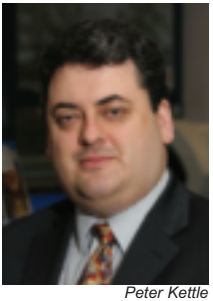
Do you want fries with that?

Peter Kettle, Product Development Manager at Roland DG (UK) Ltd, shares his thoughts with us on the Engraving industry

"Do you want fries with that?" is what some people think is the type of question engravers will be asking in the future. Are they daring to suggest engraving is a dying art? After all, it's a bit old hat, isn't it? If they mean it's been around for a long time, they're right. God didn't screen-print the Ten Commandments. When he handed them over to Charlton Heston, he wanted to make sure the information was permanent.

And what about the Rosetta Stone? Before it was recognised that all you had to do when foreigners didn't understand you was shout, people had the quaint idea you had to translate stuff. It is believed the stone was inscribed in 196 BC (Before Computers), and is still legible today, pride of place in the British Museum, alongside Grayson Perry's favourite bits of pottery.



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I know what you're thinking, just because the process of engraving has been around for a long time, it doesn't mean it will last as long as its end product. It may have been in fashion once, but not all things improve with age - just look at the Duchess of Alba. Surely, modern technologies will replace engraving? Well, certain applications, yes. Some modern print technologies, such as the UV cured LEF-12 printer can produce full colour durable lapel badges using variable data for rapid production. It can also produce flexible membrane control panels and labels on tough and attractive films with high performance adhesives. It can't cut the holes though, or profile out the shape. You'll need an engraver or laser for that. And, if you need a jig to hold products under the LEF-12, guess what, you'll need an engraver for that too. So, as print technology replaces engraving for some applications, it increases the demand of engraving for finishing and fabricating.

Having spent the last 10 years with Roland, I have seen a rapid and relentless development of print technology. I have also seen the hunger in the sign industry to adopt this new technology. But, this technology has largely centred around thin self adhesive vinyl. Now, with the release of printers capable of printing directly onto thicker materials, the demand for rigid signage is on the rise. The finished product, however, increasingly needs a router, laser or engraver to profile out the final shape, cut a slot, holes, channel or recess into the panel.

Opportunities are emerging for engraving companies. Adopting the new generation of print technologies may offer competitive advantages when it comes to trophy centres, badges, labels, corporate gifts, control panels and signs. Traditional sign companies occupy what is largely a 2D world. The concept of Z axis is as alien as Pilchards and Marmite sandwiches. For an engraving company, however, adding colour through print is a very simple extension. Engraving companies own the technological high ground, but complacency could be costly.

Our thanks to Peter Kettle for writing this article.