

Leading **PRINT**

A black and white photograph of a man in a white t-shirt and shorts, smiling and pulling on a rope on the deck of a boat. The background shows the ocean and the boat's rigging.

More Vang?

Jon Budington's gutsy rebrand of a highly successful hybrid

Into Our Customers' Minds

Gina Danner on the brand promise that transformed her company

A Really Smart Print Factory

Tom O'Brien: customer-driven automation and adaptation



From Merriam-Webster:

vang

plural -s

: either of two ropes extending from the peak of a gaff to steady it when the sail is not set.



Jon Budington's gutsy rebrand of a highly successful hybrid.

By Jon Budington

MORE VANG?

People keep asking me about the name "More Vang."
"Vang" is a sailing term — it refers to a series of ropes on a boat used to exert downward force on the boom and control the shape of the sail. When I was coming up with a new name for Global Printing, I recalled an experience I had when I first came to Washington.



I had done some small-boat sailing when I was a kid, and when I moved to D.C. in 1991, I joined the crew on a sailboat out of Annapolis. On Saturday mornings, we'd race. Soon I decided that I needed my own boat — I wanted to be captain — and bought a classic 1963 Alberg 30. It was called Nimble, a name which would turn out to be ironic. During one of the first weeks I owned it, I was pulling out of the dock in a strong wind, and I really didn't know how wind could take control of the boat in this kind of situation. We swung around backwards and almost crashed into another boat, and then another five in our attempt to turn around. By the time we got straightened out, the whole marina had come out to make sure we didn't destroy their yachts. One guy looked at me and said, "Nimble, eh?"

The bottom line is, I had a boat, but I was still learning how to sail it. I was taking risks by taking it out. Looking back, I think of it as a business metaphor: If you're in business and you're not willing to take risks, you're fooling yourself if you think you're going to be successful. Taking risks has to be part of your DNA. For me early on, that was taking Nimble out and

learning to sail by doing, often by enlisting more experienced friends as crew. My first season ended with an experience that led to the "More Vang" name. Please indulge me in another boating story.

Around the end of that November, I took Nimble on a 20-mile sail down the Chesapeake Bay for winter haul out. I had called up Steve, a sailing friend, and a couple other crewmates. We left the dock expecting a pretty good day — this was before cellphones and when you still read the weather in the newspaper. Halfway across the Bay, the clouds came in and the wind picked up, quickly gusting up to 30 knots. It was howling, and we could barely hear each other. A large gust knocked us down, and we lost steering. As the boat lay on its side, I eased the main and tried to get back up and on course. Each time the boat came up, the main would fill, and we'd get knocked down again. Steve began to yell, "Get the vang on!" Without the vang, easing the main turns the mainsail into a parachute. We were getting dragged across the Bay — filling the cockpit with 45-degree water. One of my crewmates emphatically asked, "What's a vang?" I pointed and said, "Pull that." Steve yelled, "More! More! We need more vang!" The crewmate pulled with all his strength, and the boat came up. We regained control. And I said, "Well, I see what the vang does for you."

That's the origin of More Vang. It refers to gaining control of a seemingly out-of-control situation. How we've evolved as a company has to do with taking risks, gaining control, and finding a better perspective. I've come to realize that most of our clients are dealing with many of the same problems we are — the challenges posed by an evolving business climate. The metaphorical value of the name is that everything is subject to change. If you're not prepared for that, you're just counting on luck, and that's not a winning strategy.

Regaining Control

Global Printing has been around since 1979, so it has certainly weathered its share of storms. Some were more severe than others, but it became obvious to us a few years ago that the storm we were sailing in was getting worse. Like the average printing company, every year we see 15 percent of our work disappear, and then we pick up another 15 percent to break even. If we grow, we pick up 20 percent. And the number of entities that hire us as only a



“OUR GROWTH HAS BEEN COMING FROM CLIENTS THAT NEED NEW IDEAS, NOT NECESSARILY NEW PRINT WORK.”

printing company continually gets smaller.

The goal of any rebranding is to clarify the intangible value of a business, internally and externally. With a name like “Global Printing,” most clients have an idea of who we are and what we do, but the fact is, we’ve been evolving for decades — adding software development and a full-service creative agency. These capabilities fuel our growth, so clearly our value to clients has surpassed “printing” alone. And it’s hard for some customers to buy a website or creative strategy from a company called “Global Printing.” It’s like the electric company saying they can help you with your next social media campaign.

We tried to overcome this issue by dividing the company into two divisions: Global Printing, the print production division, and Global Thinking, the agency/creative services division. Unfortunately, it became a literal division between people who thought of themselves as either the “printers” or the “thinkers.” This invisible wall resulted in two completely different perceptions of us, and it left the printers out of the creative business. A couple of years ago, it became clear to me that a comprehensive rebrand was needed. We had to present our complete product and service offerings through a single brand.

When people hear the word “brand,” they often think of a company’s identity — the name, logo, and corporate colors. But branding goes far beyond visual appearance. It’s about qualifying success. Here’s what I mean. I kicked off our rebranding campaign by sitting down with our management

team and asking them: Who are we? What do we do? Why is that valuable? To whom is it valuable? Why does this business exist?

The initial answers were shocking and all over the place. There was a clear divide between how the thinkers and the printers each perceived the business and the value we offered. So we spent nearly a year writing, questioning, and arguing over five seemingly simple questions. When we were done, we had a solid brand narrative that we collectively believed in. We were in agreement that our identity needed to shift from a manufacturing-based business to a creative-based one.

