

Editor's Picks

Friesens banking on books

Altona company unveils new press

By: [Martin Cash](#)Posted: **3:00 AM** | Last Modified: 6:38 AM | [Updates](#) |

ALTONA -- More than 20 million copies of the Robert Munsch children's classic Love You Forever have come off the presses of Friesens Corp. in Altona since the book was first published in 1986.

With the new Manroland XXL press Friesens unveiled Tuesday, it will be able to print any press run four times as fast.



WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS
Friesens Corp. CEO Curwin Friesen examines a full-colour product sheet run off the company's new press Tuesday in Altona. [Photo Store](#)



Friesens chairman David Friesen

One of only three presses of its kind in the world, the sleek German machine can print 64 full-colour pages in one pass.

The largest capital investment in Friesens' 109-year history -- close to \$10 million including a new shearing and plating operation -- it may be all the evidence anyone needs to believe the book business is still alive.

"We made our first book on a press that printed two pages," said David Friesen, chairman of the board, retired CEO and the third generation of the company's founding family. "Then we bought another press that could do four pages, then eight, then 16, then 32. We have made technology leaps in the past, and each time our competitors said we won't be able to handle it. But each time it brought the company to a new level. This one will do exactly the same thing."

There is no doubt e-books and the digital era have taken a few chapters out of the history of the book business. But Curwin Friesen, president and CEO of Friesens Corp., said book consumption flattened out about three to four years ago. Reference books, encyclopedias and pure-information books have gone online, but certain segments such as children's books and religious titles are growing. And some textbooks are coming back as well.

And the coffee-table book -- Friesens' sweet spot

-- is still strong.

"There are a few factors," said Friesen, who is not a member of the founding family, about the renewed stability. "Print is more competitive, prices have come down and versioning is very popular. With digital technology, instead of printing a textbook for all of California, we can do one for one school board with just the chapters they want."

Embracing technology has kept Friesens in the mix and on the cutting edge in a business that once looked as if it would move entirely offshore.

"We can't compete with China on straight price," Friesen said, citing wages of \$3 per hour

FRIESENS FACTS

THE MANROLAND XXL PRESS

- Weight: about 226,795 kilograms
- Length: 30.5 metres
- Number of shipping containers required to transport from Germany: 12
- Number of pages printed in one pass: 64
- Number of people required to operate the press (compared with six to eight with other large-format presses): two

FRIESENS CORP.

- Book titles printed annually: 5,000 to 8,000
- Individual books printed per year: 20 million to 30 million
- Number of employees: 600

there and \$25 per hour in Canada. "But we can compete on speed to market, time zone, availability for press checks."

(Friesen wasn't sure if they had a Chicago Blackhawks Stanley Cup championship book in the works, but Friesens Corp. did one in the past that was ready for sale days after the NHL title victory.)

Michael Mugavero, the head of Manroland's North American operations, said most printers whose business they analyse end up settling on much smaller, standard-sized machines.

"There are 5,000 of those presses (40-inch frames) running in North America," Mugavero said. "The Friesens team came in and came up with this concept."

It was at the major printing industry trade show in D^osseldorf, Germany, three years ago that Manroland and Friesens representatives first discussed the concept for this type of machine.

The two companies have been doing business for more than a decade. Friesens has four other presses from the German manufacturer and will decommission one of them as part of the efficiency planning with the new equipment.

The company remains the largest book printer in Canada and a leader in a fragmented North American market. It is currently near its peak employment and Friesen said the firm is starting to run into challenges finding people to fill positions in Altona.

But the company continues to attract top-tier publishers and produce the high-end colour books that command top dollar and have consumer staying power.

Jay Wheelock, a Texas-based lean consultant who has worked with Friesens over the years, said the company is in the middle of the pack globally in terms of size but has a strong reputation.

"They're on the leading edge on the technology curve and are extremely good in customer service," he said. "Their brand has been around for 100 years."

The attention to the value of the brand has never been more acute, even though a few years ago the founding family completed the transition to 100 per cent employee ownership.

It sold off its paper wholesale business about eight years ago, and managed its way through lean years from 2007 to 2012 caused by a combination of the introduction of e-books, the rising Canadian dollar and a brutal recession. After becoming more efficient during those tough years -- and with the help of a more favourable currency exchange rate -- sales are back on a growth trend.

In the past few years, the company has made significant investments in printing packaging, including proprietary technology that allows Friesens to do printing on thermal form plastic unlike anything on the market.

But the company firmly believes books will be in its future.

That's what the big, new investment is all about.

"The packaging printing business is growing five (per cent) to seven per cent per year and it is ripe for new technology," Friesen said.

"But when we look 30 years in the future, we believe books will be an important part of the business and we continue to broaden our footprint."

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