Graphic Printers, Inc. Connects with Customers

Company Profile
Graphic Printers, Inc. (GPI) is a full-service commercial printer based in Meridian, Mississippi, and established in 1987. GPI takes the concept of full service beyond the normal definitions in commercial printing by managing the entire direct marketing process for its customers, including mailing services. With a blend of offset and digital technologies and a talented staff, GPI is well positioned for the success of both the company and its customers.

Challenge
Since founding his business, Ed Pierce has been focused on making his customers successful. Over time, he saw that printing was increasingly being commoditized, with printers competing primarily on price. At age 56, he was becoming disillusioned and considered retirement. But he also saw some interesting new technology trends, particularly in variable data printing, and he decided to investigate the possibilities first.

Solution
Pierce invited one of his largest customers, Super Stop, to accompany him and his wife, who is a designer at GPI, to Connect, EFI’s user conference. Their goal was to collectively learn more about the advanced solutions offered by EFI and its partners that could provide expansion opportunities for GPI and added value for Super Stop, a convenience store chain with more than 50 locations. By attending seminars, speaking with EFI and its partners, and experiencing hands-on demonstrations of a wide range of solutions, Pierce returned home reinvigorated and ready to set a new pace for his business. Pierce added an EFI Fiery server with the Graphic Arts Package, a unique set of expert Fiery tools that enables him to produce state-of-the-art color output on his also new Konica-Minolta 8050 digital color printer.

Results
This new configuration, combined with its Print MIS solution – EFI PrintSmith – and its existing prepress, offset press, bindery and mailing solutions, has helped GPI reinforce its role as a value-added partner to its customers. GPI is now a vibrant, profitable business that no longer competes for work in the commodity zone. Pierce reports that profits are up 35%, based largely on variable data projects. The range of solutions and educational opportunities offered by EFI has revitalized GPI’s business, and, for Pierce, the lure of retirement is now not so strong at all.
Putting Customers First

Ed Pierce, owner of Graphic Printers, Inc. (GPI), had been running a successful business since 1987, but as the printing business became increasingly commoditized, with competitors selling solely on price, it became more difficult to compete profitably. Though considering retirement, Pierce was intrigued by the needs of one of his largest customers, Super Stop, who had implemented a customer rewards program called Seymore Rewards. Seymore Rewards enabled Super Stop to very quickly gather an incredible amount of customer information, and the company was struggling with how best to put that information to work.

Pierce and his team knew that the answer to Super Stop’s problem lay in the successful execution of variable data marketing campaigns. He also knew that producing these types of personalized campaigns would require the acquisition of not only hardware and software, but also know-how to ensure a successful program for Super Stop and other customers in a similar situation.

At this time, Pierce, who had been an EFI customer since 2000 when he implemented PrintSmith, his Print MIS solution, was invited to attend Connect, EFI’s annual user conference. Pierce was excited about the tremendous learning opportunity Connect would provide not only to him, but also to Gwynne Pierce, his wife and the company’s graphic designer, and to the Super Stop Marketing Director, Kim Gianakos. He says, “I believed it might also be a challenge for Gwynne and for Kim, who represents our second largest customer, so it made a lot of sense to invite Kim to Connect at our expense so that we could all collaboratively develop this first initiative.” Pierce believed that once he had accomplished a successful variable data initiative, he would be able to leverage his growing expertise with a number of other customers who had similar needs.

Connecting with Knowledge

Pierce attributes the virtual rebirth of his business in large part to the opportunities offered by EFI at Connect. He says, “We had important goals for attending Connect. We wanted to educate our customer about designing for variable data, providing first-hand exposure to not only the power of variable data printing, but how to design effectively for it as well.”

Building for the Future

Upon returning from Connect richer in knowledge, Pierce met with his customer, Gianakos, and Pierce, GPI’s graphic designer, to debrief on the conference and determine next steps. Pierce remarks, “It was much easier with three heads that had similar experience and exposure to put together a comprehensive program that worked. And we did just that.”