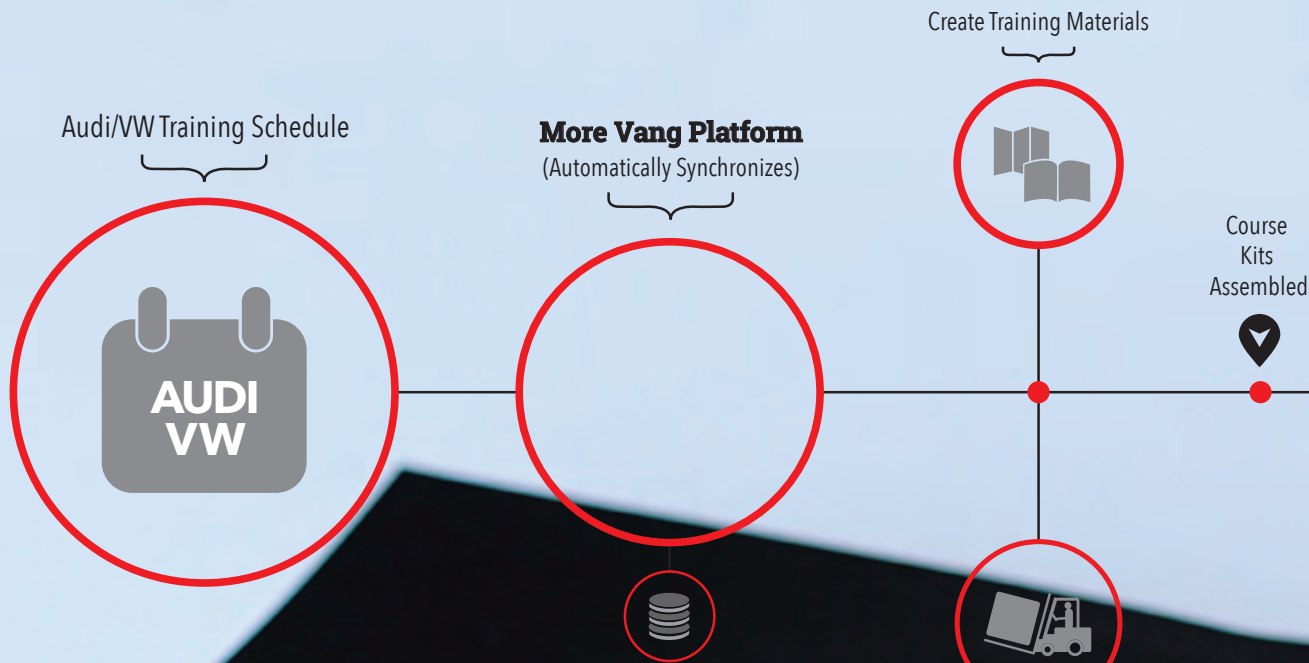
Everyone in the printing business today needs to think of themselves as an “idea person” who can create both online and physical brand experiences that our clients want to use. Many of our legacy clients continue to see us as a printing company, and that’s fine, but our growth has been coming from clients that need new ideas, not necessarily new print work. Last year, 60 percent of our incoming revenue came from technical or creative design ideas rather than “print sales.”

Our challenge, then, became a cultural one. Employees with a traditional print background have a lot of bad habits to unlearn. Printers have been trained to talk about capabilities and tactics: equipment lists, web-to-print, print-on-demand, standards, variable data — things none of our newest clients talk about.

I recently acted out a typical client encounter in front of our client services team. I showed samples of our most complex work, spoke passionately about a new piece of equipment we purchased, and rattled off a dozen print buzzwords that sounded important. Everyone laughed, but they realized this wasn’t far from what they were doing.

Approaching clients creatively requires a very different conversation. They don’t speak in printing industry buzzwords. We go into a client meeting prepared to talk about them, their needs, and what their desired outcomes are. And we always have new ideas to pitch. Ultimately, the success of More Vang is determined by our clients’ outcomes and not our outputs.

As with our design projects, we now require project briefs for all new print work. In the past, a print job was just a job. The print specs detailed



Inventory From Warehouse

Progressive

Sporty

Sophisticated

“THE SUCCESS OF MORE VANG IS DETERMINED BY OUR CLIENTS' OUTCOMES AND NOT OUR OUTPUTS.”



the job's schedule, how it was printed, and where it was to be delivered. Now, our biggest concern is to understand how the project creates value for the client. Once we understand that, we can focus on how to best express it. It may be in print; it may not be in print. It may be in a different type of print, or it may be — and often is — some combination of print, online, and software development. Whatever meets the client's needs and provides value.

Interestingly, once you become an ideas company rather than strictly a printing company, your potential geographic footprint expands. For decades, we served the local D.C. market. Last year, more than 50 percent of our work came from outside the D.C. area.

Gaining Speed

The idea of “more vang” is changing how we approach clients — shifting the conversation from “How can we help you?” to “This is exactly how we can help you.” It's a very different process — and outcome.

Here's an example. Volkswagen runs hundreds of training programs

around the United States every year, and each program has different print components. Some go out to all the programs, and some go to individual programs, depending on whether a program focuses on, say, service and maintenance versus sales and marketing. Volkswagen came to us and said, “This is a nightmare to run.” The wrong materials were being sent to destinations, inventories were running out, or there would be overruns sitting in a warehouse until they were out of date.

We looked at their management system and realized that it was unsophisticated given the complexity of the project, comprising little more than spreadsheets, email, and hope. We then discovered they had an important asset: an online registration tool — a calendar, basically — they were using to coordinate all the training programs. The data in that calendar showed who was signing up for what programs where.



We designed software to speak directly with the calendar and measure inventory needs. Our software produces all the print orders, all the shipping documents, and contacts FedEx. It's fully automated, with no people involved in the day-to-day management of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of printed materials. Volkswagen had called the process a “nightmare.” We removed that nightmare. And our value wasn't in producing printed materials per se, but rather in changing the entire process by which those materials are deployed.

Uncharted Water

The Volkswagen project may sound like next-generation web-to-print, but for us it's now business as usual. Nearly a third of our revenue comes to us through automation and “technology ideas.” In fact, one of our



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technology ideas landed us a seven-figure, four-year contract. Here's that story.

In addition to developing new ways of producing print, we're focused on inventing new places for print to live. From my perspective, that's the future of print.

As I write this, I'm wearing a pair of New Balance running shoes. I've been a loyal customer for over three decades. A few years ago, our business development team made a connection with someone in their social media department. You might ask, how does print work in a social media campaign? Social media is complicated. It's highly personal; it's intimate; and it's easy for mistakes to fly around the world at the speed of light. But what if our job with social media wasn't to create the voice, but to instead create an experience for other voices to share? This was the approach we took.

New Balance was sponsoring some major running

events, and they knew the social media “influencers” in those markets. Our job was to create highly personalized experiences that these influencers would want to share on their social channels. We developed packaging and promotional material for over a dozen campaigns. New Balance measured success through tweets, retweets, and shares — their best customers sharing their joy with the world. Conversations about new ideas like this quickly move away from “How cheaply can you print it?” to “How effective can it be for us?” Again, this can involve print, new types of print, and print in combination with online media and software development. And by “new types of print,” I’m talking about personalized packaging, all the new wide-format applications, specialty printing. New types of print are being developed all the time. I expect that some of the best printing More Vang will do hasn’t even been invented yet.

Constantly Tacking & Jibing

Most marketing people today are highly fluent in the virtual or digital brand experience, but they’re less sophisticated about the physical or offline experience. We need to demonstrate to them that the offline experience is not about taking an email and turning it into print. It’s about understanding how print can work in sync with all of these other media to complement and supplement them rather than simply duplicate them. This has been a big focus for us this year. We’ve been working on an idea that landed a dozen clients in the last three months that had never printed any of the materials they’re now printing with us.

