



Amila Singhvi and Rishabh Singhvi of International Print-o-Pac after winning the PrintWeek India Company of the Year 2010

'I want to see IPP grow three times'

Amila Singhvi is the managing director of International Print-o-Pac (IPP), the PrintWeek India's Company of the Year 2010. Singhvi has been at the helm of the industry for over two decades now. Last year, IPP recorded revenue of Rs 250-crore and expects to double turnover in two years time. Singhvi tells *Ramu Ramanathan* why she is bullish about packaging and book printing and looking at "adding another IPP plant, soon"

Ramu Ramanathan (RR): This conference room in which we are seated has superb carton samples.

Amila Singhvi (AS): True. A lot of what we've created is due to the retail boom which has boosted our packaging business. After all, hardly anything in this country is sold loose any more. The packaging spends for FMCG (mainly cigarettes, safety matches, cosmetics, detergents and food articles, ghee, tea, masala, cereal, biscuits, liquor) – all of that has both increased substantially and improved in quality. Shelf packaging meant economy size. Today, our services add durability, value, branding and visual aesthetics. Also conservation of

waste and preservation of perishables. This is reflected in our display in the IPP conference room.

RR: You've been an integral part of the print industry thanks to your father, Sher Singh Bhandari who headed Indo European Machinery.

AS: I grew up acquainted with printers like Dhote, Bolton Fine Art, Bombay Fine Art, who were visitors at home. Never did I envision setting up a print business. I considered print as business after my marriage in the early eighties. My husband ran an advertising agency and was looking at business

options. We invested in a scanner and decided to get into the pre-press. That is where our connection with print was established and thus began a stage-by-stage process of development. IPP became a printing company in 1993 and a packaging company in 1999.

RR: Rewinding to your early days in school and college, was print an option back then?

AS: No, not really. I had in my mind that I wanted to work. Even so, in our community, things are very dependent on where you get married and in which family. I'm a graduate in chemistry after which I did my law. Both the areas are not related to the print industry. However, I use this knowledge in my business on a day-to-day basis.

RR: In the early eighties, was it difficult to overcome the traditional patriarchal mindset?

AS: A little bit from elders in the family, but generally, no. Honestly, being a woman has been an advantage as far as I am concerned. This is a rare thing, but I got a lot of support from the family, fraternity and my staff. In fact, I don't recall encountering any major issues about being a woman.

RR: When you started the pre-press unit with a Crosfield scanner, what was the rationale?

AS: We were running an advertising agency and did a lot of printing work for our customers. One customer was a well known bicycle brand, which needed 300 inputs and cut-outs of cycle parts to be delivered to a trade fair. The only option was to go to Thomson Press. They said it would take three months to produce the job and that too in Italy since no one in India had the capacity. We approached other print firms in Delhi which could do a good print job but hardly anyone could create pre-press for the job. That is when the idea took germ – and we thought it was the best option for us. It wasn't a problem because the capital required for the investment was small. And so, we started as a small-scale unit.

RR: It seems to be a very basic unit. And today you have 300 top-end print firms as your clients.

AS: Yes. In 1985 we shifted from a Delhi Development Authority (DDA) shed to our unit in Okhla. By then, IPP was a well-known pre-press brand. In those ten years, we mastered the craft of retouching, image-manipulation, understanding colours, and the series of changes in pre-press. We got a scanner, then a dot generating scanner and then a table-top Scitex scanner. Technology was evolving. We realised, we had to revamp and invest in a new equipment once in three years. That is the pace of this industry.

RR: What is interesting is, you are one of the rare instances of a pre-press house that moved into printing.

AS: We got out of pre-press very early. The timing was right. Many people tried to do it later. Some went into areas like digital, wide-format, flexo, gravure. Everyone is doing well. For us, as I mentioned, it was the right time. We sold our scanners at a very good price. Most people kept it for so late that they had to scrap them. When we sold the drum scanners we got more than Rs 20-lakh for them.

RR: Looking at IPP's trajectory, it seems like bursts of ten years to make a big move. Again after ten years at Okhla, you were consolidating and creating the foundation for the existing Noida unit.

AS: Definitely. At that time, we were doing short-run commercial jobs with quick turn-around and high value addition.

So even if the place was small, our margins were good. Our Okhla unit funded this project. We kept it running for three years.

RR: So the small press was supporting the Noida infrastructure for three years?

AS: We were small but profitable. Yes, and when the Noida unit got going, we shifted some of the equipment here. We had three small-sized machines. That was all. Then we shifted our sales and production planning teams. We were – and are – fortunate to have a great team.

RR: At the turn of the century, what was the employee strength of the team?

AS: A team of 150.

RR: During this period you added machines and people? When did you become serious about packaging?

AS: In 1997, we were doing commercial printing. Quite obviously we wouldn't have grown as we grew in packaging. So we thought that if we had to grow, we had to do something with a repeat value. Packaging was the obvious answer. In those days, it was difficult. It took us five years after the equipment was installed to have access to one of the bigger multinational FMCG companies. They asked for our background, but we had no background in packaging. It was a piquant situation. Do you put the cart before the horse or the horse before the cart? I said if you give us work, we will have a background. Finally, we went and met the purchase head at this FMCG major. I had gone to him before we had put this plant. He said "*plant banao toh sahi, phir dekhenge*". After three years the plant was up and running. I went to him. He said "Let's see. To start with, do our label work". I said I am not going to do labels. If you want to give us serious packaging work then it is fine, otherwise not. Saying so my team and I walked out from there. This was the turning point. Today major FMCG customers are with IPP. We've added customers each year. Clients find merit in working with IPP.

