

PRINTING BUSINESS THRIVES AS IT CHANGES WITH THE TIMES; [City Edition]

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Point of View

Adapt or perish.

I doubt there's a business adage that's harsher -- or unavoidable.

And I doubt there's an industry that's faced more bottom-line- pounding changes in the past few decades than the commercial printing business.

After all, how many industries have seen their means of production shrink in size so dramatically and shrivel in cost so severely that one of the principal competitive threats now comes, not from other companies, but from \$80 machines sitting on millions of desks and kitchen tables?

Need a party invitation or some slick graphs for a sales presentation? Fire up your computer and make sure there's paper in the inkjet printer. Want something a little fancier to announce your engagement? The Yellow Pages are filled with companies ready to meet your demands -- cheap.

Treacherous waters indeed for a small business. So why is Steve Samuel still smiling after nearly two decades in the printing game? And how does he keep his Richmond company expanding?

This is a man not afraid of change. Eighteen years ago, he launched his first venture here, a typesetting business. Technology sank that one after a while, sucking all the profit out of the margins. So Samuel morphed his business into a service bureau, handling the digital detailing for commercial print jobs. Advancing technology took its toll on that kind of work, too.

"We could have gone out of business several times," he said. "Technology literally ran us out of that business."

Time for another adaptation.

These days, Samuel's business, Graphics Gallery, focuses on printing big stuff, frequently with a three-dimensional aspect.

The business thrives on custom jobs that require fast turnarounds or exceptionally high-quality reproduction or intricate mounting and cutting -- or all three.

Specializing in smaller-volume, complicated orders means the company can charge higher prices and escape the commodity-level pricing that has marginalized so many commercial printers.

"We differentiate ourselves by staying at the top of the market," Samuel said. "If you want 5,000 copies of something, that's not for us -- unless you want it in two days and money is no object."

Graphics Gallery, which is in western Henrico County, makes room- filling displays for trade shows, wall-sized graphics for museums, stand-up point of purchase materials, indoor and outdoor signs, vehicle wraps or just about any other oversized print job you can imagine.

The company's work has appeared at the Smithsonian, the National Archives and the Library of Congress, among others.

Business customers include CarMax and Circuit City, to name just a couple.

Graphics Gallery, which employs 17 people, does very little design work.

"We're manufacturers," Samuel said. He doesn't want to compete with the ad agencies and designers who send business his way.

A large-format Italian printer that the company bought in 1999 has handled the bulk of its production and still accounts for about three-quarters of Graphics Gallery's output.

Late last year, the company invested in another big machine, one that can print on just about anything. This one, built in New Hampshire, can handle print jobs as wide as 80 inches, on material an inch and three-quarters thick.

Showing off the new printer, Samuel and Michael Elrod, who came on board as part owner of Graphics Gallery in 1999, seem like a couple of kids with a new toy. They've been running all kinds of stuff through the \$280,000 machine to see how it handles different surfaces, everything from ceiling tiles and textured wallpaper to fabric samples and carpet swatches.

"Can you believe this?" Samuel said, holding up a wooden door -- that's right, a door -- they ran through the printer.

"This opens up a whole new universe. You could use this for interior decorating."

Imagine a Van Gogh -- or a Redskins logo -- adding that certain something to your kitchen door.

"It's faster to print it than to paint it," Elrod said. And less expensive.

Door art isn't expected to become a huge part of the business, he added, but it demonstrates the flexibility and efficiency the company can deliver thanks to its experience with state-of-the art printers and digital cutting equipment.

Standing still isn't an option.

"In 2 1/2 years the technology will have changed so much, it will warrant us looking at a new printer," Elrod said.

Samuel nodded his head: "If not sooner."

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