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The Inside Story Behind the Launch of Kyocera Mita's TASKalfa Color MFPs

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After three short months of anticipation, Kyocera Mita began shipping its TASKalfa 500ci series of color MFPs to its dealer channel on Dec. 8. Both Kyocera and its channel are hoping that these long overdue color devices truly are the game changer that Kyocera needs to compete in the color MFP space. At first blush, it's not a stretch to say, fasten your seat belts, the game is about to change.

Meet TASKalfa

The TASKalfa 500ci series combines color printing, scanning, and copying with optional faxing. If appearance counts for anything, one can't help but be attracted to the device's black and silver exterior, which certainly helps them stand out in

a crowd. The four models in the line feature a clean-sheet design and include: the TASKalfa 500ci (40 ppm color/50 ppm black); TASKalfa 400ci, (40 ppm color/40 ppm black); TASKalfa 300ci (30 ppm color/30 ppm black); and the TASKalfa 250ci (25 ppm color/25 ppm black).

Kyocera says that these devices will be ultra reliable thanks to its long-life technology, which should reduce required service intervention while maximizing performance. The foundation for these devices is Kyocera's long-life consumable technology, which includes the company's Amorphous Silicon (ASi) drums. These drums enable an extremely generous 300,000 page preventive maintenance schedule. What's not to like about that from an end user and a dealer perspective?



When it comes to color, image quality is critical and this represents one of the new series' hallmarks thanks in part to a new Kyocera color engine that offers 8-bit color output and Kyocera's new micro-particle toner.

Each model is equipped with an 8.5-inch color touch screen control panel, standard duplex capability, a maximum paper capacity of 4,100 sheets, and the ability to handle heavier paper stocks, up to 120-lb. index. In addition each device offers advanced finishing and paper handling options.

The TASKalfa 500ci and 400ci come standard with two 160GB Hard Disk Drives (HDD). The 300ci and 250ci are outfitted with a standard 80GB HDD. Users have the choice of two optional document processors—either a Dual Scan or a Reversing Automatic Document Processor. With speeds up to 100 images per minute, the optional dual scan document processor reads double-sided pages in a single pass.

Another asset of the new color TASKalfa's is its versatile scanning capabilities, including scan-to-email, scan-to-folder (SMB), scan-to-FTP, scan-to-USB, WSD scanning (Windows Vista), and TWAIN scanning at resolutions ranging from 200-600 dpi. Super G3 fax/network faxing is optional. A USB host interface enables print-from and scan-to any USB drive in PDF, JPEG, TIFF, and XPS file formats via the control panel.

Duty cycles of the new devices are particularly impressive--200,000 for the 500ci, 160,000 for the 400ci, 130,000 for the 300ci, and 100,000 for the 250ci.

The TASKalfa 500ci series offers cross-platform compatibility, allowing for connections to most environments, including Windows, Mac, and Linux. A comprehensive suite of solutions assists in document creation and output via Kyocera's KX Driver and PRESCRIBE Solution for on-demand color and black & white document creation; advanced document workflow solutions such as KYOcapture; and network and device management tools such as KMnet Viewer and PrintQ Manager.

For those businesses with heightened security or compliance requirements, the 500ci series comes standard with Secure Print and Security Watermark capabilities. An optional Data Security Kit is also available.

The TASKalfa 500ci series integrates with several third-party solution providers. In addition, Kyocera's document workflow solutions such as KYOcapture and KYOcapture

Express integrate with many document management systems, including SentryFile, LaserFishe, Documentum, and Microsoft SharePoint.

Although there seems to be a lot of anticipation among Kyocera dealers for the new TASKalfa products, it will be interesting to see if the TASKalfa brand name catches on. No doubt it's a brand that is "made in Japan" and will take some getting used to stateside.

According to Kyocera, the name signifies that every end-user's need – or task – is always a top priority. Expect to see the TASKalfa brand on all Kyocera Mita MFPs, including its monochrome MFPs going forward. While we're looking ahead here, don't be surprised to see higher speed TASKalfa color devices in the not-to-distant future either.

