Penguin and Penwizard join forces in another digital book publication venture

The phenomenon of films and TV shows generating hosts of collateral products from board and video games, to toys, branded accessories, and all forms of magazines and books, has served to keep their stories and characters fresh and spawn new characters stories, and even more films.

The Star Wars brand has now been running for more than a generation, and while the demand for products continues, the challenge is to keep the brand fresh and involve new audiences in the experience. Among the latest products of the Star Wars brand are two books that can be creatively personalised via an easy-to-use online interface that feeds data to a print service provider (PSP) that uses HP Indigo presses to produce high-quality, full-colour books that can be delivered in less than five days.

The project is a collaboration between brand-owners Lucasfilms Ltd and its publishers, the Penguin Group. To handle the digital printing and publishing aspects of the job, Penguin built on a successful alliance formed with Penwizard Ltd, a specialist on-demand publisher, to produce personalised Peppa Pig books.

Facilitating interactive publishing

Established in 2004, to produce innovative products utilising digital printing technologies, Penwizard has jointly developed its web-to-print solutions with HP and works with PSPs that own HP Indigo digital presses. Penwizard had undertaken previous personalised printing projects with Prime Print Group Ltd, of Nottingham, UK, and their close working relationship and established data handling ability made them the logical partner for The Clone Wars books.

"The Peppa Pig books had done very well, but Penguin wanted to take the personalised book concept to the next level with a global brand," said Eric Huang, category director, Brands & Licensing, Penguin Group (UK). "The Star Wars books were thought to be a perfect vehicle because of its massive market appeal, and it also would be aiming at a higher age range than the Peppa Pig books which were aimed at parents of pre-school children. Both boys and girls of all ages and interests get excited by Star Wars.

"Lucasfilms is well known for being innovative and forward thinking, so selling the idea to them was relatively easy."

Protecting brand integrity was the biggest challenge, according to Huang.

"Creating a customisable avatar that would still reflect the image and values associated with the Star Wars brand was the concern," Huang explained. "But the team soon worked out that this could be overcome by amalgamating the characteristics of the different Star Wars characters."

Lucasfilms and Penguin had also been concerned that some print-on-demand books are not very high quality and flimsy, but the experience with Peppa Pig, Penwizard and Prime had shown that quality would not be an issue.

"The final product is the standard that Penguin's customers would expect, with a glossy and luxurious look and feel. Raising the bar on personalised books while at the same time enabling readers to interact with the story in a way not possible before is an exciting development in publishing," Huang concluded.

CHALLENGE

- Create high-quality personalised books for Lucasfilms Star Wars: The Clone Wars series
- Assure print quality and a smooth end-to-end workflow
- Handle large quantities of variable data for reliable and accurate printing

SOLUTION

- HP SmartStream Designer
- HP SmartStream Production Pro Print Server
- HP Indigo 7000 Digital Press
- HP Indigo 7500 Digital Press

RESULTS

- High-quality, full-colour books printed, bound and delivered in less than five days
- Reliable end-to-end workflow and quality control
- Products worthy of major international brands: Star Wars, Lucasfilms, Penguin

The unique experience of personalised books

Personalised book production via a web interface has resulted in the need for a range of new creative, technical and management skills, and this is where Penwizard's role is critical.

"We create the systems that drive digital printing presses as well as developing books themselves," said Richard Adey, managing director, Penwizard Ltd. "The Star Wars books are a joint venture in terms of input. The avatars – the personalised characters - were created from combining the characteristics from CGI characters from The Clone Wars cartoon. For example, the features for the heads were all taken from different characters. All artwork was agreed with Penguin before being signed off by Lucasfilms. This has ensured that brand integrity has remained intact throughout the process."

Personalising the avatar is part of the ordering process on the Penwizard website.[1] A deceptively simple number of choices produces a large number of possible combinations. The fundamental choices are whether the avatar is a Jedi or a Sith, and then whether male or female. After that, faces, hair styles, eye colour, skin tone and (for Jedi) hair colour are chosen. The avatar is also given first and surnames.

"Once the customer has submitted the options for personalisation on Penwizard's online library, the information can either be sent automatically to, or downloaded by the PSP from a central database," Adey said. "The advantage of the dual system is that the PSP can fill gaps in production schedules and keep the workflow going."

One of the tools utilised by Penwizard in creating the personalisation, managing the images, text and variable data is HP SmartStream Designer which collects and assembles the data and prepares it for the PSP.

Automatic book production

With the basic visuals and text prepared, and the personalised data collected from the website, Prime automatically receives the files via the FTP site which is fed into the digital workflow.

"We receive the data from Penwizard every morning and it's transferred into our HP SmartStream Production Pro Print Server before the operators arrive," said Jon Tolley, managing director, Prime. "We use Penwizard's JLYT files because we can simply integrate the new personalised data into the standard text and image files which are already cached."

With the RIP integrated into Prime's HP Indigo digital presses, the data moves reliably and efficiently. Prime's HP Indigo 7000 and 7500 Digital Presses have the latest print engine, so that switching production between the two presses delivers the same results.

"Running the two identical print engines side by side gives us consistency as well as production assurance if there are any problems," Tolley explained. "We found that the 7500 press has flexibility and quality that are exceptional. The ability to run thick substrates and white ink gives us greater flexibility in the products we can produce, too."

Prime finishes the books in-house which provides both scheduling and quality assurance.

"It's not just about putting ink on paper," Tolley said. "It's about the entire process. I think when you're handling personalised print and personalised literature, it is extremely important that you maintain control throughout the factory. There's no point in producing a product that's got to be delivered within 24 hours or less if you have to send that out to be finished. Also, as soon as you send it out for finishing, you lose control over the product and its quality.

"Assuring the quality standards for a project like the Star Wars books is important for everyone: for us, for Lucasfilms, for Penwizard, for Penguin, and especially for the customer who has also invested in the process," Tolley concluded.

[1] http://www.penwizard.co.uk/Personalised-Books/Clone-Wars.html?referrerID=12546872&setstat=true&brandID=1&langID=GB&catID=30&gclid=CNfMhP7e86UCFVAf4QodbzXjng

"Penwizard specialise in personalised books and the systems that link websites to digital printing presses. These cross media publications use enabling technologies that require new types of partnerships with license owners, publishers and PSPs. For example, Penwizard has tested all the major personalisation software and found HP SmartStream Designer to be unique in its ability to handle complex personalisation at volume. Someone has to focus on the specialist knowledge needed to get the best out of the personalisation software and processes and therefore successfully transition from conventional to personalised publishing and digital printing."

— Richard Adey, managing director, Penwizard Ltd

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