We’ve spent a lot of time and effort on our rebranding in order to change with the times, but we understand that the times are going to keep changing — and we’re going to have to evolve again and again to continue adapting effectively.

If you look at the world and complain about social media and other new communication technologies — and resist changing to accommodate them — you’re going to go out of date and out of business pretty quickly. On the other hand, if you adapt to and embrace change and know that you’re never “done,” that you’re always learning and constantly

adapting, you stand a good chance of staying vital for the long haul. And like that winter haul across Chesapeake Bay that inspired our new name, part of that adaptation process is about taking risks. It’s venturing into unfamiliar — perhaps even hostile — waters, adopting new technologies (print or non-print) and pursuing new types of clients. It’s changing your business to better suit the times.

You don’t have to be happy about change, of course. You don’t have to personally like the way things have changed. But you have to recognize that fighting it is useless.

I don’t think print is going to go away, but a lot of different kinds of print can and will go away. At the same time, there are plenty of places, including new and as yet undiscovered places, where print will continue to live and thrive.

Jon Budington is CEO at More Vang, a company that helps brands find their voice and promote their ideas and their value to their own clients. More Vang does this through a combination of creative strategy services, website design, software development, and printing in a wide variety of ways. Connect via budington@leadingprint.org.



Account
Manager



Advertising
Sales



Chief
Operations
Officer

Graphic
Designer



Creative
Director

Chief
Marketing
Officer



Into Our Customers' Minds

Gina Danner on the brand promise that transformed her company

By **Gina Danner**

We're growing like a weed. We recently doubled the size of our print facility and increased our staff by 30 percent to accommodate the new business we're generating. What's our secret? We have created a *durable competitive advantage* that, at its root, is pretty simple. We compete where our competitors aren't. We create value that they don't. And we do this by first developing a very deep understanding of our customers. We understand who they are and what they need. We speak their language and act like they do. And ultimately, our goal — which they can relate to — is not just to print for them. Our goal is to help them make money.

R.I.P.
PRINT

We know that everyone thinks print is dead.

Reality is, they aren't doing it right.

Print drives value in ways you've probably never considered.

gonextpage.com/pixel

I run a commercial print company with my brother, Eric Danner, and our partner, Larry Wittmeyer, Jr. My mission since I bought into the family business 25 years ago has been to learn how to effectively market to our audience, who *themselves* are marketers. We have never wanted to sell them something that's just another operating expense. We want them to see our product as an investment with an ROI — and see our company as a partner that delivers this kind of value. I knew that if we could do this, we'd have a chance at growing our business in a meaningful way.

Decide Who You Are

First, we had to learn to speak our own language. As an organization, we needed to be clear on who we are: our brand, our values, what makes us different, what services we deliver, and to whom we provide value. Five years ago, we merged our company, then called MailPrint, with Graphic Services Printing and L and L Manufacturing to create NextPage. At the time, we hired a branding agency to take us through a formal rebrand. And as part of that process, we developed a single-page document that fully fleshes out who we are.

The central component is our brand promise: “To deliver more than print, in every area of our company's interactions.”

This means that it's as important for us to innovate solutions that result in greater return for our customers as it is to find opportunities to give back to our community. We placed the 8 ½ x 11-inch brand posters throughout our facility — in every conference room, cubicle, and key area on the production floor.

The rebrand gave our organization a framework within which we could evolve — if we could abide

by and adhere to it. So we still review our brand promise *every. single. day.*

Sometimes I find myself reading the poster four or five times in a day. If a decision isn't aligned with our brand, it's not the right decision. If we don't know who's going to buy a new offering, why they want it, or how we're going to sell it, it's not the right product for us. We constantly ask ourselves, “What does our brand tell us to do?”

Learn How They Think and Act

Only after we defined who we are as a company could we then adequately define our customers. And not just by type of company or industry, but by the “personas” that exist within these organizations. Each “user” of our product has a basic, general set of characteristics: demographics, behavior patterns, motivations, and goals. Developing “personas,”

or profiles, of these users helps us to understand them — and how to sell to them.

Our customers are extremely varied. We serve small agencies and startups to large telecom and insurance companies. We have created personas for each type or organization so we can be very clear on who we are talking to and thus how we should talk to them. For example, take creative agencies, a very important slice of our audience. They're the folks designing our customers' campaigns and the marketing and promotional materials we

print. We defined multiple personas for these agencies, including account manager, buyer, creative director, leader, and graphic designer. Each role has distinct motivations and buying patterns, but all of them play a key part in purchasing print.

Here's one of the important things we discovered: **Amidst the generation of graphic designers and marketers now entering the workforce, many have never produced anything for print.** With so much focus on digital marketing, this audience doesn't understand print, never mind how it can be used to increase engagement, response rates,

and revenue. If we don't make print accessible — and even sexy — to these audiences, we'll eventually have people in control of marketing budgets who just don't see the value in print.

And in the bigger picture, we've realized that, in fact, “the page” no longer means much to our audience. At NextPage, we define the page as any consumer interaction or touchpoint, from email and merchandise to print collateral and large-format signage. It's no longer just ink on paper.

YOUR LIFE
IS YOUR
MESSAGE
TO THE
WORLD.
MAKE SURE
IT'S
INSPIRING.



So now we discuss how we can help our customers make more money from all of their touchpoints. We know that if we can help provide solutions to our customers' challenges, then every page they do produce will be more deliberate and have higher value and greater return.

Create Unexpected Value

It's not enough to identify our customers' current thinking. To ensure our future, we need to improve their understanding of what print can do to help them achieve their marketing objectives. We need to educate.

We looked at what had worked in the past. For many years we've brought potential and current customers into our plant for "lunch and learn" meetings and tours. Our staff creates an engaging experience that showcases not only the production process, but, on the fly, draws out our visitors' interests and discusses the marketing touchpoints most relevant to them. The results are consistent:

When we educate customers through these experiences, our sales close rate with them more than doubles (shooting up to 60 percent).

So we launched an Eat and Educate series, our equivalent of lunch and learns designed specifically for agencies. To understand the education these particular teams need, we first took agency leaders out to coffee. They were surprised we didn't try to sell to them — we wanted to hear from them. How can we best deliver professional growth to you? How can we provide your teams with practical knowledge they can apply to their work?

We now offer a set of learning experiences to agencies — the science of color, variable data printing, finishing and folding, multichannel marketing, and environmental graphics — and we customize the content according to each team's specific needs. We send a youthful and engaging member of our team to present to this younger audience. And since breaking away to travel is hard for agency staff working on deadlines, we bring this program to them.

