

QUICK Q&A: SHIV SHANKAR DANI

A popular book format in Chhattisgarh...

Demy formats.

Timeliness is absolutely crucial, not just for new titles but for reprints as well. What kind of time factors do you abide by?

We operate 24/7 with a complete range of machinery. So we have the advantage of shuffling of jobs from night to day and vice versa. We have a successful history of getting the work done by any point of time.

How did the pandemic months affect your post-press ...

Pandemic months have been very disappointing to us. The sales have gone down and the press had remained shut down most of the time due to lockdown. We suffered financial losses owing to the lack of work.

You have invested in saddle stitchers and perfect binders in your factory...

Our binding unit is famous in Chhattisgarh due to Welbound machines.

What is your binding mantra...

To give quality finished books within a stipulated time by relying on the Welbound perfect binding machine and a three-knife trimmer.

Are you producing shorter runs, more frequently, in the past 12 months?

Yes. The pandemic has adversely affected our production.

Does it vary for paperbacks? It was up to 500 last year, earlier it was 900. A few years ago it was probably 1500.

No. It is the same as previous years.

Digital printing will remedy the bottleneck that book printers are finding. Has it benefited you?

Digital technology is the future. But it is a costly affair in terms of quantity that is greater than 250 pieces. Personally we have benefitted through digital printing as it is deployed for proofing purposes.

Are you making use of special print or finishing techniques to create higher-value products?

We using spot UV and knurling for our notebooks.

Do you require your print suppliers to provide additional services?

Yes. They should be able to send their technical person once in a year to review the steps in which we are lacking.

How are e-books affecting your requirements for physical books?

E-books are technology-driven. In this age of internet, e-books are available at will. It is bound to have an impact on the physical books. Add to it the disruption by pandemic and the previous year and this year has seen sales of less than 20%.

What are the trends from your point-of-view for paper stocks and covers?

We do stocking of papers and covers in a good quantity. But it was very crucial this year as paper rates were up by 40%. Proper storage is also a challenge.

People speak of the price of print remaining constant in contrast to the print inflation. Do you remember the book print prices of the nineties as compared to now?

There are many factors responsible for the print inflation now. I feel that in the nineties infrastructure wasn't as developed and the pressure on ROI wasn't as much as today. Today almost every city has numerous presses. So, in this scenario, the competition will kill the desired profit without any unity or presence of a printing association.

now the B-grade mills have improved a lot," says Dani. "Our printing team faces many challenges to get the production done. The real pressure is always on the machine man. We reduce our problems by using premium consumables."

There are many challenging projects that the company has encountered over a course of time. "The most challenging had been when we had to supply 32 lakh books to the Government in 30 days and we managed to fulfil it in 28 days," says Dani.

Then there was a case of dispatching 30 metric ton of finished books to the Government of Chhattisgarh. "This had to be done every day for a regular 45 days and across six depots. It probably has been the toughest deadline we have had to execute," says Dani.

The pandemic disruption

Last year has been tumultuous in terms of the pandemic. "As an education publisher it proved to be extremely difficult to cope with the changes in the industry," says Dani. The pandemic has led to an operational shift in terms of what the company will be focussing on in 2021-22. "We will be stressing on increasing titles and clearing the backlog of work that has been caused due to the pandemic," says Dani.

During the initial months of complete lockdown Dani and his team had a lot to absorb in one go and decided to be calm and forward-thinking. The work had stopped and Dani kept in regular touch with his team to figure out if anybody needed anything. "After the three days of first lockdown we decided to give a month's ration to all the workers who are with us. Some of our workers needed an advance and we handed it to them without questioning," says Dani.

The consumption patterns of books have shifted over the last few years and more so during the pandemic. Dani attributes this to availability of more options for any one product. He feels that the educational publishing will never see a dearth in demand. "The sector will capitalise on the opportunity to expand its digital footprint while rebuilding the traditional form," says Dani.

Beacon of hope

Dani feels that "a well-researched and curated educational book often transcends the boundaries of a classroom." Ajay Prakashan's mission has been to bring knowledge and people together, to make education accessible and to create a plethora of academic tools. Lakhs of students depend on books by Ajay Prakashan and it has led to an upliftment of the students in the state of Chhattisgarh.

Ajay Prakashan keeps informing the students about all the latest developments in the field of education. "We provide good books at affordable prices to students and hence it has become a trusted name among the students," says Dani.

The company feels indebted to the dealers, writers and workers who have been there through this journey. It has helped the company gain knowledge and have brought laurels for the state of Chhattisgarh and put it on the global map.

"Students eagerly wait for the competitive exam books printed by us," says Dani. "The means of education are ever evolving and we strive to evolve along with it. Our team works hard towards combining innovation with quality. We promise the children a brighter future." ■