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In-plant Graphics

MAY 2013 THE ONLY PUBLICATION DEDICATED TO IN-PLANT PRINTERS

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for Full Details.



A New Outlook

Things are looking up at the University of Minnesota. After an intense self-evaluation, Printing Services has created a communications strategy to more effectively market itself, boost business and stay healthy.

Sitting on blocks of "lead type" in the courtyard of the Printing Services building are (clockwise from top) Shawn Welch, Dianne Gregory, Dave Hoel and Tom Lucas.

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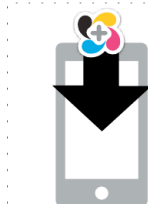
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PHOTOS BY LISA ANDERSON

A New Strategy in Minnesota

With its business changing and traditional work drying up, University of Minnesota Printing Services embarked on an ambitious self-evaluation project. The result is a new communications strategy, which will help guide the in-plant to future success.

By Victoria Gaitskell

BESIDES DECLINING print volumes, shrinking budgets and the many other demands facing today's in-plants, University of Minnesota Printing Services faces a special challenge: the in-plant operates in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, the largest metropolitan area in a state where printing is manufacturing's second-largest sector.

Printing employs more than 42,000 people in Minnesota at more than 1,000 firms, with shipments in excess of \$6.1 billion, according to Printing Industry Midwest. Such stiff competition for orders makes the in-plant's task of marketing its services to the university's 25,000 faculty and staff especially critical.

In response, Dianne Gregory, executive

director, General Services, has launched an initiative to develop and implement an effective communications strategy for her 75-employee operation, and uncover new opportunities for improvements to help the operation attract and retain precious in-house customers.

"Our main goal in this exercise is to figure out how to market ourselves in a very competitive market," she explains. "We already have about 60 percent of the printing on campus, but we need more to remain healthy."

One reason the in-plant needs to build business is that what was once its main activity—reproducing course packets—has largely gone digital. And although Printing Services faithfully maintains its FSC certification and other environmentally friendly practices, the university administration still issues periodic organization-wide directives to reduce printing for either environmental or financial reasons. Younger clients are also driving the popularity of digital communications over print and are more likely to shop around online for outside print vendors. U of M's replacement of a centralized internal billing system with purchasing cards ("P-cards") has made buying from outside vendors easier than ever before for faculty and staff.

Additionally, the in-plant constantly battles

This team of managers and sales people met for months to develop a communications strategy for University of Minnesota Printing Services. Clockwise from front left: Dianne Gregory, Bob Swoverland, Tom Lucas, Dave Hoel, Gary Stoll, Jann Jarvis, Joe Sobota and Shawn Welch.

the unfounded perception that, just because its operation is an in-house facility at a state-funded university, it automatically must share all the worst characteristics of slow, unresponsive, inflexible, low-performing government services. Contrary to this stereotype, the in-plant won three Gold awards in this year's In-Print 2013 contest; last year Printing Services won the contest's distinguished Best of Show award. Gregory hopes these accolades will help customers and prospects better appreciate the high quality of the in-plant's work.

A Seven-step Plan

To get started developing its communications strategy, Gregory tapped Shawn Welch, the in-plant's art director since 1999. He was given the task of researching and designing a customized procedure that would help the operation gain a clearer understanding of its business and competitive advantage, and determine a direction and message for its marketing collateral.

"In the recent past, Printing Services has relied heavily on past experience, intuition and anecdotal information when developing its marketing collateral," says Welch. But the operation now needs to adopt a more strategic, comprehensive approach to marketing communications, he says, citing its evolving, technology-driven product mix and the university's uncertain economic climate (due largely to steadily dropping state funding).

Working on and off for six weeks, Welch (whose Design Communications degree from U of M includes marketing studies) devised seven steps to help Printing Services assess its operation and its customers, and better determine the business direction in which the in-plant should be moving:

1. Determine purchasing motivators.
2. Evaluate buyer purchasing processes.
3. Evaluate the competition.
4. Evaluate external factors (opportunities and threats).
5. Evaluate internal factors (strengths and weaknesses).
6. Determine Printing Services' competitive advantage by developing a 2x2 SWOT

matrix showing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

7. Develop a brand positioning statement.

Gregory and her team (which included Welch, Print Manager Dave Hoel, Copy Center Manager Tom Lucas and the four-person sales team: Bob Swoverland, Jann Jarvis, Gary



Stoll and Joe Sobota) worked through one step at a time at two-hour weekly meetings (with homework).

A True Team Effort

"Because the sales team are the ones out working with customers, they enabled us to accomplish more by contributing really good, realistic comments and opinions that the management team wouldn't have thought of," recalls Gregory. She says individual contributions from each salesperson were also valuable because they each handle different university departments, which can vary greatly in their requirements.