Every Eat and Educate meeting we've hosted so far has resulted in an opportunity to produce print projects for that agency. These have all been new clients, and we've generated significant incremental revenue from the projects. We continue to develop the series and offer it to agencies on our targeted list of prospects.

There are a host of benefits for this effort. We build our understanding of this set of customer personas; we deliver content that the agencies value and associate with us; and, perhaps most importantly, we expose these young creative minds to the application, process, and value of print. This should yield benefits far into the future.



A vehicle wrap (yes, that is a print piece) can generate over **3,000 brand impressions** a day.

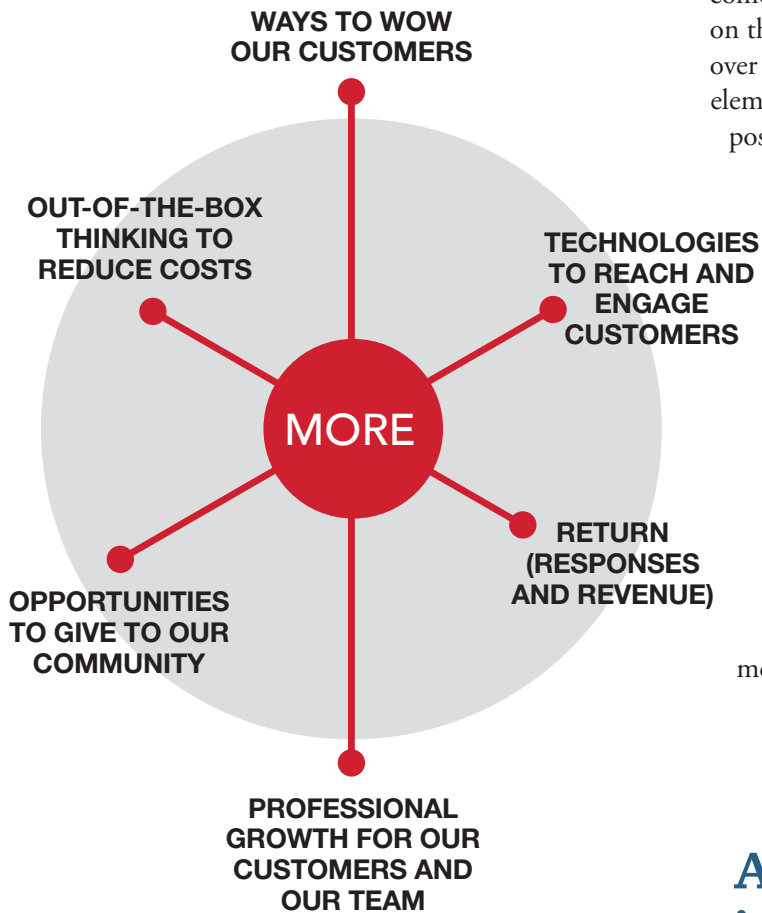


Properly designed graphics in high-traffic areas generate **store visits** and **brand impressions** all day, every day.



Properly designed and installed sponsor graphics generate **direct revenue** AND **brand impressions**.

NextPage Brand Promise



Really Smart Marketing

Educating our customers has been part of our approach. The second prong is effectively marketing to them. Here again, we're not effective unless we put to use what we've learned about our customer personas. Let me give you an example, which includes a taste of our own learning curve.

This year, we sponsored the Advertising Association Federation's Gas Can Conference in Kansas City. **The conference put us in front of several hundred creatives — with no other print service providers in attendance.** Our sponsorship included printing the conference programs, giving us a chance to showcase our printing capabilities. But we really wanted to broadcast a message to this audience about the power of print and why it should be part of the marketing campaigns they design for their clients.

My team presented me with concepts for our sponsorship ad, and I knew right away that these wouldn't resonate with the creative personas we had

come to know. The concepts positioned print OVER digital — focusing on the tactile benefits that only print can offer, why print stands out over email's overflowing inboxes, and how print is often the forgotten element in today's digital marketing mix. We were defending print from a position of weakness. With an audience so completely focused on digital marketing, none of these ads would convince them to switch to print or even to add it to their current toolkit.

We needed to speak our audience's language. If we wanted to show them that print is sexy, we needed a sexier message that explained its value better, and in terms they could relate to. My team went back to the drawing board.

Ultimately, we developed a multi-channel, progressive conversation with this audience that we dubbed our "Create Outside the Pixel" (COTP) campaign. First, we piqued their interest with the conference program print ad, which offered the chance to win Marina Joyce's award-winning book, "Design for Print." In the ad, we promoted a webpage link where they could learn more and sign up to win.

At the webpage, gonextpage.com/pixel, visitors were greeted with a message that grabbed their attention and made them feel understood:

**Hey you ... Yeah, YOU.
We know you. We ARE you.
After your 9 to 5 (and we know it is never 9 to 5), you go home and that's when the creative sparks really start to fly. You aren't limited to your screen.
Your imagination knows no bounds. This one's for the weekend Picassos, the late-night Capotes, the part-time Dylans, and the undercover Hitchcocks.**

Our creative audience is made up of artists who crave the freedom of creativity, wherever it takes them. We engaged with them at this emotional level. The rest of the page used iconography (shown in the sidebars here) to tell the story of how print in all its forms — from direct mail to large format graphics — drives value in different ways. **We highlighted the concrete results of using print, including increased brand impressions, store visits, and direct revenue.** And we hit on those tactile aspects of

print and the benefit of standing out amid overflowing inboxes. We talked about print from a position of strength.

Then we hosted a booth at the event, where attendees could experience the impact of print in signage, coasters, and pillows upon which we printed COTP graphics. Visitors had a choice of takeaways as well as the opportunity to win a COTP-branded cooler stocked with spirits. We even printed the six-pack carriers. The contemporary colors, bold voice, eye-catching iconography, and three-dimensional takeaways in the campaign attracted attention.

A lot of attention. Three hundred creatives attended the Gas Can event. Two hundred entered the cooler drawing. Our landing page received 100 visitors interested in learning more about us. The attendees were excited. They had never seen this type of fun campaign from a print service provider. They experienced the high-impact print can make when paired with digital, and they saw that creative print is more accessible than they imagined.

Based on what we learned at Gas Can, we're now integrating the COTP campaign into all of our messaging to this audience. Create Outside the Pixel resonates. A simple one-page ad created for an event has grown into a full-fledged, multi-channel marketing campaign.

