

Printing NEWS

Doin' the Right Thing: A Tale of Ethics & Profitability

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Sometimes, industry analysts sit in ivory towers and talk about technology and trends from afar. Other times, they live it. This week, I had an opportunity to live it.

In my other life as a niche subsidy publisher (Strong Tower Publishing), I worked with an author to bring out a book for a conference that started Friday, January 10. The editing ran too long, the production was more problematic than anticipated, and in the end, we missed the 48-hour window required by Lightning Source to get the books there on time. This launched a great rush to find an alternate solution.

It was now three days before the unveiling of the 324 page book. My first inclination was to lean on an industry colleague to do me a favor. So I asked a long-term industry friend of mine, Frank McPherson of Custom Data Imaging in Canada. Without hesitation, he agreed to print the 125 books by the end of the day. But that afternoon, his estimator called in a panic. FedEx would charge \$2,800 for overnight shipping. So much for that.

Okay, three days until the unveiling. As of right now, I don't even have a printer. My next option was to pray and start cold-calling in the Winter Garden, FL. I networked feverishly until I was referred to a place named tCreative, a digital solutions company that had just upgraded to a Xerox 5000. Immediately, my radar perked up. Now we were getting somewhere.

Over a Barrel

I called, and sure enough, tCreative could turn it around in time, even with outsourcing the binding. I dumped on a poor guy named Mark Hansen, explaining the whole painful story. Clearly, I had exhibited poor contingency planning, and now I was over a barrel. I got a few laughs, a lot of sympathy, and then an urgent tone—okay, now if we're going to get this done, we need to get on it right away. Get the files over here and we'll see what we can do.

The clock was ticking. It was 4 PM, and for some reason, I trusted him. I uploaded the files without waiting for the estimate. Knowing I didn't have time for more snafus, I called a few minutes later to make sure that the files had arrived safely, and to my surprise, Mark had already opened them and started working on them.

Relieved, I took a break, came back, and saw that he'd sent over the

estimate. I gulped. About 100% higher than I'd anticipated. I'm used to dealing with Lightning Source, after all.

I calmed myself down. It was a rush job, so I had expected a rush fee. It was a specialty shop, not a mass production factory, so I had expected the price to be higher. They had to outsource the binding, so I expected a mark-up and surcharge for the bindery. All told, I figured the job would be double what Lightning Source was charging. I wasn't prepared for the fact that it was four times higher.

Now, the per-book price was almost identical to the cover price. I called right away, clearly upset, and once again, Mark was as nice as could be.

"Not what you were expecting?" he asked.

Uh, no.

He promised to talk to the owner in the morning and get back to me. I wasn't hopeful. Even with a few hundred dollars discount, it would still be terribly high. But then, it was a rush job.

"And the New Number Is..."

In the morning, a new estimate came over. By this time, I was fully committed and the job was already on press. They had squeezed me in to the schedule. Certainly, it wasn't convenient for them to do, and from their perspective, they didn't have to drop the price at all. It was a pain-in-the-butt job they didn't even have to take on. They deserved what they were charging.

When I opened the estimate, I was stunned. They had dropped the price by one-third. In the interim, I had gotten a response to a panicked help request I had made 24 hours earlier on an industry forum. It was a Sir Speedy in Orlando with perfect binding in-house. I asked him for an estimate, as well, just to check the price I had been charged. His price was neck and neck of tCreative's original estimate. So not only had tCreative dropped the price more than they had to, but their original quote wasn't unreasonable anyway. No PITB (Pain In The Butt) surcharge.

Twenty-four hours later, the books were sitting on the counter at tCreative, ready for pick-up by the author. As of this mailing, I have not yet seen a

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tCreative copy, but after talking to the client that evening, he said they looked phenomenal. There wasn't a hiccup in the whole process. The client was also over the top for the quality and how he was treated at the pick-up.

The result? tCreative got a follow-up job for 200 more books. Non-rush, of course.

Serious Fun

Afterwards, I learned that tCreative is what is called a "Seven Habits" company, or a company that holds to Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (see sidebar).

Its founder, Tim Holcomb, once ran a Sir Speedy, handled the graphic design for Garden Restaurants, and did graphic design and print buying for Red Lobster. When he started tCreative, he wanted it to be a different kind of company. Based on the motto "Serious Fun," tCreative take its jobs seriously—with a business models straddling print shop and traditional creative agency—but also has fun at the same time. That fun includes the freedom to do the right thing, like helping out "really stuck" part-time publishers like me.

In a world that idolizes those who have the "take no prisoners" motto to business, the nice guy approach has worked. tCreative has grown from a Doc12 on Holcomb's back porch (more genteelly called a lanai in Florida) to eight employees in a seven-thousand-square-foot building in Orlando.

Even though they present themselves as much as a creative organization as a printer, Holcomb insists that this isn't a turn-off for the traditional creative community. "People come in here and we disarm them with our low-key approach," he says. "I say, 'Man, you don't have to puff

up here. We're cool.'"

This is interesting to me, in part, because my mother works for a company with a similar business model. She works for Auto Owners Insurance (yes, an insurance company) that is the XX largest underwriter in the country. In its 10-point business plan, profit is at the bottom of the list. The company's belief is that it does not have to put profitability first. If you do the others, profitability will naturally follow. I won't list all the ways they do this—very un-insurance company like ways—but they live it out. That is proved out on tCreative's side, as well.

"When I ran the other Print shop," Holcomb says, "I did what the owners wanted me to do, and we were not doing a lot of the right things at the time. When I left there, I vowed that I would never do business like that again. Here, we're not about making a buck and ruining someone else's life. We are serious about what we do, but life is too short not to have fun. I have worked extremely hard to maintain and protect [the 'have fun and do the right thing'] culture within the organization. That is critical for me."

Next month, "ideas for success" for creatives, including the value of working backwards from tCreative and others, to help you achieve the best end result.

SIDEBAR: tCreative's Seven Habits

tCreative is a Seven Habits company, or a company that embraces Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. When I put Tim Holcomb on the spot, asking him to list all seven, here is how he summarized them. Compare them to Auto Owners' 10 Core Values list. It is interesting how similar they are:

tCreative's Seven Habits Summary	Auto Owner's 10 Core Values
1. Be proactive (without being confrontational).	1. Honesty
2. Think win-win.	2. Hard work
3. Seek first to understand, then be understood.	3. Prudence
4. Put first things first (prioritize by value or importance).	4. Loyalty
5. Begin with the end in mind.	5. Teamwork
6. Synergize (use a team approach to be more effective).	6. Fostering relationships
7. Sharpen the saw (keep it fun so that you enjoy your job and are more effective because you are fulfilled in your personal life).	7. Opportunities for associates
	8. Focus on customers
	9. Stability and consistency
	10. Profits

