

# Commercial Printers Find Value In Wide Format

■ This summer, we saw something that we had not seen in more than a decade: the value of commercial printing shipments for the January to June 2015 time frame was up +3.5 percent compared to the same period a year earlier. This growth rate, adjusted for inflation, exceeded GDP — also something not seen in a very long time. Commented Dr. Joe Webb, Director of WhatTheyThink’s Economics and Research Center:

The industry has been changing the range of products that it offers to reflect shorter runs, smaller sizes, less frequency of traditional product, a new range of products based on digital printing, and activities that mesh well with digital media.

Some of those “activities” involve wide-format printing and specialty graphics, products and services that general commercial printers have been adding to complement, supplement or perhaps even replace their traditional printing operations.

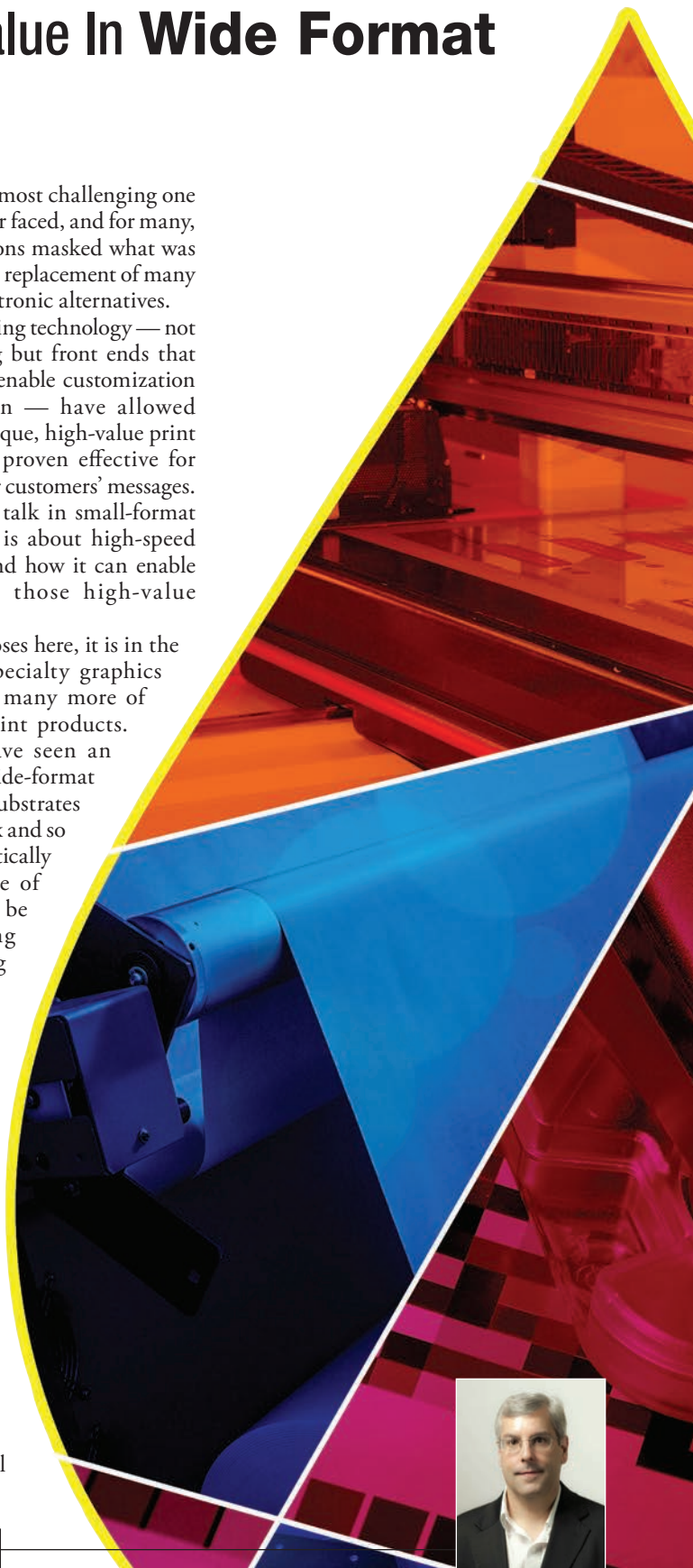
It could be said that the wide-format printing industry is like Florida: everyone is from somewhere else. Today’s wide-format and specialty graphics printing market consists of companies that moved into it from other places. In 2014, Strategies for Management estimated that about 23 percent of the current wide-format market started out as photolabs. Another 44 percent or so came over from various parts of the general small-format commercial printing market. Many SGIA members began life as (and many have remained) screen printers. Changes in the demand for various printed materials and changing technologies have created this “print mobility.” After digital cameras superseded film cameras, there was no longer any demand for film-developing services, so photolabs needed to reinvent themselves. Digital imaging was a logical transition.

