WANT THE TRUTH BEHIND THE TEST RESULTS?



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by Allen Luthy • SME Inc.

uestion: Which of these three recent imaging article titles is practically criminally misleading?

"WIR Testing Finds Aftermarket Inks are Inferior to OEM"

"European Third-Party Inkjet Inks Dealt Major Blow by Latest Wilhelm Tests"

"Aftermarket Inks Fading Fast?"

The answer is all three. An uninformed observer would infer from the above titles that the aftermarket inkjet products are substandard and the business is reeling (precisely what the study's sponsors — inkjet OEMs — intended to convey). However, the reality is just the polar opposite. In anything, when large amounts of money are involved biases move to the forefront and objectivity gets thrown out the window. A simple investigation into the methods and results of this dubious study as well as understanding the motivations of those involved prove it. Want the truth? Just follow the money.

Let's compare three recent "studies"; two sponsored by OEMs and one conducted independently by Consumer Reports, a publication that aims to provide objective information and considers consumers to be their clients.

In 2005 HP sponsored an inkjet print quality study by a company called Quality Logic. The study was universally lambasted by a number of analysts and publications for a wide range of reasons. For example, this was probably the first ever image quality study ever conducted that did not use a densitometer or spectrophotometer (long recognized industry tools for accurately comparing print quality) for comparative analysis. Even though the results lacked any credibility HP still touted them in full-page print media advertisements and radio spots to paint the entire aftermarket inkjet industry in a horrible light.

In the summer of 2006 several publications crafted articles that addressed the results of a display permanence of inkjet prints study released by Henry Wilhelm, president of the Wilhelm

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Imaging Research. Since the OEMs had sponsored much of the WIR testing, the results were predictable: the aftermarket products looked terrible compared to the OEM products. Some OEM combinations lasted 35 times longer than the third-party ink and photo paper offerings. Wow! Can this really be true?

There are three key reasons to seriously question the results of the WIR study — **one** is a **bombshell**:

- 1) The photo paper used is much more important to image permanence than the ink itself.
- 2) Many companies (including Kodak) disagree with the WIR testing protocol.
- 3) Isn't knowing who paid WIR to generate this study/data important?

First, the study compared the displaypermanence ratings of aftermarket inkjets and third-party photo papers to their new OEM counterparts. The headlines should have read, "WIR Testing Finds Aftermarket PHOTO PAPERS are Inferior to OEM" or "Aftermarket PHOTO PAPERS fading fast?" What a deception! The entire aftermarket inkjet industry is slandered with these misleading titles when in actuality, the print media used (in this case third-party photo papers) has much more to do with long-term image permanence than the actual ink itself.

Case in point, Wilhelm's own words perfectly illustrate his "position du jour" regarding aftermarket inks. In a February 2004 article in Great Output Magazine, Wilhelm said, "For example, there is a combination of HP inks and media that we rated as lasting 73 years. This lifespan fell to just two years when the consumer substituted a Staples-branded photo paper for the HP premium photo paper."

So what is really the key variable here, the ink, the paper, or the study sponsor?

Second, the WIR testing protocol is based upon extremely obscure and unrealistic conditions that are not relevant for judging aftermarket ink performance. The WIR protocol evaluated the print permanence rating of inkjet prints and third-party photo paper print media framed under ultraviolet filtering glass in high-

this just means everyone is entitled to an opinion. Many believe these test results are wildly exaggerated and, therefore, are not valid.

Finally, Wilhelm is an expert in the preservation of museum quality traditional and digital color photographs and images. According to a July 2005 article in PC World, major

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lumen museum-display type environment. What percentage of inkjet prints worldwide are utilized and stored under these conditions? One in a hundred million?

Kodak has previously disputed the WIR testing protocol with regards to light stability - the key element for this study. Apparently the lumen level in the accelerated glass-filtered fluorescent light stability test that WIR uses (450lux/12 hours per day) is nearly four times higher than Kodak's recommended testing protocol for realistic conditions. Extrapolating data from unrealistic lighting conditions will generate unrealistic results. Wilhelm had once stated that, "There are no ISO or ANSI standards for permanence, so our company's standard has become the de facto industry standard." No,

printer vendors regularly hire WIR to test photo papers, inks, and printers for longevity. No one is going to come out and call Wilhelm a paid partisan hack but objectively reviewing the image permanence data and the way it was presented will allow people to draw their own conclusions. The published results conveniently omitted key comparative results for specific vendors, there was no differentiation between which cartridges used dye-based inks versus pigmented ones (inherent differences in image permanence longevity), and implying that the ink alone is the critical differentiator in image permanence just does not seem honest.

Regardless of the ink type or print media, all colors will eventually fade. Is the WIR study even relevant?

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Is it a benchmark to judge the entire industry? Certainly not. The value proposition that an aftermarket inkjet product offers with regards to print quality, page yield, price, and image permanence is what is ultimately driving the explosive growth of these products. Hopefully a fair comparison will eventually emerge.

Consumer Reports, which many would consider to be an unbiased product evaluator, noted in their July 2006 issue that several of aftermarket inkjet cartridges matched the photo quality of the printer makers' cartridges at a reduced price. Certainly there are substandard vendors in every industry but the majority of aftermarket inkjet products generate high-quality finished goods that are comparable to a new OEM cartridge at an attractive price.

Why would there be such a variance between reports contracted by an OEM and a report on behalf of the consumer? It might be because of how much money we are following. According to Charlie Brewer, editor

of Lyra Research's Hard Copy Supplies Journal, the world's inkjet printers are guzzling up more than \$32 billion worth of ink this year. Retailers are selling high-quality remanufactured inkjet cartridges at 50 percent off of the retail price (of a new OEM cartridge) and still earning margins of 80 percent. Lyra Research notes the worldwide aftermarket inkjet market share of the total inkjet cartridge market currently stands at 31 percent and is expected to grow to a remarkable 36 percent by 2010.

Follow the money: compare the results of independent research conducted on behalf of the consumer versus research conducted on behalf of the manufacturer.

With roughly 50 percent of the U.S. population never having before purchased an aftermarket cartridge, OEM-sponsored "independent" studies are tacitly designed to sway consumers away from buying these cartridges. The huge upswing in consumer acceptance of aftermarket

cartridges is clearly affecting OEM manufacturers as a one percent change in consumer acceptance equates to hundreds of millions of dollars of lost revenue. It looks like the OEMs are not just following, but chasing, the money. **(B)**

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As a nine-year imaging industry veteran, he has a wealth of experience in a variety of technical sales and process engineering roles and has helped hundreds of retail, B2B, and industrial inkjet companies grow their businesses. Prior to joining SME, Luthy was a program for \$1B manager polyurethane manufacturer whose foam chemistries are used extensively in many inkjet cartridges today. Contact him www.sme-us.com.

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