A New Press Is Not a Marketable Message

Traditional print service providers, including my own business partners, still tend to think about equipment first. It's natural. We spend a lot of money on our equipment, and we know how improved technology benefits our customers. But here's the thing: Our audiences don't care if we buy a new press or how much volume we print. They care about what the page — whether digital or printed, big or small — delivers. **The bottom line is: If we're doing our jobs right, our clients make money. Our own marketing needs to tell that story.**

Our branding and marketing efforts have fueled our success in ways we didn't think possible. We've become thought leaders and solution providers for our customers, and that has directly impacted our business. We know that to stay ahead, we need to focus more on data and analytics and continue to push our team on collecting and understanding concrete metrics. Data is the only way we'll be able to better understand our audiences and track what's working and what's not.

We'll continue to push the envelope with unique campaigns, educational outreach, and creative marketing activities. We'll continue to differentiate ourselves from other print service providers and make a lasting impression in the minds of our audiences. And we'll continue to find the right marketing touch points, aligned with our brand and speaking to the right personas. We believe that this is what compels clients to take action and engage. And in learning how to improve our own marketing, we'll be positioned to help our clients improve theirs.

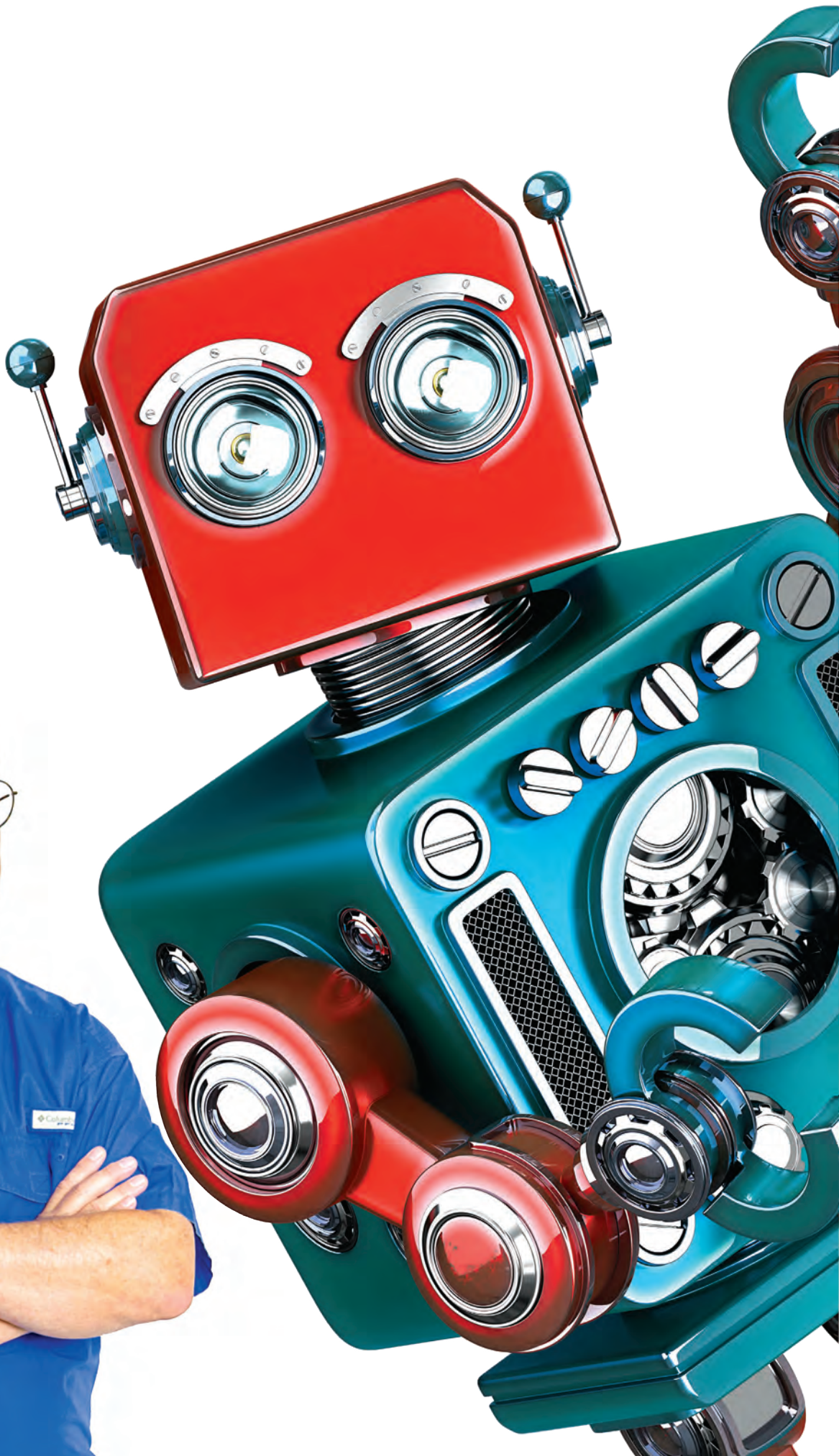
Gina Danner is CEO at NextPage (formerly Mail Print), an innovative print service provider in Kansas City, Missouri. Connect via danner@leadingprint.org.



Packaging and sales literature enhance **sellability** for retail products.

Printed product, such as greeting cards, note pads, stationary, and physical products, is a **multibillion-dollar industry** that allows you to **generate real revenue.**

Lets's face it, all of us have **hundreds or thousands of unread messages** in our various email boxes. We slog around the internet all day long. But print. **Print demands to be touched**, to be interated with, to engage, to acknowledge. Print is **alive and thriving.**

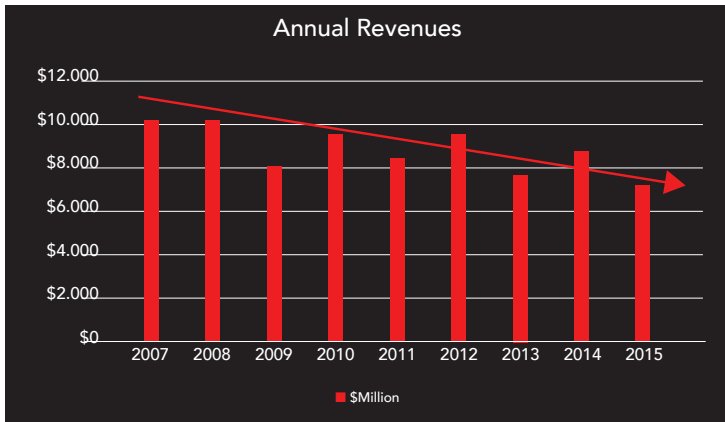


Building a Really Smart Factory

Agility, adaptation, and automation = rapid, profitable growth

By Tom O'Brien

We had a difficult path back from the 2008/2009 recession. Revenues for the commercial print company my brother and I run were heading in the wrong direction, and despite our best efforts, we couldn't seem to turn things around. By 2015, we were facing difficult decisions about our future.