By early April the working group had completed Step 7, a brand positioning statement to be conveyed indirectly to clients and prospects through marketing messages and on-the-job interactions. This statement emphasizes the main selling points that emerged in previous meetings, stressing that the in-plant:

1. Occupies the unique position of an expert and committed internal partner.

Printing Services employees gather in the pressroom. The success of the in-plant's new communications strategy depends on how well they adapt to the changes ahead.

2. Supports university departments strategically and financially by helping them develop effective, responsible communications products.
3. Provides a comprehensive range of high-quality services.

Results So Far

Although no concrete results are yet available in terms of financial return, Welch says the process of developing a communications plan has already helped the operation by giving participants a better understanding of their business and its role within the university.

Customer service representatives Gary Stoll (left) and Jann Jarvis (right) work with designer Sysouk Khambounmy to develop the in-plant's new creative campaign.



“We determined what we already suspected about ourselves: that we are general practitioners, a one-stop shop, and that this is the space we should occupy,” confirms Gregory. “While other printers may be able to make more money by specializing, we can’t and we shouldn’t. We have to have more equipment and skills to offer a variety of services to our clients and handle everything for them expertly. And because we are also part of the University of Minnesota and a non-profit operation, we will never try to oversell them, or fail to give them the support they need, or turn down difficult jobs, as outside printers may tend to do.”

Although serving some customers to this standard can be time-consuming, especially if they are not digitally literate, Gregory thinks that helping and educating customers is part of the job, and that this investment may lead to bigger orders. (Similarly, although the in-plant doesn’t solicit jobs from outside the

university, because local business competition is so fierce, they do not refuse outside jobs that walk in the door.)

“The clients we want and are most effective working with see us as a partner and treat us almost like an extension of their own staff,” says Welch. “They communicate openly with us, admit us into their communications planning process early on, and trust us to execute every aspect of their plan—which might include Web design, mobile design and design for print, as well as copying, and digital, variable and offset printing. Although this scenario is not always easy to obtain, it’s what we’re shooting for and what is of greatest benefit both to the university department and to us from a profitability standpoint.”

The in-plant is now working on building stronger relationships with university staff and faculty with this target clearly in mind.

Next Steps

As other next steps, Welch’s graphic design department will draft a marketing campaign and collateral based on the new brand positioning statement. Working group members will also detail the results of their seven-step process to the rest of Printing Services’ 50 employees, including the importance of adapting to the changing marketplace and improving their performance, teamwork and customer service.

Gregory also plans to conduct a survey to help the in-plant understand customers’ needs and preferences more objectively. At some future point, the shop may also consider adding or enhancing some of the value-added services that the planning process raised as minor opportunities, including specialty items, improved online proofing and expanding large-format printing.

The In-plant’s Evolution

Gregory began working at the in-plant in 1975 as a bindery and press operator, then became a supervisor and eventually director in 1992. Based on market demand, she has led two previous reorganizations to downsize offset and increase toner-based production for shorter, faster runs. More recently she has updated the operation to include Web and electronic media design and variable data printing. Current variable data work includes personalizing diplomas, checks, W2 forms, calendars, letters and surveys. The in-plant also prints

Art Director Shawn Welch (left) was instrumental in developing the seven-step process the in-plant went through to create its new communications strategy. With him is Dianne Gregory, executive director, General Services, who launched the initiative.



and mails personalized sports tickets, with names, seat numbers and bar codes digitally imprinted on an offset-printed shell.

With an annual operating budget of \$10 million, the unionized operation serves three of the university's five campuses (Duluth, Crookston and Twin Cities, which is by far the largest with 52,500 of the university's 69,000 students). Printing Services' capabilities include copyright-permissions processing, prepress and design, bindery and mailing. The shop runs five sheetfed offset presses (from A.B.Dick, Halm, Komori and Heidelberg), along with 18 toner-based presses and printers, mostly from Xerox, including an iGen3.

One unusual feature of the operation is that it has its own four-person bookbinding and repair department (a rarity even for university in-plants) to bind books from the university's library as well as theses. Another is that, instead of being relegated to a basement or other leftover space, like many in-plants, the main shop occupies a dedicated 34,000-square-foot building (built in the 1970s) a few blocks northeast of campus. Gregory also oversees four campus copy centers. Since the in-plant doesn't require all of its warehouse space, some of it is leased to libraries and other departments.

So far Gregory is encouraged by the positive results obtained from developing a customized communications strategy.

"This process has helped us focus on our strengths, so now we can build on them," she says. "I'm also happy that it has shown all our staff that we are not just sitting back and letting change happen to us. We're proactive now, and are living out the future we've planned."

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Find Out More

To learn more about University of Minnesota Printing Services' communications strategy and the results it is generating, contact Dianne Gregory through the in-plant's website:

www.printing.umn.edu