

Kadfire & Canon

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Kadfire has become the UK's train timetable print specialist – and it's all down to being in the right place at the right time, says its founder

“In business, you should aim to get yourself a niche.”



Clive Blane
Kadfire

Clive Blane admits chance played a large part in establishing Kadfire's niche – but hard work has kept it on top.

Chance encounters can change the course of a business, and Clive Blane remembers the day in 1996 when opportunity knocked for himself, his partner Paul Newsom and their fledgling company, Kadfire.

“We'd started Kadfire in 1995 and we were building a healthy hardware and software business with architectural practices, replacing pen plotters with the relatively new inkjet technology. Somehow we got in front of a train operating company looking for a new way of producing double royal-size timetable posters – that's 635mm x 1016mm. They were using an old NEC Pinwriter to print A3 sheets, which they stuck together. We told them our inkjet printer could do the job in 90 seconds, and we had a sale.

“Clive and Paul didn't know it then, but Kadfire was on the way to becoming the UK's leading specialist in train timetable solutions, processing data and printing timetables and posters for most of the country's train operating companies (TOCs). Kadfire now employs 16 people at offices in

Redditch, close to Birmingham, and London, and has sales in excess of £2 million. “They say that in business you should aim to get big, or get yourself a niche,” says Clive.

“Thanks to that meeting, we've gone niche and it's proved to be the right decision.”

Kadfire occupied the niche by steadily enhancing its range of services to meet the special requirements of the sector. From selling hardware and software, the company took on poster and timetable printing. Next, noting how many times it had to halt print runs to take in last-minute data changes, Kadfire commissioned its own bespoke timetable software. Today, Kadfire also designs timetable and marketing products, consults with TOCs about compliance with timetable requirements, and supplies, installs and supports clients' in-house large format print systems.

Redditch is home to Kadfire's production department, where it handles data and printing for 16 TOCs, including Southeastern Trains, Chiltern, First Great Western and GNER. Products cover the whole spectrum of large format print seen on stations, from timetables, through notices of track engineering work to publicity posters.

 imagePROGRAF





imagePROGRAF iPF8000S

Engineering notices and related items (details of replacement bus services, for example) make up most of the workload – substantial timetable changes are generally limited to two a year. Kadfire receives the engineering data two weeks before the work, and has to deliver the material to the stations one week later. The choice of stock depends on how long the posters have to be displayed – 130gsm poster stock for short-life posters (up to four weeks), or 200-micron polypropylene (water-, tear- and UV-resistant) for longer-term display.

Until last year, production was handled by a battery of HP DesignJet 5500s, but these have been joined by the company's first Canon large-format printer, an imagePROGRAF iPF8000S. There were several reasons for the decision to switch to Canon, as Clive explains: "We'd been an HP house for a long time, largely because until now there hasn't been a lot of competition. But we keep an eye on what's happening in the market, and the iPF8000S clearly merited a close look, which I took at the official launch of the machine in Barcelona last autumn."

Around the time Kadfire was checking out Canon's LFP range, a TOC client was in the process of evaluating whether to set up its own internal print operation – a network of large format printers located in ticket offices at 20 'hub' stations providing posters for display at all 160 of the TOC's stations. Data would be prepared at the client's head office and sent across the company's intranet for printing. Distribution would be handled via the client's train services.

"The client was driven by the usual desires to gain control, speed up turnaround and cut costs," says Clive. "At the end of the exercise, they decided to go in-house, and asked us to advise on, and supply, the right printers. We had no hesitation in recommending the iPF8000S, and offered the client a long-term trial machine so they could test the concept and evaluate the printer.

It's competitively priced, fast, the quality is excellent, and it's more than a match for anything else on the market. It's also a genuine production machine, which matters – the machines aren't printing every day, but when they are they need to produce up to 60-plus prints a day. And if one machine goes down, that means extra work for another. It's also user-friendly, which means staff need minimal training, and low-maintenance – the sub-ink tank technology means it can run unattended for longer, which is also important in a non-production environment." The machine has been a major hit for the TOC and has further enhanced Kadfire's reputation in the process.

Looking to the future, Clive sees Kadfire continuing to develop new products and services for the niche the company has come to dominate. A recent addition – a web-based service that allows passengers to compile and download personalised timetables – is proving very successful (one TOC reports over 60,000 downloads a month), and new ideas are close to fruition. And he looks forward to seeing how Canon develops its large-format offerings: "Canon's entry has changed things. The company is a serious player in the graphics market."