

# FORT ORANGE PRESS

Commercial printer capitalizes on unprecedented vote-by-mail initiative to invest for current and future explosive growth.



*The Fort Orange Press management team — (left to right) Daniel Mathieu, Production Manager; Daniela VanVeghten, Director of Election Strategy; Robert (Bobby) Witko, President and CEO; Jamie Dickinson, VP Operations; and Jane Nieckarz, VP Business and Finance.*

Headquartered in Albany, New York, Fort Orange Press is a family-owned commercial printing and mailing company that has been in operation since 1905. The company was named for Fort Orange, the first permanent Dutch settlement in New Netherland in 1624. The present-day city of Albany, New York, was developed on the site of the fort.

Fort Orange Press has two divisions—Elections Printing & Mailing and Offset & Digital Printing and Mailing. According to Robert Witko, president and CEO, Fort Orange Press has been involved in ballot printing in New York State since 1905. The Elections Printing & Mailing division currently represents approximately 60 percent of the company's business. Historically, the company had been printing primarily poll-site ballots—ballots used on election day at polling sites. Prior to 2020, there was a small demand for absentee ballot printing, but the vote-by-mail initiatives put into place in New York and other states due to the COVID-19 pandemic created a

tremendous increase in both the volume and complexity of absentee ballot production. Robert recognized an opportunity to grow his company—and invested \$4.5 million in state-of-the-art equipment, added personnel, and expanded his data processing, mailing, and reporting services. The result was a three-fold increase in the company's capacity, enabling it to not only service more than one-half of the Boards of Elections in New York in 2020 but also expand beyond the Northeast to other East Coast and Southern states for their vote-by-mail initiatives. In addition, the data-driven skills and high-performance capabilities implemented to support vote-by-mail are serving the company well as it expands into other high value-add vertical markets. For example, finance, healthcare, and education are a natural fit for transactional and transpromotional mail programs.

### **THE EVOLUTION OF BALLOT PRINTING**

Ballot production has changed substantially over the one-hundred-plus years Fort Orange Press has been in that business. Originally, letterpress technology was used. That process transitioned to offset printing to produce the voting machine strips used in lever voting machines that became prevalent across the country. At the time of the Help America to Vote Act in 2004, New York State shifted from lever voting machines to paper ballots that were optically scanned, necessitating another transition—this time to digital printing, due to the large amount of variable data required.



*In addition to two Canon ColorStream series inkjet web presses, Fort Orange Press utilizes a Canon VarioPrint i300 full-color sheetfed inkjet press, Canon imagePRESS C10000VP full-color cutsheet toner presses, and Canon varioPRINT 6000 monochrome cutsheet toner presses.*

For Fort Orange Press, a digital web solution—first toner-based and then inkjet with its first Canon ColorStream press—became necessary as volume grew.

In 2020, New York's governor issued an executive order mandating that anyone who wanted to vote by mail could do so by submitting an absentee ballot application. That single order caused a major change in the ballot production process. Of course, poll-site ballots were still needed. But now, all residents of the state were to be mailed applications for absentee ballots. If such a ballot was requested, a number of processes had to take place flawlessly and in a timely manner: (1) data processing of the voter's information for accuracy and deliverability, (2) production of vote-by-mail packets with numerous security and accuracy checkpoints incorporated, and (3) tracking of all items in the vote-by-mail packet with real-time metrics for transparency and accountability.

The data files created from the returned requests for absentee ballots were sent

daily to Fort Orange Press from the counties that the company serves. This represented an enormous increase in the complexity of the workflow, the data processing required, and a huge increase in print, inserting, and mailing volume—all of which needed to be kept within the required time frames of each individual county. According to the Pew Research Center, 46 percent

of voters nationwide used vote-by-mail in the 2020 general election compared to 20.9 percent in the 2016 general election—more than a two-fold increase! "Our workflows had to be absolutely airtight and perfect," Robert says. "As my dad used to say, 'The business of ballot printing is the equivalent of sending a rocket ship to the moon. You only have one shot. It has to be right on.'"



