

Go Boldly Into Disruption: Seven Lessons in Transformation

By Fred Van Alstyne

No business can settle for doing what's always been done, and that especially includes commercial printers. Digital printing, multi-channel marketing and workflow automation are just some of the disruptors transforming this industry. I've been through the process of pulling a traditional company into a new way of doing business, and these are some of the lessons I've learned.

Lesson One: Look five years out and beyond.

When we set out to remake a traditional printing company, we were prepared for disruption, and we certainly got it. Our goal was to transform a traditional print and mail company into something exciting and relevant to today's customers.

The story starts with the purchase of the assets of two companies that were in trouble. Combined, those companies had well over 100 years in business. There were good people and great clients, but the companies were both overleveraged and lacked direction.

After working through obstacles associated with the initial purchases, the blended company became associated with Triangle Services, the ultimate owner of Content Critical Solutions, our flagship brand. We took a financially unstable company and then partnered with a larger, stronger company, which gave us a more stable base. We already had good clients and service reputation, and overnight we went from being held back to full-on growth mode.

It wasn't as easy as it might sound. We struggled with inefficiencies in some parts of our business. We had always done a good job with print, but not so great at first around things like inserting, warehousing and other operating aspects. But we held strong to a long-term view, and we didn't let weaknesses frighten us or slow us down.

Lesson Two: Be proactive in making changes and shedding costs.

After the purchase in 2010, it was critical to move quickly to stay afloat in an extremely tough economy. A lot of people got caught standing still, but we were very proactive in making changes and shedding costs. This made us more efficient quickly, and this sense of urgency propelled us forward.

Lesson Three: Stop leading with print.

As we pursued our goal, our business focus changed. Today our mantra is: stop leading with print. We have to offer solutions to problems, and print is just one vehicle for getting a message across. Today, it's more about content management and brand messaging that drives our strategy. Our focus is on technology, building software and systems tools related to content and client communications.

Lesson Four: Those who can't adapt can't move forward.

We brought in a new head of operations and made a lot of changes, even down to the operator levels. Some of our people have worked for the combined old and current entities for more than 25 years. We've built on the best of what we had, and that's given us the confidence to stay focused on what's ahead.

Sometimes you have people who can adapt and some who can't. We had no room for non-forward thinking people. Some people were stuck, and some couldn't get out of their own way. We kept moving ahead with those who could adapt and grow with us.

Lesson Five: Get buy-in for your plan, stick to it and move steadily.

Before entering the print industry, I worked as a "troubled company" consultant, where I developed the skills needed to drive change. What looks like chaos to others is okay to me. I know how to stay calm and work through problems.

The main message is really just stay focused and keep moving forward. When leaders stop making decisions, they freeze, and that's when they get into trouble. Hesitation slows things down. You're in a period of change, and you need to keep moving and drive it home. If your strategy is solid, don't be afraid to drive it. The setbacks we encountered were largely our own fault because we got off on a tangent.

Lesson Six: Be sure to look at the whole process, not just the new part.

In 2013, we made a big investment with a high-speed inkjet press, which changed how we positioned production going forward. Content Critical Solutions embraced a "white-paper factory" strategy to offer more print options to customers for a better price. The company became very efficient very quickly, because we had a lot of success implementing the new technology across our customer base.

However, it created inefficiency in other areas. The transformation rippled through all parts of the business, sometimes in ways we didn't anticipate. We used to have an even process of print, insert, then to mail. When we committed to inkjet, we were printing so fast that it created a logjam on inserting, so now we have to move faster on inserting. Change didn't start in those downstream areas, it started with inkjet, but other steps of the workflow also were impacted dramatically.

We got too excited by our big change and didn't think through how it would trickle down. No one warned us about that. When we bought our high-speed inkjet press, we were an early adopter; there weren't a lot of resources out there to help us understand how it would impact our business model. People were worried about paper and ink concerns, but the rest of the process. I've heard that consistently with a lot of other adopters.

Lesson Seven: Work on getting known and being relevant.

Any time you create a new business situation, the challenge is getting your name out there and becoming relevant in your industry. “Relevant” in this case means name recognition. When we first embarked on this challenge, we were dealing with older companies that had name recognition, but when Content Critical was created in 2010, it struggled to earn a reputation. Everybody knows the big guys, but you have to work hard to build recognition when you’re starting fresh.

It took several years of networking and speaking out for Content Critical to become relevant to the printing industry. Now for the first time, people are starting to say, “I know who you guys are.”

I stay in touch with the industry and invest time going to conferences and joining associations like ***The Imaging Network Group***. There are very thoughtful leaders out there, people in the same place with similar values, and we’ve all got lessons to share.

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