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The interview: CAREY GEORGE

Print has to be strategic to be useful says the owner of a full-service branding company

SELF-DESCRIBED AS “old school” when it comes to his understanding and appreciation for print, Carey George of Up Inc., considers himself the last of a generation of graphic designers who did paste-ups on boards and worked with final film, working film, Chromalins, colour keys, and other prepress relics long replaced by digital technologies. Though he oversees a large branding firm complete with design, account, editorial, production, and digital staff, he still works closely with his designers and account people to develop accurate print specs so that his clients’ printed communications are produced properly and reflect the brand message Up Inc. helps them create. We caught up with Carey at his office in Toronto to chat about where print marketing is heading.

Q Over the years, you’ve clearly witnessed changes in demand for printed marketing and communications products. How would you best summarize the changing position of print within the marketing mix?

A Well, we do a hell of a lot less of it. In fact, I’d say today we do half of the printing for our clients compared to how much we managed for them five years ago. And our business has still grown because we’ve replaced that print business with other things, primarily digital offerings, like motion graphics, pre-rolls, brand videos, animation, and other such services.

*** Customers are taking a hard look at their print and asking if the piece is worth printing. In many cases it’s not**

Some of what we lost is going overseas and we are just not managing it anymore, but the vast majority of that—about 90%—is just gone because our clients don’t print the same quantities they used to do and don’t replace their print as often. They’ve become much more conservative with what

they are printing. They are taking a hard, close look at their print and are asking themselves if the piece is worth printing. In many cases they’ve determined that it’s not.

Q Do you think this has a lot to do with the argument that the speed and measurability of electronic campaigns has been a major driver of print’s decline?

A Perhaps. But I think print can be much more effective if there’s more strategy applied to its design and execution. I think, for example that eventually the bulk of general direct mail—the little brochures that tell you about the latest TV or health club—will go away. Not because I think they are ineffective (but you do have to send a lot out), but I think that there will be more of a push back with consumers asking, “Why I am I getting all this,” or “Why are they cutting trees down for this?” Marketers in turn are looking at e-mail for example as a cheaper alternative, but people don’t want to be bombarded with that either, so marketers have to figure out ways to make things more interesting.

What we’ve noticed is that people don’t click on an electronic ad unless they get something for free like a coupon or contest entry, so I see this working well for fast-moving consumer goods, but not for clients like big banks, or mainframe computer makers, or Up Inc., for that matter. With the types of clients we are going after and what we are trying to sell them, I’m not going to use Facebook ads. I’m going to use print.

Q Tell me more about how you use print to promote your own business.

A Well, we have a system for getting new business, which involves careful screening of potential clients based on a number of criteria. Once we’ve developed a target list, we send each company a meaty 24-page self-cover direct mail piece printed offset in runs of between 3,000 and 5,000, twice per year. Lots of companies send out little postcard reminders and the recipient gets it and says: “Who cares?” But when prospective clients receive our piece they say: “There’s got to be something on the other end of this.”

Carey George

Title Partner & co-founder

Company Up Inc., a 31-person branding company, founded in 1997 in Toronto, currently seeking to expand its client base into the Northeastern United States

Work History Trained as a graphic designer at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Moved to Toronto in the summer of 1988, working at various design studios designing primarily annual reports as was typical of design firms of that era. Started a small graphic design firm and eventually sold his share to his business partner. Co-founded Up Inc in 1997 as a two-person graphic design shop, steadily growing and transforming the business into a full-service branding company, targeting corporate clients with over \$20 million in annual revenue.




We send it out, because everyone looks equal on the internet, so anyone can say they are a 30-person shop but can in fact be as small as one or two people. But I guarantee you a two-person design firm is not sending out 24-page brochures in the mail by the thousands. We know that our potential clients aren't getting 50 other brochures just like ours so we stand out right from the beginning because of the substantial, tactile nature of that book.

Q So does that mean you are a big promoter of print to your clients in helping them promote their businesses?

A Not necessarily. We only encourage print when it makes sense. It all comes down to what the brand objectives are and then building a strategy. We will suggest producing a printed piece if we feel strategically it's going to work better for the client. Some clients don't want to, but we'll insist if we feel other media won't have the same effect.

Even the most boring piece can be made unique, but it has to be strategic and there has to be a compelling reason to print it. And this is the key, I think. Print can do a lot better. One of our clients commented that they had no idea of the effec-


tiveness of their last direct mail piece. We explained that you can absolutely measure "response" by doing things like adding a coupon or incentive, and changing the coupon for those distributed in newspapers versus those that are POP.

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Then you can go even beyond that, and do one coupon for each season, and that can tell you how long people are holding on to the direct mail piece or catalogue.

Unfortunately you often need a couple years to confirm the results, because you have to benchmark based on the first mailer and compare the results of the second one. You have to increase frequency if you want to see the results faster, but you always need a benchmark. But my point is you can always do things better.

Q What can your print vendors do better for you as a customer?

A We don't like it when someone is trying to force a floor sheet down our throats. That might be ok for some customers, but it's not for us. Luckily we don't see that as much as we used to. Also, I'm always amazed when printers do not hand-pick their samples when they send them to us. Even the best printers we work with occasionally just grab a stack, shrink wrap them and send them along. And it's Murphy's Law that in that stack will be the one piece in the whole run where there's a problem. The little effort it takes to go over it first before you ship it is well worth all the headaches that you save, because when that happens once, the client will always be scrutinizing things so closely after that and looking for problems because of that one experience. 

Vince DeFranco has been writing about the printing business, trends, and technology for over 15 years, while serving in senior marketing, management, and sales roles with various printing companies. He is currently a senior account executive for Toronto-based Prime Imaging. He can be reached at vince@goprimeimaging.com