*With a massive increase in the print volume and variable data complexity of absentee ballots in the 2020 election, Fort Orange Press relied heavily upon two Canon ColorStream inkjet web presses configured with inline trimming, perforating, and stacking capabilities to meet the individual time demands of its Boards of Elections customers.*





*Fort Orange Press uses its sheetfed inkjet and toner presses for shorter run length application flexibility, shown here by Pete Jordan, Digital Press Operator.*

## THE WORKFLOW SOLUTION

To meet the demands of this unprecedented increase in vote-by-mail volume, Fort Orange Press made some substantial investments. It added a second Canon ColorStream series inkjet web press to handle its increased print volume with speeds of up to 417 linear feet per minute and 1,200 dpi perceived image quality. Considered the most reliable digital inkjet web press in the industry, the addition of the second ColorStream press to the existing VarioPrint i300 full-color sheetfed inkjet press, three monochrome Canon varioPRINT 6000 cutsheet toner presses, and two Canon imagePRESS C10000VP full-color cutsheet toner presses gave the company the capability to produce in excess of one million ballots in an eight-hour shift. “When we’re in our peak production cycle, we’re running all of our inkjet presses

and our toner devices as well. We’re literally on a 24/7 schedule for six weeks straight,” Robert says.

To automatically monitor print quality, the company installed Videk’s DocuVision Pro web inspection system on the ColorStream presses. This camera system provides page-by-page inspection of quality patterns to verify jet health and delivers up-to-the-minute notifications indicating any out-of-tolerance results. Quality is checked while the presses run at full speed, thereby reducing labor costs and improving operational efficiencies.

Both inkjet web presses are equipped with inline Tecnauf perforating equipment since many ballots required perforated numbered stubs. The presses also trim to size inline and offset stack. Whatever the requirement to separate printed ballots—for example by zip code, county,

or political party—all can be offset stacked on all the Canon presses.

To bolster the accuracy and security of its mailing operations, Fort Orange Press purchased several envelope inserters that feature closed-loop security crosschecks to assure the accuracy of every mail piece. In addition, a high-speed envelope overprinting press enabled secure overprinting of the oath, reply, and outer envelopes with the required codes for tracking purposes.

Fort Orange Press put workflows and systems in place to manage the enormous growth in mail pieces using BCC mail software. This software not only ensures address accuracy and the most advantageous postal discounts but also provides mail piece delivery tracking—both outbound mail delivery confirmation and inbound mail confirmation. The tracking of

returned mail-in ballots is necessary to ensure performance guidelines are met and ballots are not lost. With this software, it is possible to drill down to information on every single mail piece. With its comprehensive reporting capability, checks on the mailstream progress of any job can be done at any time. "In the ballot arena, there needs to be complete transparency to our Boards of Elections customers. That was a critical requirement," Robert says. "Election officials needed to know exactly how many pieces were mailed, where they were in the process, if they were received back, etc. Voters wanted to know when their ballot would come and where it was in the process. We were able to provide all that information."

There are several key requirements to ballot production. The consistency and density of the ink are critical because the ballots are read by tabulators that reflect light off the sheet. Densities have to be very specific and within set tolerances. That's where the Videk solution shines. Reliability of the technology is a critical factor. "One of our worst nightmares is to have some kind of malfunction or to be down on a piece of equipment," Robert says. "Canon has provided a great service model for the 24/7 cycles that we're in. The print capacity redundancy we have and the service cycle time that Canon has provided have been huge value-adds and given us the confidence to go forward."

### **BALLOT PRODUCTION DNA**

Robert points out that success and growth in the absentee ballot production niche is not the result of just technology and workflow. It also rests on decades of election law knowledge regarding requirements in each state. "Understanding the political calendar of a given state, when various pieces are due, when applications need to be mailed



*Jamie Dickinson, VP Operations, appreciates the speed, image quality, and superior reliability of the Canon inkjet web presses.*

out, when and how an absentee ballot needs to be mailed in a primary election or printed in a political party's colors—all that intelligence gathered over the years has helped to make the company successful," Robert says. "I believe wholeheartedly that the success of our company has come from the consultative approach we bring to partnering with our customers. We're there to solve their problems. And they rely on us for the knowledge and the expertise to produce this work accurately and to the letter of the law."

Fort Orange Press exhibits a deep sense of pride in what it sees as its part in shaping our democracy. It is part of the company culture. "Our employees are proud of what we do," Robert says.

"We start the beginning of each election season with a company BBQ and a team meeting because we're literally non-stop 24/7 once that season starts. Everyone understands the requirements and what it takes to be successful. We've developed that in our culture. It's a huge part of our success."

### **THE CANON RELATIONSHIP**

Fort Orange Press has been a Canon customer for about ten years, ever since it transitioned to digital printing. "When we got into digital production, we did our due diligence and had competing product lines on our floor," Robert says. "We found the Canon presses worked the best for us and were the best fit. The reliability is superior, and that's a critical factor for us."



