United Litho, Inc.

United Litho: Leveraging Technology to Improve the Bottom Line

Company Profile
Founded in 1970, United Litho serves the needs of short-run association and special-interest publishers, producing more than 200 titles with its unique service offering. Purchased by The Sheridan Group in 1994, United Litho moved into a new manufacturing facility in 1997 and added new full-width web presses to its manufacturing portfolio. United Litho is dedicated to creating an extraordinary service experience for its customers and views technological development as a continuous, evolutionary process that is integral to its culture and heritage.

Challenge
In the spirit of providing excellent service, United Litho had focused significant effort on the development of internal systems that would support an efficient and cost-effective production environment for short-run publications. By the late 1990s, however, the company’s management realized that it could leverage advances in technology to replace its homegrown systems with packaged software solutions that would lessen the burden on its IT resources.

Solution
In 1999, United Litho acquired EFI’s Prograph® Production Planning Module to address the myriad issues that publication printers face, including a more efficient planning process, the ability to manage multiple versions of a publication, and the flexibility to make last-minute page-level and page count changes to accommodate publisher customers. A key decision element in the acquisition of Prograph was EFI’s future vision relative to integration with other business solutions, including Auto-Count™ direct machine interface, PrintFlow® dynamic scheduling and Hagen™ OA Print MIS.

Results
Prograph Production Planning Module has allowed United Litho to remain competitive through the deployment of an extremely flexible planning process that not only reduces the amount of time required to lay out and impose a publication, but interfaces directly with EFI’s Auto-Count to instantly communicate last-minute changes to the press operator. This allows print order changes to be implemented even during the make-ready process. United Litho is in the process of replacing homegrown systems with PrintFlow dynamic scheduling and Hagen OA MIS to deliver even more productivity and flexibility to its production and business processes.
United Litho: Targeting Short-Run Publications
For more than 30 years, United Litho has been providing specialized services to publishers of short-run magazines. The company has optimized its production capabilities to cost-efficiently produce runs of magazines from 7,500 to 100,000, in weekly, monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly and customized frequencies. Part of The Sheridan Group since 1994, United Litho continues to assess its business and production operations on an ongoing basis to ensure deployment of the best possible technology infrastructure and the delivery of competitive, flexible solutions that address the specific needs of its clients.

Planning for the Future
Over the years, United Litho had developed a largely homegrown business and production infrastructure that enabled the company to meet its goals of providing cost-effective customer solutions delivered against a healthy bottom line. As the 1990s drew to a close, the company began to investigate third party solutions that could replace those existing systems, delivering enhanced functionality without the drain on scarce IT resources often inherent in the development and support of internally-developed systems. At the time, the key business issue United Litho wanted to address was the publication planning process. According to Steve Fanning, Director of Information Services, “We wanted a system that was aimed at the issues that printers like us have to face every day as we are working with customers to plan the production of magazine issues. This includes the ability to track versions, page counts, folioing, trim sizes, furnished signatures and version synchronization, as well as the ability to make changes on the fly as the project matures.”

In reviewing its options, United Litho determined that EFI’s Prograph Production Planning Module was the ideal solution to meet these needs. Fanning adds, “Prograph was the only solution we found that was designed from the ground up to address all of the issues we were facing. Although we had a homegrown planning system, there was no way we could have evolved it to include the features and depth we found in Prograph.” Fanning points out that while publication planning is an important process element for any magazine printer, it is especially critical for short-run publications, where timelines are tight and budgets do not allow for extensive make-ready cycles.

Considering the Big Picture
But United Litho was not simply looking for a point solution for production planning. According to Fanning, “We knew that this was a starting point for reinventing our infrastructure, and we were looking for a partner that could meet a broader array of needs. We wanted a partner that had a clear future vision and a plan to get there.” United Litho found that partner in EFI, and together they built a plan to tackle a broad range of business issues over time with an integrated solution that would replace much of the homegrown infrastructure that had served United Litho well in the past.