Commercial printers haven’t quite gone the way of photolabs, but the first decade of

this century was the most challenging one that printers have ever faced, and for many, back-to-back recessions masked what was really happening: the replacement of many print items with electronic alternatives.

Advances in printing technology — not only digital printing but front ends that can process data to enable customization and personalization — have allowed printers to create unique, high-value print products that have proven effective for communicating their customers’ messages. The majority of the talk in small-format printing these days is about high-speed production inkjet and how it can enable printers to create those high-value applications.

But for our purposes here, it is in the wide-format and specialty graphics arena that we find many more of those high-value print products. Since 2000, we have seen an explosion of new wide-format printers, inks and substrates — UV, flatbeds, latex and so on — that has dramatically expanded the range of what can physically be printed on, leading to a corresponding explosion of print applications. And while it’s true that screen printing and other analog printing technologies were long able to print these items, the economics of analog printing require long runs. Accompanying the proliferation of high-value applications is a downward run-length trend. Digital



Richard Romano, Industry Author

printing enables these short, even very short, runs — including runs of one.

That all said, what opportunities exist for commercial printers in wide-format printing and specialty graphics?

#### **We Are the Champions**

In order for any venture into wide-format printing to be successful, the company needs to have an internal champion. This individual should not only understand the nuances of wide-format printing and how it differs from general commercial printing, but should also function as an evangelist within the company. This person should go on sales calls with the company's reps to ensure that they are selling wide-format or specialty graphics services correctly, as it can be a very different process than selling commercial printing, which can be more about print specs and quantities of fairly standard items. With wide-format printing, it's more about brainstorming unique solutions to problems, such as signage, display graphics and the like. The wide-format champion should understand these differences and be able to communicate them and offer

guidance to company employees who may not get it immediately.

#### **Culture Club**

Every company — be it printing or any other kind of business — has a particular culture. In order to get the company on track to effectively produce and sell wide-format graphics, very often the culture of the company needs to change, and that can be a harder process than understanding and implementing a new technology. A printing company that has had little involvement with a customer beyond taking orders over a counter or the occasional sales call may not find it easy to adapt to the mindset required for specialty graphics. Success in wide-format requires a greater understanding of the full panoply of customer needs, and being able to anticipate those needs, or even suggest to customers needs they may not have realized they have had. For example, if you are eager to get into the POP/retail graphics market, you need a greater understanding of how retail works. None of these things are impossible or even all that difficult to master, but getting all the relevant employees into the

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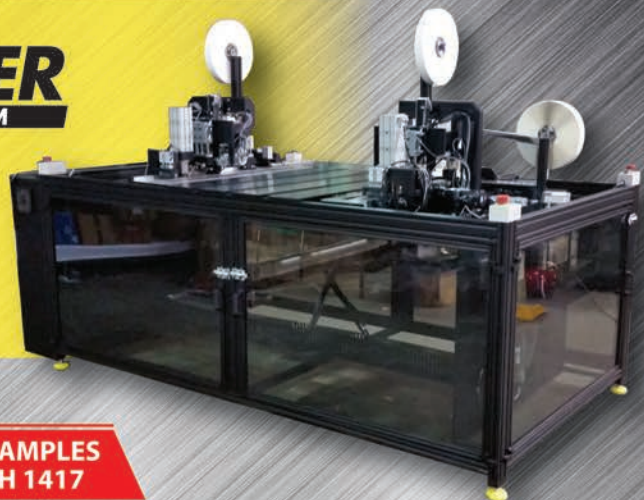
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mindset required can be the challenge. That is one of the roles of the champion mentioned earlier: to effect the needed cultural changes.

### **Understand All Parts of the Process**

Shops that have transitioned into wide-format have often found that the ink-on-substrate part of the process is the easy bit. It's what happens before and after printing that often comes as rude surprises. On the front end, it is workflow, while at the back end, it is finishing and fulfillment. If a company starts producing banners, for example, a vital skillset involves cutting, hemming and sewing, or at the very least being able to operate sewing or welding equipment. Again, that's not an insurmountable task, but is one of those things that can sneak up and bite you if you're not careful.

Then there is just managing the logistics of wide-format output, which by definition is big. Moving postcards or brochures around the shop floor or warehouse and delivering/shipping them to customers is one thing, but when you're suddenly moving materials around that are in excess of several feet wide and/or long, the result can be not unlike the stateroom scene in the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera*, with everyone crammed in a very small space with little room to move. Physically shipping and delivering finished materials can also be a concern, but there is one important process that general commercial printers rarely have to concern themselves with: installation. Do you do install finished graphics (like, say, trade show or event graphics) yourself — and, if so, do you know how — or do you hire third-party installers? Where do you find good installers? If you are producing signage, what do you need to know about municipal sign codes? If you are producing vehicle graphics, what kind of insurance do you need? These are questions that rarely come up in general commercial printing, but are examples of the kinds of issues that can arise in various aspects of wide-format printing. Again, they are not insurmountable — and any printing company that also does mailing and has mastered the byzantine postal code can easily figure out these things — but knowing what questions to ask, and even that there are questions that need to be asked, is vitally important.