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Based on what they learned at Connect, GPI decided to acquire a Konica-Minolta 8050 color digital press powered by an EFI Fiery server with the Fiery Graphic Arts Package. Pierce was looking for high-quality and value, and the integrated capabilities that would enable him to successfully deploy variable data solutions for Super Stop and other customers. He says, “One of the Fiery’s key capabilities is caching large files at the RIP for merging with variable data. This means that we only had to RIP those large files once and were able to produce variable data jobs at the engine’s top rated speed.” He also acquired DesignMerge from Meadows Publishing Solutions to design templates and manage the selection and merging of the variable elements that would make each printed piece uniquely relevant to its intended recipient.

In addition to enabling Super Stop to make good use of its new database of customer information, GPI has been successfully marketing variable data services to other customers. Pierce provides highlights of the solution he is now providing for his largest customer:

“Our largest customer is a plumbing supply company that has approximately 75 branches across the Southeast. They are confronted with the same issues that printers are fighting in that the contractors and home builders see their products as a commodity. To combat this, the company has established high-end boutique bath and kitchen stores at 20 of its 75 branches. These boutiques have professionals on staff to help design kitchens and baths.” Pierce reports that in a pilot project with one store, GPI conducted a variable data mailing campaign driven by building permit lists from the three counties around that store. The campaign consisted of three mailings, with the content of each subsequent mailing driven by the recipient’s response – or lack of response – to the previous mailing. In addition, GPI conducted a mailing campaign directed at contractors as well as follow-up mailings to walk-in customers at the retail location. Pierce says, “When a customer visits the store, regardless of whether they simply walk in or arrive as a result of the mailings we produced, the sales consultant serving that customer gathers information, sends it to us, and we do a mailing that thanks them for coming in, confirms their next appointment, and is personalized with a picture of the sales consultant and his or her name. That personal touch makes a big difference.” GPI is in the process of rolling out the program to the balance of their 20 boutique stores.

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The Importance of Print MIS

According to Pierce, one element of his infrastructure that has made it easier to make the momentous business decisions he has made over the last couple of years is his use of EFI’s PrintSmith Print MIS solution. Pierce states, “PrintSmith has helped us integrate our organization from an information perspective, making it much easier to find information about jobs, both in progress and historically. It cuts down on rework due to errors, and it helps us be more profitable.

Once I was able to incorporate our budgeted hourly rates and all of the information associated with the various aspects of running a printing business into PrintSmith, I suddenly had all the information at my fingertips that I needed to stay competitive and profitable. Pierce points out that everyone in the shop uses PrintSmith, and that it is a simple matter to adjust his pricing as needed. He adds, “I continually find new advantages in PrintSmith. EFI constantly updates and improves the product. And there are a lot more resources that we will be able to tap moving forward to ensure that our business remains profitable.”

Pierce is a believer in the importance of EFI’s Print MIS solutions. He says, “I just do not see how a shop in today’s print world survives without high-end management software such as PrintSmith. Had I not had PrintSmith, I can assure you that I would not be in variable data printing today. And with Connect, EFI delivered on its promise, “Essential to Print,” providing the education I needed to move my business forward. Without that education, I might stumble my way into new business opportunities, but I would be less profitable and more frustrated. Connect was a serious leg up.”

What’s Next?

Pierce is looking forward to continuing to grow GPI’s variable data business and increasing the sophistication of his offerings as he gains more experience and takes on more customers. Pierce says, “A lot of printers still think they can run their businesses just like they did 30 years ago. That’s where I was before attending Connect. I was burned out on running a commodity business and ready to cash out my IRA and retire. Connect 2004 was one of the most timely things that has happened in my business career. It really did rejuvenate us. What we are doing now is definitely not a commodity.”

Upon returning from Connect, GPI targeted five customers, and already has three of them online with a plan in the works to secure the other two. He adds, “It is exciting to put a plan together and have your customers trust you enough to buy into that plan, pay more than they would have with traditional printing, and see their eyes light up when they see the results.”

Pierce concludes, “This really is an exciting time in our industry. I pity the people who do not have an innovative company like EFI to partner with to run their business. I don’t see how they will make it.”