

Apex Signage: putting precision into the picture

How an Elitron Spark C 19.16 helped an Australian signage specialist automate a labour-intensive finishing process



For Apex Signage, investing in an Elitron Spark C wasn't about adding another sophisticated machine to an already well-equipped operation. It was about people, and specifically how much time they were spending cutting printed graphics by hand.

Based in Sydney, with production sites also in Melbourne and on the Gold Coast, Apex has grown from a small sign factory into a full signage specialist covering commercial, retail, vehicle, construction and environmental graphics, plus visual merchandising and window films. The business increasingly involves digitally printed films, wall graphics, glazing graphics and corporate interiors. These are areas where finishing can matter as much as the printing itself, and that's where the company spotted an opportunity.

From sign shop to national operation

Apex began in the Sydney suburb of Cromer before growth pushed them into larger premises, where they have now been based for three years. Five years ago, they opened a Gold Coast site, which developed its own printing, cutting and braille capability, and Melbourne followed more recently. Today Apex offers a full service nationally including design, production, project management and installation. Production technology has evolved alongside the



business, moving from roll-to-roll equipment to UV-curable digital printing. Sydney now runs two Canon Colorado systems, while Queensland and Melbourne use a mix of Epson and Mutoh printers. Commercial interiors, wall graphics, glazing films and architectural work for designers, architects and builders have become a significant part of the business, and it was here that a specific finishing challenge emerged.

Removing the finishing bottleneck



Before the Spark C, digital printing was already in place, but finishing remained labour-intensive. Large wall graphics and glazing films had to be cut by hand. Nick Williams, NSW Operations Manager, notes that some jobs with three-metre drops needed two people just to handle and cut the material.

Beyond labour cost, there was a consistency problem: "when you're cutting by hand you've got human error and you've got time issues," says Williams. The goal was to bring finishing up to the same digital standard as printing and the Elitron Spark C offered just that route.

An investment that came through the print room

The path to Elitron ran through Apex's existing supplier relationship with Currie Group for Canon printing equipment. Currie had recently struck an exclusive Australia & New Zealand partnership with Elitron, adding the Italian manufacturer's cutting systems to its range, and the timing put the Spark C in front of Apex.

Managing Director Nick Greally says Currie's team are strong on service, and once they showcased the Spark, "it was clearly something we would be interested in." Other machines were considered, but price and quality tipped the decision. Williams confirms price mattered and at a significantly higher price point, Apex may not have one ahead at all.

Flexibility also counted. Though Apex's main need was cutting printed film, the Spark C's multiple tooling options and broader substrate range give it a backup route for other work when the company's CNC is busy. As Greally puts it, "accuracy, speed and quality are everything in this industry, and a machine that keeps pace is vital to hitting deadlines with minimal rework."



NICK GREALLY
MANAGING DIRECTOR

Clear-cut results from the start



NICK WILLIAMS
OPERATIONS MANAGER NSW

The Elitron mainly handles digitally printed films rather than rigid board. Apex still uses a Summa roll cutter for smaller jobs, plus a MultiCam CNC and Thunder Laser elsewhere in production. The Spark C fills the gap of automated finishing for larger format film work, including optically clear film for glazing, where precision in both printing and cutting is critical for the graphic to read as part of the glass rather than obvious overlay. Williams says the "Spark C has proved excellent both in terms of productivity and precision." A typical job might be a graphic around 1200mm high in varying panel widths. A job that once meant repeated manual cutting now runs through the

Spark's automated, conveyor-driven system. The investment wasn't about marginal improvement - it was about removing a manual process entirely.

Automation without adding complexity

The real benefit, Williams says, is what operators no longer have to do: "The beauty of the Elitron is that it's a computer-operated, digital system that doesn't need someone looking over it the whole time." The two staff once tied up handling and cutting long drops can now be redeployed. Williams estimates productivity in this area has roughly doubled. One benchmark being the ability to cut 100 m² of printed film in a day.

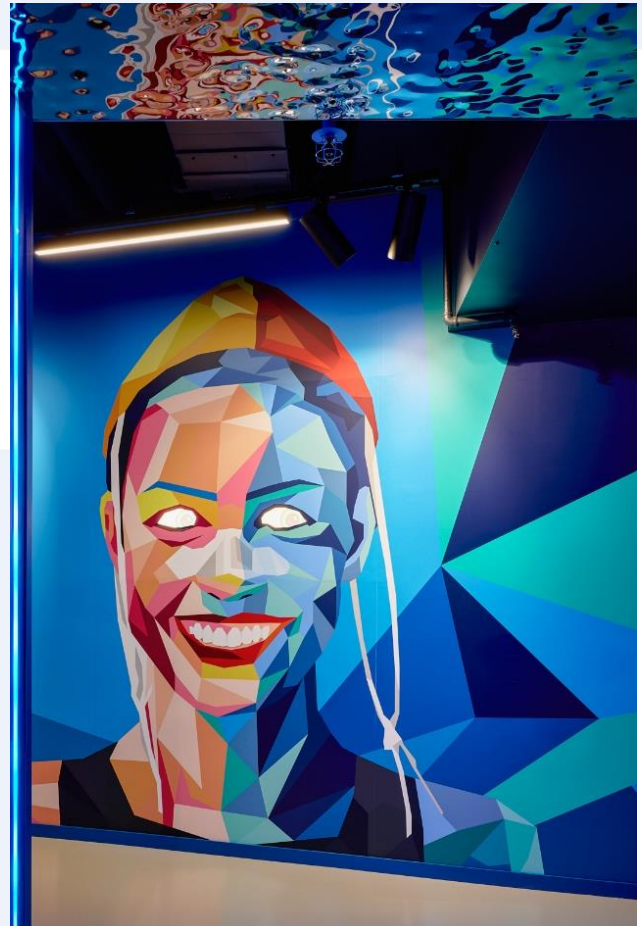
Predictability matters too. Digital printing enables fast, customised work, but manual finishing can bottleneck the whole chain. Automating that final step makes Apex's workflow consistent from print to finished graphic. Greally adds that "loading a roll and letting it run while staff prep the next job has let Apex take on more work, with less need for thorough quality checks thanks to the Spark's precision".

Part of everyday production

The Spark C isn't a contingency machine. During busy periods it can run for most of an eight-hour shift, and the experience has been largely trouble-free. Williams says there haven't been any real issues since installation a couple of years ago, and the machine is still on its original cutting mat with minimal technician involvement. Installation required lifting the unit onto a mezzanine by forklift, and the exhaust was later routed to the ceiling to manage summer heat. Around five staff have been trained to operate the Spark. This is a deliberate policy so leave or absences don't create bottlenecks, and Williams says the machine and software were straightforward to learn and that early trainees have easily passed on their knowledge.

More than just a cutter

Apex isn't yet using the Spark C's full capability. Panel and contour cutting is still mostly run through the CNC, but that could change, giving the team more flexible options when other machines are occupied. Greally says taking on short-notice jobs is now less of a burden and this has become a genuine point of difference in terms of customer service. Ultimately, Williams sums it up simply: "Elitron's Spark has greatly increased our productivity." The Spark C's sophistication and flexible tooling matter, he adds, but



increased productivity is the real result and for Apex, that's exactly where this investment has earned its place on the production floor.