Let me paint you the picture. In 2007, pre-recession, we had revenues slightly in excess of \$10 million. By 2015, we were generating less than \$8 million. As a company with 115 employees, an 80,000-square-foot facility, and clients in 50 states and abroad, this was unsustainable. It was do-or-die time.

What had always paid dividends for me was networking. Throughout my career, I've invested time and effort to support industry associations and network with peers. In these situations, I learn things I can then bring back to my business, and by being out there, others have learned about us and our reputation.

Networking paid off again. Our turnaround opportunity began with a referral in summer 2015. The organization Dscoop, which I supported, chose to include us as a potential partner for a large West Coast-based online seller of personalized products. This company was looking for an East Coast manufacturing and logistics partner. They sell personalized cards and invitations online and ship a significant percentage of their products East. A regional partner could reduce the time and costs associated with shipping. They visited several sites, and we were their last stop.

Why Us?

This potential customer had high expectations. In fact, their requirements were downright scary. We would be accountable to work with their IT staff in developing a complex integration to personalize these products and direct-ship to customers. The customers are individuals and small businesses who might order 500 business cards or a dozen invitations. ... Or perhaps they might need only one greeting card. I wondered how we could possibly produce one card profitably. And I worried about the volume of orders. Would it be predictable? Would we see severe peaks and valleys, or would we be able to achieve a sustainable volume? It was clear we would need to make some capability investments to meet the company's needs, and things for us were already shaky.

My brother cringed when I said out loud and in the meeting that this was a scary proposition for us. As it turned out, the

customer appreciated our honesty. Others had told them they had no issue with the requirements, and THAT scared *the customer*. They knew this would be complex. They ultimately chose us because:

- **We listened.** We took the time to understand their requirements and consider exactly how we would meet them. What they were asking for was something we had never done before.
- **We were honest.** We said upfront that this was a frightening proposition, but that we were willing to do our best to get it done.
- **We worked hard.** Our respective IT staffs collaborated to build an integrated order entry and production system. We were flexible and nimble. And we never gave up.

Early on, we discovered a synergy and cultural alignment that we believed would allow us to work well together. So we each took the leap. The company granted us a short-term contract through the end of December 2015. Even though this was only a 3-month contract, it was ideal. If we “stunk on ice,” they'd have an out. And we wouldn't be committed to something that was perhaps over our heads — or, worse, unprofitable.

Over a very short period of time, about two months, we co-developed integration. In the company's own internal operations, everything is automated. They had already

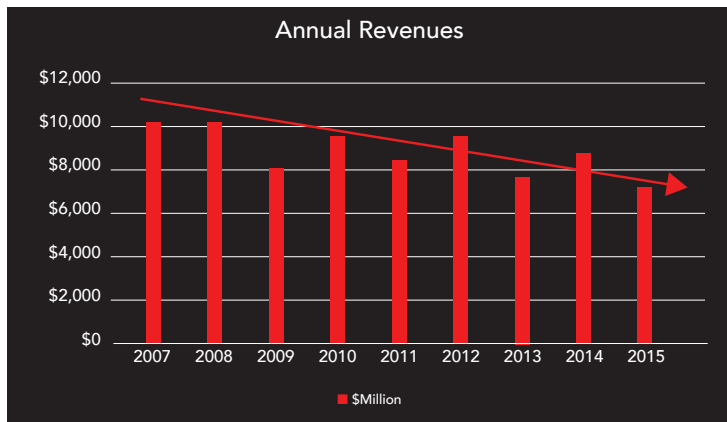
“THIS POTENTIAL CUSTOMER HAD HIGH EXPECTATIONS. IN FACT, THEIR REQUIREMENTS WERE DOWNRIGHT SCARY.”

developed a system that delivers exactly what the customer orders, on time (the customer orders and proofs online). They wanted us to duplicate that process so the customer orders could flow into our production system seamlessly, with minimal human intervention. Basically, a customer should not know or care about anything but receiving the high-quality product they expect, even in a quantity of one.

“Black Tuesday”

Have you ever been in the middle of a project when an unplanned software upgrade is installed and breaks everything? That was us on Day One of production for this new client. And they were onsite to witness it.

An unscheduled upgrade to our imposition solution literally broke our workflow and took three hours to fix. Three hours



Let me paint you the picture. In 2007, pre-recession, we had revenues slightly in excess of \$10 million. By 2015, we were generating less than \$8 million. As a company with 115 employees, an 80,000-square-foot facility, and clients in 50 states and abroad, this was unsustainable. It was do-or-die time.

What had always paid dividends for me was networking. Throughout my career, I've invested time and effort to support industry associations and network with peers. In these situations, I learn things I can then bring back to my business, and by being out there, others have learned about us and our reputation.

Networking paid off again. Our turnaround opportunity began with a referral in summer 2015. The organization Dscoop, which I supported, chose to include us as a potential partner for a large West Coast-based online seller of personalized products. This company was looking for an East Coast manufacturing and logistics partner. They sell personalized cards and invitations online and ship a significant percentage of their products East. A regional partner could reduce the time and costs associated with shipping. They visited several sites, and we were their last stop.

Why Us?

This potential customer had high expectations. In fact, their requirements were downright scary. We would be accountable to work with their IT staff in developing a complex integration to personalize these products and direct-ship to customers. The customers are individuals and small businesses who might order 500 business cards or a dozen invitations. ... Or perhaps they might need only one greeting card. I wondered how we could possibly produce one card profitably. And I worried about the volume of orders. Would it be predictable? Would we see severe peaks and valleys, or would we be able to achieve a sustainable volume? It was clear we would need to make some capability investments to meet the company's needs, and things for us were already shaky.

My brother cringed when I said out loud and in the meeting that this was a scary proposition for us. As it turned out, the

customer appreciated our honesty. Others had told them they had no issue with the requirements, and THAT scared *the customer*. They knew this would be complex. They ultimately chose us because:

- **We listened.** We took the time to understand their requirements and consider exactly how we would meet them. What they were asking for was something we had never done before.
- **We were honest.** We said upfront that this was a frightening proposition, but that we were willing to do our best to get it done.
- **We worked hard.** Our respective IT staffs collaborated to build an integrated order entry and production system. We were flexible and nimble. And we never gave up.

