

VINCE
DeFRANCO



The interview: PETER BRAYNE

This senior production manager values printing as an art form that augments design

WE CAUGHT UP WITH Peter Brayne of Calgary's Venture Communications, who has deep roots in the printing industry. He argues that attractive printing adds value to projects, that personalized messages are on the increase, and that printers should avoid lowballing prices, because print shops can't win by doing short-sighted things that reduce quality. The future, he says belongs to the pros.

Q You're a self-described "old-school" print production manager who started his career as a scanner operator, and you've obviously seen some massive technological changes in the industry. But what are your thoughts on the social changes that have occurred in terms of print's place in the marketing media mix?

A To me, it's still about the art. Printing is an integral part of the design, not

just a process that's done after the design is complete. How you print a particular piece augments the design and takes it that much further. It takes effort and know-how. As production people we have to ask ourselves how can we take it further.

I think we are losing the art and craft of a lot of things in society. Like food, for example; with everyone so busy, look at the rise of fast food and all the problems that brings. I'm hoping the pendulum swings the other way and people begin to value quality printing again. I don't want to get to the point where it's just a message on paper. Attractive printing has more value. I think it can serve commercial purpose and be esthetically pleasing. It's still nice to read the paper, or to flip through a printed catalogue.

I have this wonderful book at home with pictures of Scotland. The book was

printed about 15 to 20 years ago, and you can still see the quality of the drum scans. Everything is balanced and bright; there's a broader dynamic range, and the photos have such depth. This is craftsmanship. But I suppose appreciation of it depends on the person who recognizes what went into producing it.

Q With arguably fewer clients who appreciate this craftsmanship, combined with economic pressures and the power of digital media, what's this doing to the print volumes you see at Venture Communications?

A We've seen that overall some of the volume has dropped a bit, but the main type of printing we do—targeted print—has actually increased. For clients like Toyota Parts & Service, our direct mail is targeted right down to, say, people who have a Toyota but haven't been to a dealer in a year, or maybe someone who has come in for an oil change in the past

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month. The message is personalized to each recipient with an offer specific to their purchase history or vehicle. The days of just pounding out flyers are going away and we don't get that as much any more. And although we never did a lot of annual report work, that has really dropped off. With Calgary being an oil town, we used to see lots of elaborate, beautifully printed reports, but now many clients will pay more to not look too good.

Print budgets and volumes have certainly been cut, but it's difficult to know if it was recession-related, or if clients have decided to go in a different direction. I'm on the production end so I don't see where the marketing dollars go.

Personally I'm still seeing printing for

Peter Brayne

Title Senior Production Manager

Company Calgary-based Venture Communications, one of Canada's largest independent marketing communications firms, owned by Arlene Dickinson. Founded 26 years ago, the company has a client base that spans North America and crosses a variety of industries. It is a recipient of Canada's 50 Best Managed Companies award.

Work History Started his career as a scanner operator at *The Calgary Sun* in 1984, followed by roles at other prepress and printing houses through to the mid-1990s, including Spectrum Graphics (Calgary) Total Graphics (Vancouver) and Sundog Printing (Calgary). He joined Venture Communications in 1995 as its production manager.



real estate and specialty products, where marketers are getting the word out, and they understand that the piece needs to be slick, and high quality since they're selling million-dollar condos or holiday property. I know there's pressure for them to print fewer copies due to the costs, but when you think about it, producing a piece that costs 15 bucks is still cheaper than lunch. I don't understand the mentality. People don't want to pay 15 bucks for a 40-page brochure on beautiful stock that's elegantly finished and is absolutely custom, but they think nothing of paying 5 bucks for a greeting card.

Q What about the rise of online printing companies? Have they helped the purchasing process at all?


A Online printers are ok if you want to print a pizza menu, or something basic, I suppose, but I certainly don't use them. Some of these print management companies who shop around for excess capacity claim not to be brokers, but they are. They say "If you let us handle your printing, we will be able to save you 20%

on your print budget." The ones I've seen at least are indeed brokers. They have a database of companies who do different kinds of printing, but their approach is flawed I think because it assumes printing companies are interchangeable. But printers are not equal. The approach is

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about as hands off and removed as you can get, and is based on a 'Good enough' mentality, and I don't have that. Are they really giving you expert advice, or are they just a personal shopper for you?

Q As a print buyer, though, can't you benefit from increased competition, while still communicating your high production standards?

A No I don't think so. Regardless of how they're doing it, they are just driving prices down by encouraging printers to lowball each other. Printers can't win long-term by doing short-sighted things like, say, hiring less qualified people to keep costs down, or by taking a job just so the printer down the road doesn't get it. I'm not a printer, but I think that needs to be looked at. Lowballing is so bad. It shouldn't be a matter of who's the last man standing, though we obviously need competition. I think the printers who charge a reasonable amount will last; the "quick buck" people will be gone, and the pros will remain. 

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.

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