

Calif. printer taking business to next level

BY CLAUDIA KREISS SPECIAL TO NEWS & TECH

Any printer surviving “the worst recession since the Great Depression” deserves high praise. One that is thriving warrants a standing ovation from the industry, and a closer look at what it’s doing so well.

Since 2005, Samoa, Calif.-based Western Web has grown from a start-up local-newspaper publishing business into an award-winning \$3.5 million commercial printing operation with 80 customers, both local and national.

“We’re a small shop in rural California; we work hard, make the most of our equipment, and produce a quality product,” said Steve Jackson, co-owner and president.

But there’s more to the story. Jackson seized an opportunity and has a clear vision of where his company is going. For Western Web, which prints only coldset web, competing with traditional heatset printers in a challenging economic environment has

proven to be extremely advantageous. “Our equipment enables us to efficiently produce a mix of high-quality long- and short-run materials,” he said, with short runs having a significant impact on the bottom line.

Low cost, high quality

“People today are extremely cost-conscious, but they still want quality. Print high-end annual reports on a web press? You bet

I do. There’s a point where the customer’s need to save money and improved web-printing quality intersect. Our ink control and presetting technology allows us to do short-run work and focus our attention on helping the traditional sheetfed customer migrate to high-quality web printing,” Jackson said.

The trajectory of Jackson’s path to success has been marked with unexpected twists and turns. In 2004, Jackson left California’s Paradise Post, where he had worked for 20 years, with a plan to travel for a few years with his wife. “We sold almost everything we owned, bought a motorhome, and

headed off, deciding to spend the summer in one of our favorite places, the north coast,” Jackson said. A few months into that venture, though, fate inter-

vened and he received an offer he couldn’t refuse: to help The (San Francisco) Examiner with a \$6 million expansion and reorganization. Then a one-day consultancy at The Reporter in Eureka, Calif., led to his being recruited by a Humboldt County real estate developer who wanted to take the fledgling Reporter into daily production with his own printing facility. Jackson signed on and set up that plant (see *News & Tech*, December 2005).

“I love planning and coordinating a project such as The Examiner’s expansion, and the chance to start from scratch in northern California was too cool to pass up. So, we sold the motorhome and bought a house again.”

Changing plans

But, as the economy shifted, so did his boss’ vision for the company. By 2008, the paper had ceased production, but the commercial side of the business remained intact. Fast-forward to 2010 when Jackson and his partner, Jack Davis, purchased the company, formally founding Western Web Inc. Today it operates five days a week on two shifts, employs 20 people, and prints between 100,000 and 200,000 impressions a day. Among its products are California local newspapers, including the award-winning San Francisco Bay Guardian, local and national city- and event-guides, calendars, maps, marketing materials, brochures, and annual reports. Some of the awards it has garnered during the past three years are seven Printing Industries of America Web Offset Awards (including three first-place and one best-of-show) in addition to more than a dozen print quality awards from the Printing Industries of Northern California.

Western Web’s equipment



Western Web co-owners Jack Davis and Steve Jackson; below, Western Web’s Tensor press line.



comprises four Tensor Group Inc. 4-high towers with 32 fountains and an H-50 folder; an EPG Key-Color C Remote Ink Control System and KeyColor AutoSet presetting software; a Gammerler KL Stacker; Kodak Trendsetter News 50 CTP and Prinergy Evo software; Muller Martini stitcher/trimmer and inserting machines, both with inkjet mailing capabilities, and a Kirk Rudy offline ink-jet mailing system.

Fast startup

Jackson is adamant that getting to color quickly is critical to success. An eight-hour shift with seven start-ups is not unusual at Western Web. "People may wonder why a printer running 10,000 copies or fewer of a local paper needs ink control and presetting. They need it because start-up waste is just as much as at the New York Times. If you have a job that is 100,000 impressions and it takes you 1,000 sheets to achieve perfect color, that's 1 percent of your total costs. If the run is 2,000 impressions, and you still need 1,000 sheets for makeready, that's 50 percent of total costs. Reducing start-up waste at any time is important, but it's absolutely essential for short runs. Otherwise, waste is a much larger portion of your total costs."

Jackson recalls discussions in

2005 with Tensor about his goals and the suburban Chicago vendor recommended he add EPG's ink control and presetting systems to help him maximize his productivity. "I'm a big fan of Tensor, so I took their advice," he says. EPG's Key-Color Systems include ink control and presetting technology designed to help commercial, newspaper, hybrid, and packaging printers operate more efficiently by reducing makeready time and waste and achieving consistent color.

Jackson said that the system paid for itself within the first year.

With the company ready to celebrate its second anniversary under his oversight, Jackson said his short-term goal is to break the \$5 million annual sales barrier.

"I'm seeing a rebound in the economy. For my publishing customers, page counts are creeping back up. But I cannot rely on them to do all the work. My plan is to make the most of our equipment and continue to diversify and add new customers." ▲

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Late last year, GCI CEO Gracia Martore told investors and analysts that Gannett would increase the number of papers with paywalls in 2012.

Finally, the MediaNews Group unit of Digital First Media scaled back paywalls at three northern California newspapers that will no longer print Monday editions.

The publisher said "digital-first Mondays" will be in place in Vacaville, Vallejo and Eureka, where Monday papers will no longer be produced. The paywalls will go back up the remainder of the week.

In Hayward, Oakland and Fremont, three markets where paywalls have not been put into operation, digital content will be provided free of charge on the first day of the workweek in the wake of a decision to stop home delivery of Monday editions. Monday papers in these markets will be still be available at newsracks and retail locations.

News & Tech's list of U.S. newspapers with digital subscriber initiatives can be found at www.newsandtech/stats. ▲



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