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One industry or many, we need to work together: James Cryer's commentary

Tuesday, 17 August 2010

By Print21

What's in a name? Quite a lot, and it is time the printing industry thought about how it promotes itself, says Print21 columnist, James Cryer.

Last week's GASAA seminar was useful for at least one reason: it brought the debate on alternate ways of trying to make a dollar, out of the closet and into the open air. Although with Hagop Tchamkertenian, *Printing Industries* national manager for policy and government affairs, reporting that, per employee, "the mining industry is 56 times more profitable than the printing industry" we should all go out and buy a shovel.

Unfortunately, as so often happens we ran out of time before all the issues could be fully debated – but that's no reason why the fires of debate can't be fanned into life via such electronic forums such as Print21Online. (Now there's an invitation to fire off a few irate emails at me, if ever there was one.)

One of the fundamental issues arising from this debate is: are we one industry or many?

To ask a question such as "Can you make money out of print" begs the question: "What do you mean by "print"?" The NPAs are wrestling with the same issue as we try to compare persimmons and pomegranates, in terms of "quality" which is becoming increasingly difficult, as new, alternate technologies emerge.

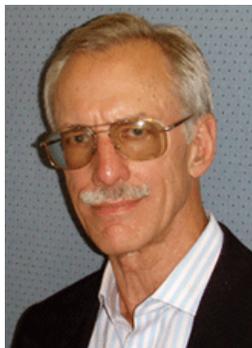
It would be like asking the vehicle manufacturing industry the same question. You'd get different answers

depending on whether you made rick-shaws or helicopters – and our industry is just as diverse.

In my view, you can divide the traditional "commercial" print sector into three arms: 1) sheet-fed offset, 2) small-format digital and 3) print managers (call them the "sales arm" of the industry if that helps calm the emotions). And in any debate on "how to make money" in our industry, there would be virtually no consensus between those three sectors.

I argue that this is a good thing – as an industry we're maturing and evolving into niches that fill various specific, market-based needs. In other words, we've arrived at the point in our industry's evolution where we have to recognise, respect and even celebrate the fact we consist of an exciting array of specialist technologies. We shouldn't attempt to sweep them under a "one-size-fits-all" label called printing.

The obvious next step is to question the traditional focus and "branding" of our long-standing industry associations. The PIAA has inherited the "jewel in the crown" ie, the very name "printing" in its masthead, which infers everything from offset to newspapers to packaging to signage. But, through no fault of its own, it is essentially the "Sheet-Fed Offset Association" – and as such will have trouble attracting digital printers. By re-naming itself (for example) the "Printed Media or Graphic Communications Association" it would be process-agnostic and would have more appeal to everyone who produces multi-colour printed products – be they offset or digital.



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Historically, we tended to name our associations after "processes" – but technology has a habit of moving in all sorts of unpredictable directions. Look what happened when offset took over from letterpress – or when screen-printers morphed into wide-format ink-jet printers. At the association level, the "process" is not as important as addressing the needs of a particular market segment. The screen-printers/ink-jet printers would (according to "truth in advertising" criteria) be more accurately re-named as the "Signage & Display Association" – or something similar.

The "Litho Institute" is another organisation on the endangered species list. It performs an invaluable role under a somewhat antiquated banner, and it would be tragic for it to disappear. But its name sends mixed messages especially to the young who may not even know what "litho" is. By re-branding itself along the lines of the "Applied Printing Technologies Association" (or similar) it would suck in oxygen by becoming process-agnostic. Its membership base would expand, its average age reduce, and its charter would expand so as to cover all the exciting new, emergent printing processes.

Issues like this go to the heart of how we want to be defined or seen as an industry – and some are even questioning whether the word "print" is even relevant – maybe we're "graphic communicators"? Our industry is going through some striking re-adjustments down at the coalface. But sooner or later, these changes will have to be reflected in the ways we re-arrange ourselves at an industry level. It's no use taking the easy option and simply floating down the river of denial.

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://t.co/d5oamorf2X>

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