Canon's ancillary support has been important, too. In addition to field engineers, there are regional color analysts and systems engineers to support any print project Fort Orange Press takes on. "Anything to do with the Canon product line, be it hardware or software—equipment, media, workflow, everything—Canon is on site as quickly as possible to resolve any issue or provide fast phone support for anything their products touch," Robert comments.

Fort Orange Press advocates taking a consultative approach in solving its customers' problems. Rather than a commodity-driven relationship, it seeks to offer a single-source solution and be a single point of accountability to develop long-term relationships with customers. For example, in the ballot production space, Robert believes his partnership approach to his customers is the reason for the company's success.

Robert views his relationship with Canon in a similar way. "The Canon sales rep has been my point person from the beginning and operates in the same way as I like to define myself and our company to our clients," he says. "It's a consultative relationship. We develop solutions together. Canon has always been there to meet my needs so I can deliver on my promises to my customers. They've never once let me down."

"In this business, I need to know I have a team behind me that understands our call to action and my value proposition to my customers. I've had conversations with and access to most every Canon senior executive. They've all been in my office and on my production floor. I have their business cards with their personal cell phone numbers.

## “IT'S A CONSULTATIVE RELATIONSHIP. WE DEVELOP SOLUTIONS TOGETHER.

CANON HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE TO MEET MY NEEDS SO I CAN DELIVER ON MY PROMISES TO MY CUSTOMERS. THEY'VE NEVER LET ME DOWN ONCE.”

—Robert Witko, president and CEO, Fort Orange Press



*The investments Fort Orange Press has made in its digital printing capacity enable it to produce in excess of one million ballots in an eight-hour shift. Production is overseen by its VP Operations, Jamie Dickinson.*

They are there when I've needed to call them, and that helps me sleep at night. Canon has aligned well with my company from the inception of my leadership here. It's been a great relationship."

## THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Robert believes the use of vote-by-mail will continue to grow. The convenience of receiving a ballot in one's home with time to think about all the candidates and make a decision for whom to vote offers a solution that fits well with our convenience culture. "And there's nothing that replicates the security of a voter-marked ballot," Robert says. Though presidential elections are only every four years, community elections are held every six to seven months, and state primary elections occur at various times throughout the year.

The investments Fort Orange Press made to respond to the tremendous growth in vote-by-mail demands became an opportunity to leverage its capabilities, processes, and data management skills to expand into new directions. The company has developed valuable expertise in the data aspects of variable data mailing projects that require a fast turnaround time, highly accurate and verifiable mailing, and transparent reporting. The data handling, high-speed color variable data printing, intelligent inserting, track and trace capabilities, and real-time reporting throughout the mail production process are all highly transferrable to other large volume transactional and transpromotional print projects that are common in financial, healthcare, non-profit, and higher education vertical markets. From a positioning perspective, these expanded and refined services have not only enabled Fort Orange Press to do more business with existing customers, but also to grow its



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secure, data-driven solutions with new customers.

"Our workflows provide information and reporting to a client to validate that the individuals who are supposed to get a certain mail piece have received that mail piece. We can show a client that their information has been produced, mailed, and accurately placed in the postal system," Robert says.

"Combined with our ability to track and report on mailed responses, a client can analyze the results of their mailings to further fine-tune their marketing initiatives and refine future mailings. It can become an iterative loop of leveraging data to provide more value to our customers."

Part of the respect the company has attained also comes from the long tenure of its employees. When customers call Fort Orange Press, it is likely they will be talking to the same person they have been talking to for fifteen years! When that employee says, "You'll have it by Wednesday," the customer knows they will have it by Wednesday. That consistency and

in-depth knowledge of its customers' businesses are large factors in the company's stability and success.

"My people are great," Robert says. "I could never have the success I've had without being surrounded by smart and committed people."

Through the tumultuous year of 2020, Fort Orange Press has pivoted to not only survive but to thrive going forward—through its visionary technology, equipment, and software investments as well as process and people investments. Those investments combined with its seasoned expertise and reputation for exceeding expectations have enabled the company to develop and evolve with changing business demands. As Robert says, "When you are a family business, you have a little extra sense of pride in your accomplishments. I'm proud that we are successful and have been able to overcome past adversities and continue to flourish. I'm proud of our company. I'm proud of our people. And I'm proud of the opportunity my dad gave me. For Fort Orange Press, I think the sky's the limit!"

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