Early on, we discovered a synergy and cultural alignment that we believed would allow us to work well together. So we each took the leap. The company granted us a short-term contract through the end of December 2015. Even though this was only a 3-month contract, it was ideal. If we “stunk on ice,” they'd have an out. And we wouldn't be committed to something that was perhaps over our heads — or, worse, unprofitable.

Over a very short period of time, about two months, we co-developed integration. In the company's own internal operations, everything is automated. They had already

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developed a system that delivers exactly what the customer orders, on time (the customer orders and proofs online). They wanted us to duplicate that process so the customer orders could flow into our production system seamlessly, with minimal human intervention. Basically, a customer should not know or care about anything but receiving the high-quality product they expect, even in a quantity of one.

“Black Tuesday”

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is an eternity when you need to get hundreds of initial orders out the door, and the client is there watching.

It was the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week, the beginning of peak season. We got 67 orders out the door. It wasn't anywhere near expectations. And it took massive amounts of effort to get those done. I thought, "Oh, well, we gave it a shot. Game over."

When you start a partnership as we did with this client — total transparency, listening, being honest, and working hard, it puts you on an entirely different footing. Our customer's reaction was, "I'm tickled to death with our decision. You were faced with a raft of challenges, including a software update that broke everything and took time to resolve. I saw what I wanted to see. You guys are flexible, nimble, and good at solving problems. My prediction? Within three to four weeks, you'll break 500 orders per day, and within two months, 1,000."

Now, his prediction was way off. Way, *way* off. By day three, we had broken the 500-orders-per-day mark; by day seven, we were shipping in excess of 1,000 orders per day.

On the last shipping day before the holiday started, I was in the UPS parking lot five minutes before the doors would be locked at 7:00 p.m., and the customer called. They had decided to extend our contract for three more months. And the short extension was just to give them time to figure out what a long-term relationship would look like. We had knocked it out of the park.

A Much Smarter Factory

Our relationship with this customer continues to grow, but the story gets better. Bringing on this customer positioned us to win similar business from other clients. Business we hadn't looked for in the past. In order to do these job right, we've invested in automation — upgrades that have enabled us to routinely process more than 4,000 orders per day and up to 15,000 during Christmas peak. Here are some examples of what we've done:

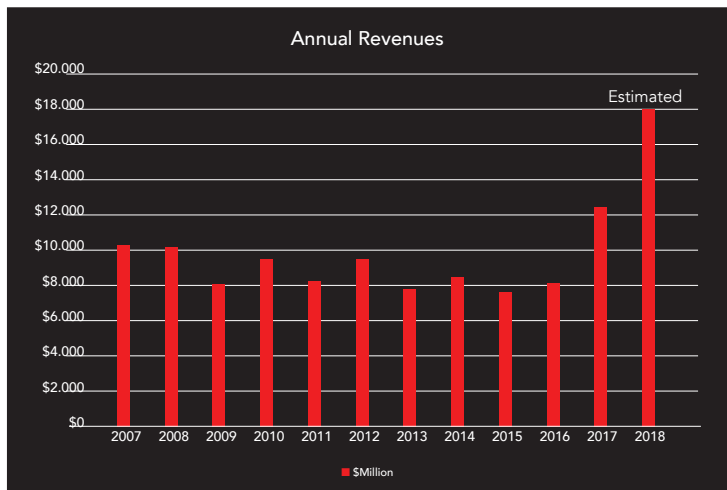
- **We implemented a print-specific MIS that feeds us real-time, actionable data.** No more waiting until the end of the month for reports. Now we can determine in real time whether a job or customer is profitable. Or maybe there's an operator or a press that isn't performing up to standard. We address these immediately — not when looking in the rear-view mirror.
- **We built a solid fulfillment infrastructure.** You can't



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fulfill thousands of orders per day if everything is manual. Fulfillment and shipping have to be as automated as possible. We need to ship within 24 to 48 hours, ensuring the right item goes to the right recipient. And some of our clients have a no-fault policy that allows the customer to ask for a refund or no-charge reprint if we make a mistake. Have too many of those, and we'll lose money — and maybe our client. So we invested in fulfillment software that integrates with our MIS and improves our physical infrastructure, making the pick-and-pack process more accurate and efficient.

- **We preserved effective preflighting.** A good, automated preflighting process means you don't have to handle each and every file that comes in. Of course, you still need



good quality control processes. Our people pay close attention to the work, including a final quality control check in shipping.

- **We automated bottlenecks out of our bindery.** Cutting used to be a huge problem for us. We had two 45-inch guillotine cutters, each requiring an operator per shift. Now we have a system that lets us move a skid of paper from the digital press to the finishing device, press a button, and walk away. What took three to four hours of intensive manual labor now takes an hour — with essentially no labor.
- **We leveraged our capabilities.** We make full use of our equipment and upgrades. Here's an example. Die cutting often is critical for the products we produce, so we offer that, but we also use more efficient tools when we can. We had a customer who insisted that everything be die cut; he didn't believe any other method would deliver the quality he wanted. We didn't agree, so we invited him into the plant to show him our automated cutting system. He liked the results. Now we're the only supplier that customer doesn't require to die cut everything. This is huge because our cutting process is faster and more cost effective.

In essence, we've built a very smart factory. With automation from concept and order through production, finishing, and distribution, we're able to eliminate touches and take time and potential for error out of the process. We leverage every

automation opportunity. And our IT team closes any gaps. It's not a one-time thing — it's a constant effort to find more streamlining.

Our front-line employees are key to identifying opportunities for efficiency. We listen to their feedback and make changes based on their recommendations. And we make sure they're recognized for their efforts. This could be an "attaboy," or a financial reward if their recommendation resulted in significant savings or increased revenue.

Diversifying

At the end of 2016, we were approached by a company looking to have items printed using the dye sublimation process. I thought, I'm a commercial printer; what do I know about dye sublimation? Exactly nothing, was the answer. But based on what we had been able to pull off in the paper side of the business, we said sure, why not?

Dye sublimation is a fairly simple process. You print onto special heat transfer paper, and then use heat to sublimate the ink onto the target item — which could be a mug, ornament, blanket, promotional item, or just about anything else you can think of. The initial investment level is minimal; you don't need a half million-dollar press to get going. And with the new

business we had gained in the past year, we were back on solid financial footing.

