

Digital textile

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EDUCATION THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Fluxmall DTG managing director Dmitry Sarbaev emphasises the role education will play in the growth and development of the digital textile printing industry in Vietnam. **Joseph Link** reports.

It has been suggested that digital textile printing has had little impact on many low-income economies, but Fluxmall DTG is working hard in Vietnam to change people's opinions of the technology in the region.

Vietnam has been a common destination for textile manufacturers to offshore production. Fluxmall DTG was one of those companies, following managing director Dmitry Sarbaev's decision to switch operations to the Southeast Asian nation from Russia in 2015. But, unlike many foreign manufacturers in Vietnam, Fluxmall DTG is resolute in its desire to boost the digital printing industry in the country.

"We are only at the start of this exciting journey," says Sarbaev, who discussed the potential of DTG printing and its growing importance FESPA Asia 2018. "We have spent two years setting up technology processes, purchasing our first machines and consumables in the country and selecting the proper business model to fit into the local business environment.

"Our team in Vietnam is still a small one and consists of expats and young talented Vietnamese," continues Sarbaev. "In some areas of DTG we consider ourselves real trailblazers because we face challenges that others in our industry treat as less important, because we are committed to working out new solutions in those areas. This requires us to stay in touch with many of our clients, constantly gathering feedback so we know where we need to improve. Though our premises are still small, we have no doubt that we will expand in the following years and become leaders in the DTG industry here. But most importantly, we have a big heart for Vietnam and we aim to contribute to the development of the industry in Southeast Asia."

Geographical location

Fluxmall DTG is based in Ho Chi Minh, which was voted the world's second most dynamic city in 2017 and is now home to over 10 million people. Sarbaev believes the city's vibe is key to Fluxmall's growth during the last two years – its international community has quickly become the company's biggest market. Additionally, Sarbaev is aware of the important role education plays in the success of emerging technology.

He says: "Ho Chi Minh is a perfect location for us to set a high standard in DTG printing and expand the industry sector in Vietnam. Being aware of the commitment to the community and society in which we operate, we understand that human resource training is not only the responsibility of educational institutions, but also the enterprises. We have made steps in the past year towards raising the educational level of future DTG labourers. We reached out to universities to enquire if we can conduct workshops and, possibly, develop joint programs to train students. We have already started partnering with two universities in Ho Chi Minh and we hope there will be more opportunities available."

Education

The importance of education has been realised throughout the digital textile printing industry. Many conferences have seen adopters complain over issues they claim are the same as those experienced with conventional printing. Colour management is one such problem and OEMs regularly point to education as a solution, which adds further expense to the adopters' already steep investment cost.

Sarbaev claims that the courses offer students theoretical



Dmitry Sarbaev presents a workshop to educate local people in an attempt to boost the DTG industry across Asia

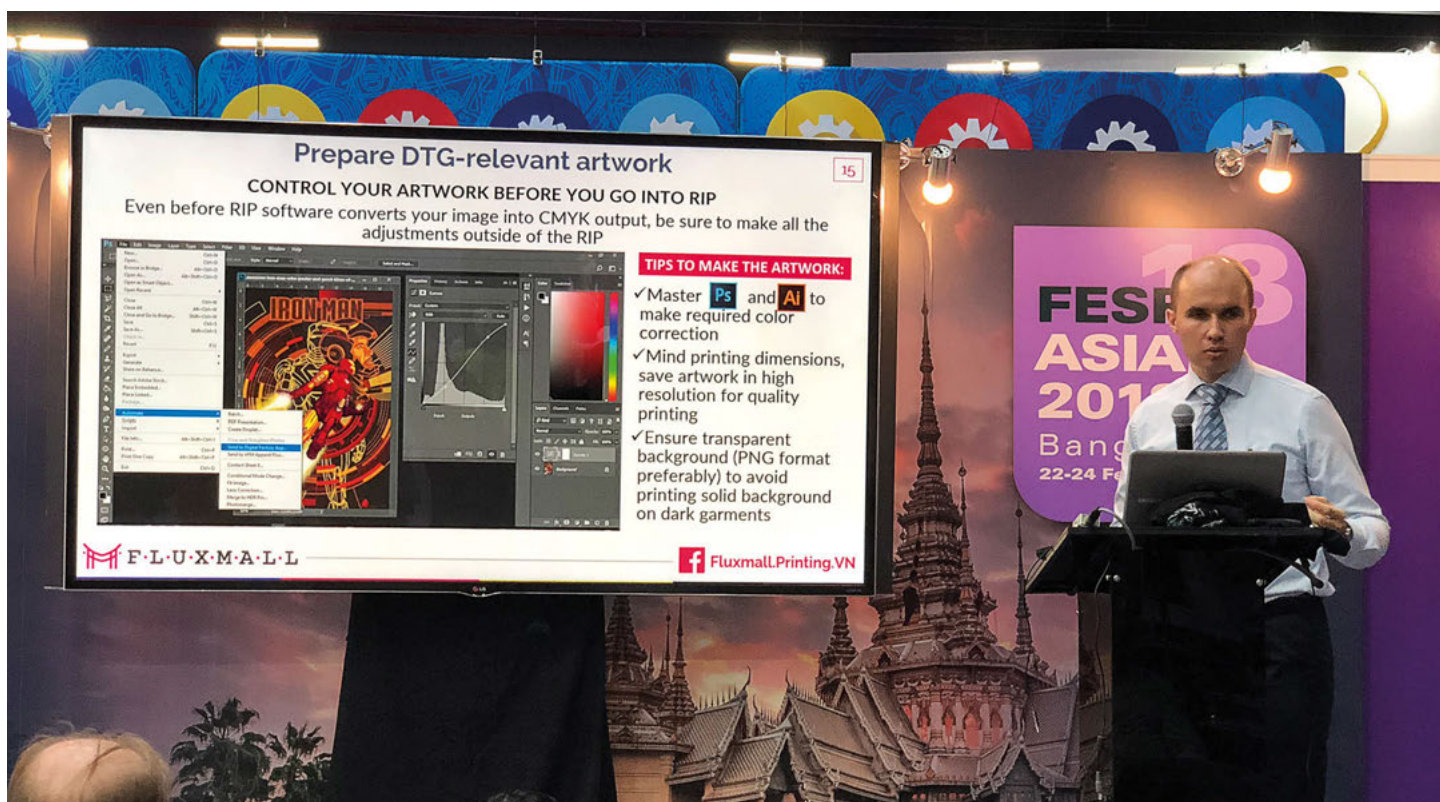
knowledge about direct-to-garment printing, but also hands-on practical training, which involves working with some of the latest printing technology on the market. The company's next big investment will be in the Brother GTX, according to Sarbaev, who believes the machine is a 'real game changer', but acknowledges that it must fit your business model, meaning volumes are high enough, if the investment is to prove fruitful.

