

BUSINESS

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR ■ SATURDAY AUGUST 30, 1997 ■ STEVE McNEILL/BUSINESS DESK 526-3245

Techno-print shops

Digital evolution a constant challenge

By PETER MITCHELL
Special to The Spectator

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1450 revolutionized the world of communications, allowing information to be packaged and made available to everyone.

Today, radical developments are once again sweeping the world of communications, and local print shops are changing as a result. Equipment is smaller, information is easier to transfer, and the level of quality people expect has soared.

"The digital evolution of printing has begun," says Gaspar Lipari who, with partner Dave Knox operates Allegra Print and Imaging on York Street, Hamilton.

"Ten years ago desktop publishing was just coming out as the next big thing, enabling people to do a page layout on computer. Those early systems are already out of date," Lipari said.

The challenge for print shops today is keeping up to date with the continually evolving technology to remain competitive.

The changes have been exciting, but also frightening.

Investments

Bob Stirling, owner of Stirling Print-All on King Street East, recalls what happened when the first computer arrived in his store. "There was a lot of fear and panic among the staff when the first Macintosh came in nine years ago. We didn't plan for it. We all had to wake up and embrace the new technology."

Fear quickly dissipated as the positive ramifications of this new equipment became apparent.

"The more we embraced the technology and acquired the hardware, the software, and the people-ware, the more we were able to reap the investments."

Stirling formed his company in 1974 during the on-set of instant printing. Initially, there were huge sacrifices made in terms of quality and lack of colour. As the technology grew and the demand for instant printing became more acceptable, these problems were addressed.

"The digital applications have re-invented the industry; made it more challenging and thought provoking," Stirling says.

There is "no more cut and paste." Colour and graphics can now be added through a computer, and the clarity of the end product is astonishing. With digital output, every copy is an original; not "a copy of a copy of a copy."

It is also easier to customize orders to a customer's exact needs, making the step quotation process a thing of the past. Clients no longer have to buy in pre-set amounts of 1,000, or 5,000, leaving them with thousands of wasted product at year's end.

"If you need 812, you get 812," says Stirling, "If you find you need another



Gaspar Lipari, left, and Dave Knox believe state of the art equipment will keep Allegra Print & Imaging competitive.

49, it's not a problem. You just slip in the disk."

Stirling now looks ahead to the future with no fear at all. "Most of our energies are directed to increasing our digital capabilities. Our two-year goal is to double them."

"In any business, it is important to be confident of who you are and what you can do, then just forge ahead."

Cam Whiffing, owner of Eagle Press Printers on Enfield Road in Burlington concedes there is a revolution happening, but downplays its importance.

"We do have state of the art technology, but it is only a portion of what we do. We are still putting ink on paper. In order to put ink on paper, we need an image. Digital technology helps us arrive at that image."

"It is a tool used internally to arrive at the finished product. How I arrive at the final product is not a major concern for the majority of customers."

"We shouldn't overlook how important the human element is. People skills are just as important, if not more important than the technology we use."

Eagle Press has been in operation for 30 years and has found a comfortable niche providing traditional off-set printing; supplying booklets, packaging and folding services that have nothing to do with digital technology. Business has remained steady.

"In my opinion, there is room for both technologies. I have printing presses that are 45 years old that still do the job well."

He also warns against the dangers of trying to continually keep up with the latest developments.

'In any business, it is important to be confident of who you are and what you can do, then just forge ahead.'

Bob Stirling

"You can spend a lot of money upgrading. It isn't that critical."

His philosophy is to appreciate and embrace the new technology — but with caution.

Stirling agrees.

"It doesn't pay to be the first kid on the block with the newest thing; an upgrade is usually needed within three months of its launch. It is best to be conveniently positioned just slightly behind the crest of the wave," Stirling said.

Caution has not stopped Knox or Lipari from expanding into new areas. They recently merged their companies to meet the demands they faced. Lipari says the number of print shops is actually decreasing.

"The saturation level has reached its peak. Mergers are the way of the future."

Knox formerly owned Seagers Press, a Hamilton based company that had been in operation since 1905. Starting as a "wrapping rat" when the company was owned by his father, he gradually learned all the aspects of the business before taking over in 1989.

Lipari rose through the ranks at Speedy Printing, working in the company's Windsor location, before moving into the Hamilton market eight years ago.

They had already built a solid working relationship, assisting each other according to their companies' strengths; and decided the best way to meet the new challenges was to join forces. Since March 1, they have jointly owned Allegra Print and Imaging, a franchise run by American Speedy Printing.

Their biggest challenge now is marketing the new name and letting customers know what new services are now being provided.

Along with traditional printing services, digital technology now allows Allegra to provide web-site designs and CD-ROM archiving — taking large files and compressing them to a single

CD-ROM.

They also provide one of the area's first direct-file transfer systems, allowing files to be transferred electronically thus "solidifying the client relationship where distance is an issue."

With location no longer a barrier, local print shops are suddenly faced with the challenge of competing in a global market. "It is not intentional," Stirling says. "It's happening only because of the technology itself."

For Allegra, the breaking of the location barrier has more local implications.

Since re-opening, Knox and Lipari have been forced to run their operation from two locations. Their sales, administration, and front-end copying are all handled on York Street, while the actual print shop, with all the off-set printing hardware is still in Seager's old Mary Street building.

To satisfy their franchise agreement they must locate in the downtown core; yet the industrial/warehouse type of zoning they require is more easily found in one of the outlying business parks, but harder to come by in the core itself.

Lipari says, "with all the space available we are having a tough time finding space."

Luckily, the two locations are close enough that it has not been a big problem, and the new technology has definitely helped. "It is not easy at times," Lipari admits, "but for the most part it has worked quite well."

'We shouldn't overlook how important the human element is. People skills are just as important, if not more important than the technology we use.'

Cam Whiffing

Ted Brellisford, The Spectator