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Accommodating Late-Stage Changes

As publishers struggle with a tough market in which competition for ad pages is fierce, magazine printers like United Litho find that their production operations face increasing time pressure. Fanning indicates, “It is not uncommon for us to receive page count or production quantity changes right up to the point when we go to press, and it is critical for us to be able to identify all of the components that go into constructing and producing a magazine at a page level, and to be able to not only accurately display changes on the fly, but to generate reports that can be used downstream in the production process. Prograph allows us to easily do that. It is a big plus for us to be able to manage the production planning process in this granular way, having changes immediately flow through, do all the recalculations for page count, imposition, etc., and generate new documentation quickly and easily.”

United Litho also takes advantage of EFI’s Proteus, which provides a visual desktop for magazine layout, page planning, ad placement, version control, image linking and review. Proteus represents a significant value to United Litho’s clients, streamlining and speeding the planning process even more.

Fanning says, “Proteus is a great timesaving tool for our customers and we have received very positive feedback by making it available to them. It helps them to organize the assembly of their magazine and, in so doing, we recognize time savings by receiving a more complete, better laid out package at the beginning of our processes.”

In addition, United Litho is leveraging integration between Prograph and EFI’s Auto-Count Elysium, designed exclusively for Prograph, to automatically and seamlessly flow information from Prograph to Auto-Count’s direct machine interface, populating the system with the most current information. Fanning says, “As soon as any new information is entered into Prograph, it is immediately reflected in Auto-Count so that even up to the very last minute, we can accurately and efficiently accommodate quantity and page count changes. Because the information is available real-time on press, we don’t need to print out new press tickets. Even if the press operator has already started the job and is in make-ready, if the quantity changes in Prograph, a screen will pop up at the press notifying them of the change. The accurate reflection of these changes and the effects downstream on finishing requirements has greatly reduced the frequency of shortages, and subsequently going back to press.”

This level of operational integration and improved communication has allowed United Litho to retain its competitive position in the marketplace, acquiring new customers and increasing its business with existing customers. The level of efficiency and integration that United Litho has achieved with Prograph and Auto-Count has enabled the company to grow its volume by over 60 percent without a corresponding increase in Account Management staffing. This is an example of how Prograph has helped United Litho better position itself to meet increasingly tight publication deadlines, but with savings in labor and materials that help maintain United Litho’s pricing at a competitive level while still returning good margins to the bottom line.
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**Next Steps**

And now United Litho is in the process of taking that organizational efficiency to the next level with the addition of EFI’s PrintFlow dynamic scheduling and Hagen OA print MIS, both of which will be integrated with the Prograph environment.

According to Fanning, “I was involved with installing PrintFlow at our sister company, The Sheridan Press, which was an extremely successful implementation of PrintFlow. PrintFlow is the only scheduling solution I have seen where the system does the thinking for you. You set up an accurate simulation of your manufacturing environment, and PrintFlow automatically adjusts your production schedule to accommodate increases or decreases in volume of product and changes you make in staffing. The system is continually optimizing the sequence of tasks to minimize make-ready while still meeting due dates.” He points out that instead of spending a lot of time with mundane tasks like manually adjusting press and bindery schedules in a rapidly changing production environment, with PrintFlow, schedulers are able to spend their time thinking about better ways to staff the plant and more efficient ways to have the work flow through the plant. PrintFlow also allows “what if” scenarios that allow schedulers to understand, for example, what effect weekend overtime in a given area will have on the overall schedule. He adds, “I have been developing and installing software in the printing industry for 26 years, and PrintFlow is the most impressive piece of industry software I have ever dealt with.”

Fanning is also looking forward to the implementation of Hagen OA, EFI’s print MIS solution that is integrated with Prograph. EFI is in the process of adding a contract pricing estimating module to Prograph, and as soon as that is available, United Litho will begin its implementation of Hagen OA.

Fanning says, “When we first engaged with EFI, this end-to-end integration was part of the vision they laid out for the future, and they have been working hard to complete that integration. Once all the pieces are in place, we will have virtually eliminated redundant re-keying of data and gaps in our information flow. And we feel a high level of security in working with a development company like EFI—we are confident that they have the resources and expertise to continue improving their products into the future, helping us to stay competitive.”