usually used and are not so simple to process using standard equipment. Such products attract a lot of attention in a bookstore and can lead to customers making an impulse purchase.

Long texts are easier to read on paper

The fact that I personally find it easier with a printed book than with an e-book should come as no surprise to you. I find it more pleasant, but ultimately it's a question of how we learned to read – in other words, it's a matter of habit. But it would be wrong to say the same thing of the younger generation. However, I do find it more pleasant to read a large chunk of text on paper. By contrast, smartphones and tablets are vastly superior for short bits of information. But they're not so great for reading larger amounts of text, such as novels. So I still see the advantage of printed books.

But even if the global trend toward e-books seems to have stopped, there remains an exciting question for me: Do future generations even want to read long texts in one go? The way people absorb information is changing. I think the traditional book has been transformed somewhat into a luxury item. It will no longer be a mass entertainment medium - and, consequently, books should, in keeping with our company philosophy, be increasingly equipped with added values.

That is why I am confident that the printed book will continue to hold its own against digital competition over the coming years. But I also believe that it will not be a growth market overall. The market will probably continue to shrink a bit, but books will not disappear the way vinyl records were replaced by CDs and then CDs were replaced by streaming services. The trend is much more muted and slower for printed books.

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