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Managing prepress and print in a no-budget, no-time, no-staff world

► SPECIAL TO NEWS & TECH FROM GARY BLAKELEY, SOUTHERN LITHOPLATE

The reality of publishing today has many production managers in a perpetual no-win situation. You may know the scenario all too well and likely have a more colorful way of describing it, but it is more common than we all care to acknowledge.

For instance: The board of directors tells the CEO, who in turn tells you that you have to lay off one or more of your prepress crew. "They cut the budget. You'll just have to get it done with a smaller staff," he or she says. Or, it's 3 a.m. Your old backup CtP unit goes down for the count and you don't have authorization to spend money on repairs (if it can be repaired) until the vice president gets back from a two-week vacation. So you just pray that your main CtP doesn't act up.

As this scene plays out across the U.S. among larger publishing groups, smaller regionals, locally owned single-paper operations, and perhaps even weeklies or shoppers, those responsible for the production of the printed product may feel powerless. And who could blame them?

Breakdowns, downtime, shorthanded staffs, inefficiencies and more are the fallout that production management has to deal with on what seems to be a daily basis. Managing those obstacles while also handling the day-to-day pressures of pushing out a newspaper does not a fulfilling job make.

And managing all this alone is not really an option.

Consider this alternative: Invite a veteran prepress/print solutions supplier (a company you trust, or someone referred to you by someone you trust) to visit with you about your circumstances. Zero in on an organization that has a good track record, that has a history of working effectively with operations like yours . . . someone who is committed to the printing and publishing industry.

If you don't have acquaintances that can provide that type of referral, contact one of the professional associations serving the newspaper publishing or printing industry for a list of supplier members who play an active role within the group. These are the types of people and companies who have an interest in helping and indeed can help. Another idea – read through the ads in this publication and others to learn of suppliers that reflect your current thinking and that you believe are worth talking to.

Rather than trying to find a specialist for each and every single area of need, find a well-rounded solutions provider who can be a one-source option. One that can accommodate servicing and supporting your current equipment, consult with you objectively about any new technology you believe you need, about training, consumables and other elements of prepress and pressroom operations.

When the solutions provider comes to your facility, show your operation, your equipment, your issues. Share your recurring problems and your staff concerns, whether it's too few or too inexperienced. Divulge the conditions of your production operation you fear may worsen, but that you can't spend the time to look into or address.

Talk with this trusted supplier about new or recent technology, about your need for environmental compliance, about managing waste, about training. A fair supplier is one that can offer honest, impartial assessments on available workflow, CtP options, service and support, pressroom options, plates and other consumables.

So, let's throw in the hopper some of the areas that you might discuss with a prepress/print solutions supplier. This might help you quickly generate a rea-

sonably solid list of issues or problem areas so that when you do visit with this possible new supplier partner, there's a good place to start and the supplier can effectively present some on-target ideas for you to implement.

Consumables consumption – What you are using by way of plates, blankets, ink, processing chemicals, water, electricity, paper/makeready waste. Traditional records should have most of this information. Even if it is not dead on, it will offer a profile of your operation's efficiency.

Equipment service history – How often has your CtP been down long enough to miss your deadlines for getting your printed product out the door? How many emergency service calls? Is the maker of your equipment no longer in business or no longer providing service?

Staff issues – Recent layoffs, experience of new hires, and staff's proficiency with the operation's technology, their ability to fix or repair small or large problems, training experiences.

Equipment's ability to meet production demand – Does one of your devices create bottlenecks because it can't keep up, or no longer delivers the quality?

Software – Have you recently experienced your supplier eliminating support for your prepress or press workflow or software? Is your operating system dragging down your workflow, causing glitches or just not functioning?

Now let this fair and trusted supplier analyze this information, consider your circumstances, investigate solutions and come up with a menu of options for you. In the process, you will no doubt hear ideas you never would have thought of yourself, get options you might be able to implement right away or at nominal expense (without needing an expenditure authorization in triplicate) or have the start of a program that can get you where you need and want to be.

What is the bottom line advantage of this approach? At the very least you will learn:

1. The projected true cost range of doing nothing at all to address your issues
2. The cost to have some of your issues addressed
3. What a program might look like on a budget that you could handle

What should it cost to visit with a trusted supplier of this kind and get this kind of information? Zero to next to nothing, except a little of your time.

And that will also be how you know if you visited with the right organization, one that will commit to helping your production department.

Now armed with this information, you can go to your company's president, VP or owner with valid projections provided by an independent third party. If the bosses haven't heard you before this, this should indeed get their attention.

Of course, there is no assurance that management will come around to your way of thinking. But the odds of getting action on your most troublesome issues have improved. And if nothing else, you can get some of the things that are in the way of your production department's progress out of the way, whether you get a little more budget, a little more time or more productive staff.

Don't go it alone. Get the input and advice of a trusted prepress/print solutions supplier who is committed to print! We recommend Southern Lithoplate.

Gary Blakeley is director of global service and technical support at Southern Lithoplate.

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