Sarbaev was also attracted to Brother because of the support that the company offers and the desire it shares with Fluxmall to grow the digital textile printing industry in Asia and further afield. "Some world-renowned OEMs have already supported our initiative, and you will see our joint educational programs very soon," says Sarbaev. "I personally find a lot of joy in spending time with young Vietnamese talents, overseeing their development and expanding their knowledge of DTG. We really hope our efforts will help students succeed in the industry.

"We certainly invite investors to have a closer look at the Vietnamese market. There is a lot to be done not only in the educational field, but also in creating a proper infrastructure around the industry in Vietnam and surrounding countries. We need to keep in mind that the local economy is significantly aimed at export, so certain

business models might be feasible for this segment. Next to that, given the fact that DTG is not cheap compared to traditional methods, as we analyse the local fashion world in its trends in general, I trust the market is ready to consume high-quality printed garments."

Fluxmall DTG's origins stem from fashion brand COOL AIR which, for 15 years, specialised in casualwear, outdoorwear and skiwear. But the company's shareholders migrated to Fluxmall to remain in the garment industry, albeit in a different market segment. Consequently, the majority of Sarbaev's career has been spent working in e-commerce and digital marketing, which is what initially directed him to Vietnam. He says: "In 2013-2014, part of our core team relocated to Vietnam, where we had our fashion and design department, to help develop and promote our knitwear collections, which we felt strong about with regards to what our customers demanded. The challenge we encountered was the inability of local suppliers to produce high-quality multiple-colour prints for our garments. We have always put a strong emphasis on the quality of our products, as well as the use of the most modern materials and innovations. So, we thought 'why don't we try to get one cheap machine in Vietnam first and see if we can make the print ourselves?' That is how it all started."



Dmitry Sarbaev discussed the benefits of DTG printing at FESPA Asia 2018 in February

The lure of DTG

Fluxmall confirms that it has no intention to branch out from DTG printing in the future. "Over the years, I've learned the lesson that you don't need the whole sea, but rather focus to be the biggest fish in your own pond," says Sarbaev. "Niche is very important to gain your true followers, and you are supposed to dominate in your niche to become the leader."

"If we look at the Asian market in general, from what we hear from OEMs and some of our colleagues in Southeast Asia, we conclude that there is huge potential for DTG in the region, although some countries are doing better than others."

One of the biggest appeals of DTG, according to Sarbaev, is the freedom it affords designers. DTG has also enabled the customisation and personalisation trends to flourish and, with Amazon investing heavily in Kornit Digital's DTG technology, these trends are expected to go from strength to strength. Sarbaev adds: "Look at the map of DTG across the world and you will see that those countries which really grasped its beauty have a lot of designers capable of creating the artwork with gradients, semi-transparent areas while skilfully knocking out the colour of the fabric from full-colour images. No more limitations on colours, less limitations on the composition of fabric and a vast variety of locations on the garment where you can decorate it with your print – virtually everywhere."

Sarbaev continues: "Secondly, there is a huge market for those who will print with no minimums. At some point of life all of us need birthday gifts, garments for special occasions, couple T-shirts with photos etc. I don't see any method more suitable for that than DTG."

"And finally, we live in the digital world. The level of automation keeps growing. Inevitably there will be more fast digital machines and huge garment brands will develop more collections where you have to go digital to fulfil their requirements."

Sarbaev's experience in operating a digital printing company in Vietnam is positive for both the industry and the Vietnamese economy. It suggests that there is a strong future for digital printing with educational bodies getting involved and working in partnership with companies such as Fluxmall. Furthermore, Fluxmall's success to date has resulted in the manufacture of its very own DTG printer. Currently, the machine is in the prototype stage, but Fluxmall aims to officially launch the printer in the second half of 2018. Sarbaev selected a team of engineers to embark on the journey to produce what he states will be an entry level machine for newcomers to the industry. It will be interesting to see how the machine impacts on the industry and the effect, if any, it will have on current OEMs.