RR: This was in 2003? Right? That's seven years ago.

AS: Even prior to 2003 we had work, but it was not our preferred kind of work. However, in packaging what one can do is, fill up capacity. That's because there is a lot of work available. So we took up work with local customers. Then when we →

"Our aim is not just to buy a machine but a productive machine"

IPP's plant at Noida

got entry into target customers we stopped doing low-grade work for packaging. We focussed on value-added work. Three things became vital for us: delivery, timing and right kind of technology. I believe, without equipment and timely delivery, there is nothing. Job fulfillment is important. It is more important than getting the job. Delivering the final product and getting a repeat order is actually the key.

RR: Does packaging have the biggest barriers for entering in lieu of the certifications and audits?

AS: Yes, very much. Every year we go through two audits per customer. So it's essential to have high quality infrastructure. It's not merely about installation of equipment. There are ethical and social audits, and other audits related to hygiene standards. Specially, for export customers. Now domestic clients have similar requirements. So audits are very important.

RR: How does your Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) work?

AS: We have a customised ERP in place. We have integrated all the departments from enquiry, estimate production planning, production to invoicing. This was put into place a few years ago. It was a task. We keep modifying it. We have an in-house developer. Also, we have been outsourcing our IT requirements. And it's been managed well. We keep updating it from time to time, from platform to platform.

RR: You got your first web offset in 2004.

AS: Yes, we got it for one of our magazine customers. Those days we were doing pre-press processing for them. We started printing the first two dummy issues for them, and then the volume got beyond our capacity. In 2003, we decided to install a web press so that we could start printing. We got the first press in 2004, the second in 2006 and the third in 2008, which is the recent one.

RR: The machine scalability seems to match the balance sheet which rose from Rs 150-crore to Rs 200-crore to Rs 250-crore...

AS: We have been adding almost one sheetfed machine on an average every year. And when you add a printing machine you have to add complementary finishing kit too. Last two years we did not do much expansion after the Komori heatset press. And so, in FY10-11 we bought three machines; a six-colour with coater, a five-colour with coater and one two-colour perfecter, all brand-new.

RR: A walk around the press indicates that the IPP pre-press team is strong and creative. And backs your press-lines.

AS: Yes. Pre-press has two roles. For packaging, they have product development, structural development, formulation of special inks. In fact, for the special inks, we have in-house ink kitchens where they develop the special colours, create proofs and get these approved from the customer. Commercial jobs involve more of colour corrections, whereas most of the publication jobs involve text correction. This is in spite of the fact clients saying we would get print-ready files. However, there are always a lot of corrections that have to be done. Lot of colour correction, re-touching, image manipulation, digital proofing and colour matching on the machine. Our pre-press team supervises the job while they are being printed to re-check what they produced in the pre-press department. The point is, we are traditionally a pre-press house – and it reflects on what we print. It is the hallmark of our quality.

RR: How much of hand-holding is required? Especially in packaging?

AS: Initially yes. Even so, most of the multinational customers are aware of what is required. Maybe the smaller customers or some new customers would need hand-holding. In the publication section I would say, whenever a new magazine starts to print at IPP, we send our personnel to their place, see how their files are prepared or rather show them how we want the files. At times, we get the colour corrections done at their end and do a bit of work. This means when the file comes to our end it is ready for production. This is required.

RR: IPP produces 100 magazines plus another 20 book customers, and 80-100 customers in packaging. Together that's 200 odd plus customers plus their jobs. In terms of organisation, how does it work?

AS: We've a separate marketing division for packaging and for commercial printing. Furthermore, we have dedicated resources for the export business. We have a separate PPC team for each business that coordinates purchase and production. It works well. We've co-ordinators who handle customers. Each of these handle about five to six assigned customers and push the order through the plant in co-ordination with the sales team.

RR: If I met you in 2015 or 2020, what change would I see?

AS: It's easier to say you have a goal and want to get there. Maybe after two years I would like to see ourselves as creating something very different. Maybe IPP will not remain a printing company. We may be a big multi-locational printing company. IPP has evolved with time. We are a highly dynamic organisation. I would like to see IPP grow three times in size by 2015.

RR: Do you take work home? What is your management mantra?

AS: No. This business is about teamwork so work gets done in office. My management mantra is that each person in the company must have a strong sense of ownership. Unless there is ownership it's very difficult to be successful. The owner's personal input is just as important in this industry as is professional management. Because there are hundreds of instantaneous decisions required and, unless those are taken on time, one cannot deliver.

RR: What are your future growth plans?

AS: We are looking at another location.

RR: In North India?

AS: Maybe not. Probably elsewhere. We are working on our strategy. Watch this space. ■

“To grow, we had to do something with a repeat value. Packaging was the obvious answer”

FIVE THINGS NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT IPP

Rishabh Singhvi updates us with a message from the London Book Fair on his Blackberry

- The IPP team has more than 100 persons in R&D. This team has no direct contribution to sales.
- Each member of IPP team has assured medical benefits with 24 hour in-house clinic which is staffed by a doctor, attendants and an ambulance.
- The IPP team celebrates all major festivals with prayers and a food feast.
- Only vegetarian food is permitted within the premises. The food is home-made and very delicious!
- IPP's landscaped estate is a great picnic spot, especially during the winter season. At times, the IPP garden is transformed into a cricket ground.