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Glass Houses: Automation Becomes Cheaper

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Getting orders fast--that's the name of the game these days for duplicators and replicators alike. Just as Americans thought the economy was picking up, our Southern neighbors have been hit by the ghastly Hurricane Katrina. With already high oil prices, Americans are looking at unprecedented costs this fall. That, of course, comes in the heat of the busy season. The questions on everyone's mind is, "How do I save time and how do I save money and still get my work out on time while growing my business?"



One trend that has emerged in the last two years may provide a helpful solution: more reasonably priced robotics. "Previously, you couldn't purchase an autoloader for less than \$10,000. Now we have units between \$2,300 up to \$6000," says Ryan Swerdloff of Vinpower Digital Inc.

In the past, people just got multiple towers because robotics were so expensive. Robots are eliminating the need for more manpower. Vinpower and some of its competitors are making standalone machines in different sizes with robots that can really meet a variety of needs from the small outfits who only need to do 20-50 discs a day to the large production houses that need to do a thousand discs overnight.

As anyone in this industry knows, replicators are also recognizing that there is market for duplication under quantities of 2,000, and they are looking at these autoloading duplication machines. "With an autoloader, you can duplicate and walk away from the machine. In the past, companies might set up 10 standalone towers, for example, and they would have somebody always there continuously feeding them," says Swerdloff. "One autoloader can take the place of that whole system. Now, you load the blank disc into the spindles and the robotic arm will load and unload all the discs for you. The machine itself will recognize how to duplicate, what type of master it is. Cutting costs in manpower and time devoted to a single task really helps," he adds.

Strictly speaking, says Tom Perksy of Tustin, California-based service bureau Disk Duper, manual towers might be faster. However, his Vinpower autoloaders allow him to add another shift and work overnight, he says. "If you are getting 60 discs an hour, a human with a six-target tower could probably do it faster--maybe 10 more discs in an hour---but is a human going to stand there for 20 straight hours?" he asks. "Your turnaround time will be much greater with an autoloader," he argues.

"When we started duplication, we used towers that had a capacity of 50 input, 50 output and 50 reject," Persky continues. "We couldn't walk away from those for very long. Right now, the availability of low-cost, high-quality equipment has really changed the equation for us. Our reliance in tower duplicators has gone down by 50 percent in the last 6 months. If you are a small business, you are always watching your bottom line for employees. An employee is going to be \$30,000 to \$50,000 by the time you put in training, health care, and benefits. If you can buy \$30,000-100,000 worth of equipment, and you can avoid hiring an additional person. For us, it makes sense."

Primera, whose customer base differs quite a bit from Vinpower's, also continues to introduce more automated products. Primera has recently introduced a hand-fed tower duplicator with seven drives, but its most popular products are automated duplication and printing systems with up to 4 drives. All of Primera's automated systems are sold as print-only or burn-and-print solutions. According to vice president of sales and marketing, Mark Strobel, Bravo II is selling on the street for about \$1,800. That product burns and prints up to 100 discs at a time, automatically, overnight. "Before the Bravo, our closest competitor was our own Composer which was about twice the price," Strobel says. "We felt that if we didn't compete with ourselves, someone else would. As a result of the Bravo II, we have been able to expand our market and create more opportunities."

Persky reminds me, however, that no machine is perfect. When an automated machine works right and makes the discs overnight, "It's a joy!" he says. But there are still stumbling blocks at times. That's why the best advice to offer anyone looking into automating their work is to be very concerned about the ability of a provider either to swap out equipment or offer very fast repair service. Good service, after all, is why content providers go to professional duplicators instead of doing it themselves. So before you buy, no matter how low the price, make sure you know what kind of service you will be getting from your equipment supplier!

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