The TASKalfa 500ci, 400ci, 300ci and 250ci have extremely competitive suggested retail prices of \$16,460, \$12,955, \$9,950, and \$8,915, respectively.

The TASKalfa 500ci series hits the rest of North and South America in January as well as Europe and Japan. As an FYI, the new color devices won't be marketed by Kyocera's Copystar division with the TASKalfa brand name. Rather, those products will be marketed as the CS500ci Series.

Preparing for the Launch

Throughout December Kyocera has been aggressively training their field staff in the U.S., Canada, and Latin America. "We've taken a different approach to training and how we're communicating through a series of regional events with our dealers," explains Peter Hendrick, vice president marketing. "We also had some exposure with the product to some of our key dealers and select customers and from what they've told us, they are extremely pleased with the performance and image quality."

"One of the biggest things we're doing with this product is making sure that consistent messaging is there and that the delivery strategy to our customers is consistent as well," adds Danielle Wolowitz, product and solutions marketing manager, color MFPs.

Wolowitz reports that Kyocera has developed interactive workshop-based training for these launches and that the consistent message will revolve around the new device's ultra reliability, unsurpassed performance, and superior image quality.

"We're taking reliability to the next level," boasts Wolowitz. "We've incorporated the best of the best from our product lines, so even though the devices are clean-sheet design, we didn't start from scratch. We looked at what we did best and what our core competencies are taken that from our '80s and our '60s that have really proven that reliability in the field and incorporated those components into these devices."

That so-called "best of the best" technology draws from Kyocera's black & white printer line as well as the company's Ecosys printer technology. When it comes to the superior image quality of the new color TASKalfa's, Wolowitz recites the company's new mantra, "the proof is in the print."

"The image quality on these devices truly is phenomenal and is highly competitive," says Wolowitz.

Dealers seem to be excited and have been telling Wolowitz that the dual-scan document processor is something that will likely resonate with customers because of the efficiencies it brings. "The optional dual scan on the 25-ppm device is a very strong feature for a machine in this category, because color scanning is becoming much more prevalent and having that capacity and productivity on a 25-ppm device as well as a 40-ppm color device really gives diversity and flexibility," says Wolowitz. "Plus we have two document processor options that they can choose between. It's really going to allow our dealers to customize this product for their end user."

Other features that Wolowitz feels will be embraced by Kyocera's dealer and end user communities is the commonality across print drivers, the selection of tools and utilities, and the touch screen control panel. "All of these things are taught to customers as to how it will solve their business problems, rather than just being a spec on the device," notes Wolowitz.

Leveling the Playing Field

The new color devices with their enhanced image quality, lower cost of ownership and service, should go a long way towards leveling the playing field for Kyocera Mita in the color space. Hendrick acknowledges that the company has had to play catch up.

"We were not perceived as quite as strong a color image quality as we needed to be compared to some of our competitors," concedes Hendrick. "We feel our color output is equal to if not superior with this new device. And I think that combined with our long-life technology and the TCO and TCS story is great for the dealer and great for the customer."

Asked if he thinks this will become a go-to product for dealers who might have gone elsewhere to fill a gap in the color gap in their product lines, Hendrick is optimistic.

"Certainly that's what we hope to happen, but it's a little too early to tell. Each region is going to go to each dealer, and dealer by dealer show them what these products can do for them not only in terms of performance and image quality, but from a profitability standpoint. I think it's going to be a situation where dealer by dealer we try and win back some of the business that may have misplaced to another competitor over the past couple of years."

Hitting the Mark

Anyone who's been around the industry for any amount of time has a general idea how to gauge success. Although Hendrick isn't going out on a limb, he says that time will tell how well the company has done.

"We think we hit the mark from a technology and performance standpoint," he says. "We think we hit the mark from a marketing and training standpoint. We've hit the mark on the MSRP, and on the CPP side, over time dealers will tell us if we've hit the mark. Our job is to get out there now and make sure our dealers understand the value proposition. We aren't going into the market green; we know this product is proven."