At the front end of the process, workflow can be a challenge. Estimating wide-format jobs is not a million miles removed from general commercial print

jobs, but can pose unique challenges. As for other front-end processes, the mantra in commercial printing for the past decade or so has been “automation, automation, automation,” but there are few automation solutions for wide-format and specialty printing. Solutions are starting to appear, but very often each wide-format job needs to be treated as a custom job, which severely impacts efficiency and productivity. Shops looking to add a web-to-print system or storefront often need to do a bit more homework to find one that will support wide-format projects.

Some of these considerations may sound obvious, but they very often end up as surprises, especially when a business is focused on the most conspicuous aspect of wide format: the printing equipment.

### **Getting Business**

OK, so you have your equipment and workflow in place, and have ramped up production. How do you “feed the beast”? Where does work come from? Ideally, you will have already gleaned some wide-format work before making capital investments in equipment, but in general there are two basic strategies.

The first is the “build it and they will come” strategy. That is, you invest in all the right stuff, hang out your shingle as a sign and display shop and wait for the phone to ring or the front door to jingle. And for some, that has been an effective strategy.

For the run-of-the-mill print shop, however, that's a bit of a gamble. Companies that have successfully transitioned to wide-format and specialty printing have begun by talking to their own current customer base and asking what other types of printing they need. If a customer is a restaurant and you print their menus and other small-format marketing collateral materials, maybe they also have a need for indoor and outdoor signage, or indoor posters advertising specials. Maybe they want to advertise on billboards or other signage. If you produce publications or newsletters for clients, chances are they attend events or trade shows. So event and trade show graphics is a logical extension of what you already offer, especially since you already have access to that customer's logos and other assets.

As you're investigating new products and services, see what your current customer base needs. Then, tailor your wide-format offerings around those applications. In this way, you become more of a strategic partner for customer than

merely a service provider. It increases your value to that client and makes them less likely to shop around for a better deal on what may very well be a commodity item. Again, getting into that mindset is part of the culture change I mentioned earlier.

Another part of the sales and marketing process is realizing that every business you drive past is a potential customer. In some ways, that's always been true; virtually every business needs some kind of print collateral. But when it comes to wide-format and specialty graphics, the opportunities are much broader. Walk into any retail location and stand and look around at all the materials you could potentially print: exterior signage, interior signage, wall graphics/décor, window graphics, floor graphics, shelf wobblers... the list goes on. After all, someone has to produce those items. Another part of the culture change is getting salespeople to see those kinds of opportunities and be able to pitch them effectively.

As a side benefit, some shops have found that, just as small-format printing can lead to wide-format printing, so, too, can it go in the other direction. A new client for wide-format services may turn out to have small-format printing needs, as well.

### **Move Incrementally**

There is no need for companies to acquire every piece of equipment that they will ever need for wide-format production in one fell swoop. Moving in small stages is a perfectly valid — and perhaps even desirable — strategy. To get started in the new endeavor, invest in the minimum amount of gear and gradually ramp up as necessary. Many wide-format service providers partner with other businesses to fill in whatever gaps are required. For example, investing in a relatively inexpensive solvent printer is a first step, and partnering with another business that has, say, a flatbed UV device can allow a company to start to offer new types of applications without a hefty initial investment. When volume picks up sufficiently, then the company can look to acquire its own flatbed. The same principle applies to other types of wide-format printing technologies, or even finishing processes.

### **Buy Another Company**

Buying equipment — prepress, printing and finishing — is one thing, but also remember that you will also need people to run it, people who have specific wide-

format skills. Granted, much of today's equipment is becoming "push-button easy," but most wide-format equipment does still require a certain level of specialized skill to run it. One way to acquire everything you need in one package is simply to buy a company that offers wide-format and specialty graphics printing. Granted, this is not a strategy for everyone, but for those who have the resources, it can solve a world of problems.

#### **At the End of the Day**

Opportunities prosper for commercial printers in wide-format printing, and SGIA has found that printers coming from offset lithography and/or small-format digital printing represent a greater and greater share of new attendees to the SGIA Expo, and even new members to the Association. As the barriers to inkjet wide-format printing are reduced and eliminated, there will be even more movement into these areas. But success in these endeavors is about more than just investing in the right stuff — it's about understanding the entire specialty graphics ecosystem.

*Richard Romano has been writing about the graphic communications industry for almost 20 years, and covering wide-format printing since 1998. He is a senior analyst for news and information portal WhatTheyThink.com, covering wide-format, production inkjet, and environmental sustainability. He is the author or co-author of more than half a dozen books. His most recent book is *The Home Office That Works! Make Working at Home a Success—A Guide for Entrepreneurs and Telecommuters*, [www.homeofficeworks.com](http://www.homeofficeworks.com).*

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