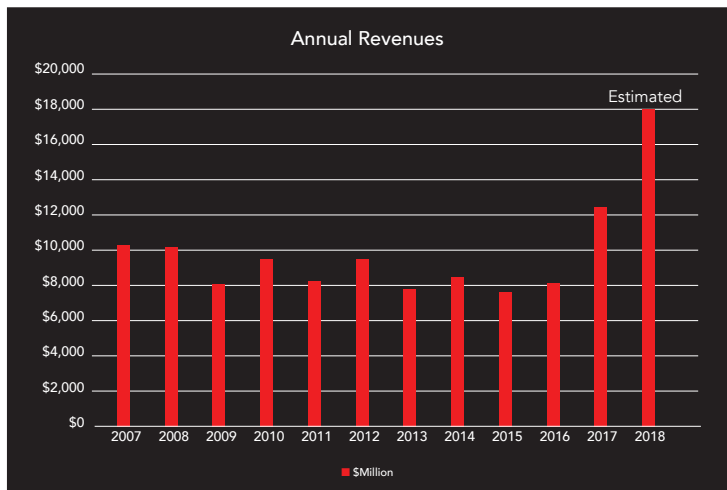
This launched Phase Two of significant business growth. I attended industry conferences to learn about the sublimation business and to network.

Then we got started with a relatively small investment and minimal space consumption.

It took off. Dye sublimation has opened a new world for us and has energized our organization. We've now moved into the photo gift business, serving multiple ecommerce companies. We're doing short-run printing on blanks — garments, mugs, bags, whatever the client needs. These are small orders, all personalized, and with tight turn-around times — 24 to 48 hours at best. There's no room for error.

In early 2018, we started printing dye-sub on performance apparel shirts, producing 50,000 for a client's peak season. And we're lining up





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work from one of the largest online providers of photo products in the U.S. for things like stainless steel tumblers, can coolers, and neoprene laptop cases. More opportunities are coming in, and I'm now consulting in the space.

Results

In the end, if you can't deliver the financials, the effort is for naught. Our financials tell the story. Our first project started at the end of 2015, and our revenue picture improved starting just the next year. We went from \$8 million in 2016 to more than \$12 million in 2017, and we expect 2018 to be our best year yet at \$18 million.

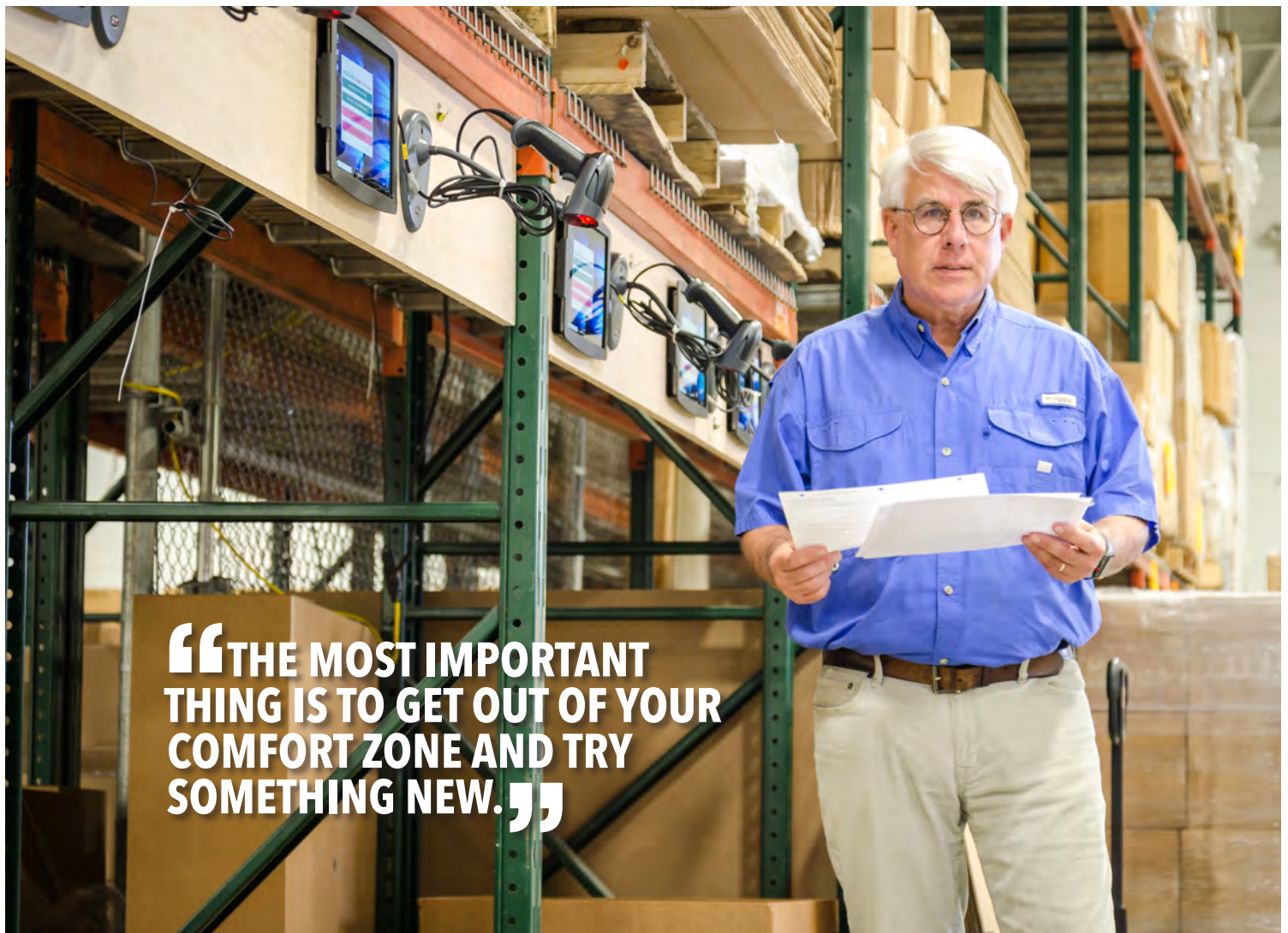
Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, "I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat. What I seek is the highest possible batting average." We continue to take on new projects and challenges, and we expect some of them aren't going to work out. But we see our "batting average" remain

high, and that encourages us to believe we have the right formula for success.

We never would have gotten where we are without the initial leap of faith and the trust our initial client put in us. That project challenged us, and we lived up to the challenge. And it made the next steps easier. We gained confidence in our ability to adapt, change, upgrade, and be nimble. We applied what we had learned, went out and learned more, and persevered. It's been a fully satisfying journey.

We listen, are honest, and work hard. We find good partners. And we've made our plant efficient. We're excited about the future. Are you?

Tom O'Brien is president of Acculink, located in Greenville, North Carolina. He started the company in 1980 at the age of 24 and is having the most fun yet. Connect via obrien@leadingprint.org.



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