

First Night Northampton, MA

First-Class First Night Many cities and towns across the country ring in the new year with First Night celebrations that bring communities together and showcase local businesses. The town of Northampton, Massachusetts, is no exception.

For the past 14 years, the Northampton Center for the Arts' largest project has been the coordination of the town's annual First Night celebration. "An ongoing challenge for us is directing visitors to the various performance sites," explained Michael Kusek, executive director of the Northampton Center for the Arts. "This year, we wanted to have high-quality signs that were easy to read so attendees could just glance down a street and find the venues."

The Center for the Arts wanted to hang 25 double-sided banners identifying First Night venues and a series of double-sided pennants describing various ice sculptures throughout the downtown area.

Industrial Color Laboratory of Framingham, Mass. steered them towards ink jet imaging because it would allow them to create eye-catching graphics economically. Previous methods would have meant that all 25 banners be the same. Ink jet technology offered an economic alternative by allowing the Northampton Center for the Arts to incorporate variable venue schedule information on one side while consistently acknowledging sponsors on the other side.

"Utilizing existing logos and color schemes, we were able to create a template for the banners," added Kusek. "Digital technology enabled us to tailor each sign."

Because of the unpredictable New England weather, choosing the right media was critical to the success of the project. "The materials we used needed to be tough enough to withstand harsh New England weather --everything from rain to snow to sleet," explained Becky Gardner of Industrial Color Labs, the service bureau responsible for outputting the signage. "And because of the financial constraints, we needed the signs to be durable without requiring any overlamination or special treatment. Rexam's DMPB10 and DMVLA5 were ideal for this because they provided the durability and image quality we were seeking."

Twenty-five full-color banners, each measuring 24" by 84", were run using an Encad Novajet Pro 60e plotter on Rexam Image Products' DMPB10 10-mil polyethylene banner material, then hung and framed using PVC piping. In addition to the banners, 40 double-sided pennants were printed on Rexam's DMVLA5 5-mil matte adhesive backed vinyl. No finishing or laminating was needed.

According to Gardner, the printing industry has undergone a dramatic change in the past five years, shifting from about 20% digital to almost entirely digital. Work has become more complex and production cycles have been reduced dramatically. "Vendors must rely on consistency of materials, high quality control and tight scheduling," explained Gardner.

"These are the only ink jet products we've used that are waterproof regardless of ink type," explained Gardner. "We used vegetable dye inks which have a shorter life span than pigmented inks. Because the banners were only being hung for one night, lifespan was not an issue. We were more concerned with image quality, durability and time constraints and Rexam's media met our requirements."

"Ink jet imaging was the perfect solution," added Kusek. "It enabled us to create complex, multi-colored signs that could be displayed on lightweight frames that could not support web canvas or other heavier materials."

Perhaps the true measure of the project's success came from the comments of the general public. "Most First Night attendees liked the addition of the signs. They found them helpful and aesthetically pleasing and many designers are looking to use the media for other projects," noted Kusek.