

New Times, New Solutions

Southern Lithoplate's consulting services helps newspapers generate new profits



By Nu Yang

Southern Lithoplate is known in the industry as a supplier of digital and analog lithoplates to more than 1,800 newspaper and commercial printers across the U.S. and around the world. Now, the company is offering a new service called SLP Solutions, a one-stop-shop for service and support for all prepress and press service and support needs.

Headed by director of global service and technical support Gary Blakeley, SLP Solutions can help newspapers overcome several obstacles, such as technical maintenance, equipment and workflow updates, and outsourcing. Blakeley himself started in the industry working in operations 30 years ago, and he brings his talent and the talent of other longtime professionals to his team.

Blakeley explained the entire process starts with one phone call. Before even visiting a site, they spend time on the phone with newspaper executives learning about current issues with production and operations, what their business model looks like, and their finances. The length of the phone conversations, Blakeley said, range from two to six hours, depending on the type of job needed.

Once they visit a site, Blakeley (who accompanies his team to every location) said the agenda generally includes a meeting with the stakeholders to define the scope of the project, speaking with the project lead before breaking up into subgroups to talk to individual workers to address any issues and concerns.

After visiting a site and collecting data, Blakeley and his team put together a report with directions and suggestions for improvements and solutions. Typical turnaround is between three to three-and-a-half weeks.

Sun Coast Media Group is a family and employee-owned newspaper group located primarily in southwest Florida with two dailies and five weeklies. The company has two printing plants, and a commercial printing arm of Sun Coast Media Group—Sun Coast Press—has more than 100 outside active commercial printing customers.

David Dunn-Rankin, president and

CEO of Sun Coast Media Group, admits he always wants do more. "Despite printing over 100 outside commercial printing jobs, (I) asked the commercial print team to double the size of that business over the next five years." To accomplish that, Richard Hackney was named president of Sun Coast Press and production director for the company and agreed to be president of Sun Coast Press full-time to drive revenue growth. Ken Shelby agreed to join the company as production director. New production managers were also hired to head the two printing facilities.

"Because of all the personnel changes and the growth demands in front of the team, we decided it was a good idea to do a deep dive into our internal processes and procedures in our prepress, press and mail rooms. SLP Solutions had a very strong team with deep expertise available to help us," Dunn-Rankin said.

When the consultants were on site, Dunn-Rankin said the staff appreciated their presence. "Part of what made that work is that we had relatively new people in all the seats so if there was something that needed to be changed it was less of a personal reflection on their management. It also helped that the SLP team was pretty low key and collegial. They spent time with the key personnel asking their opinions and making sure their voices were heard all the way up to the CEO of the company.

"Often the people doing the work know what many of the issues are but think status quo must be acceptable to management. Management doesn't know all the issues and assumes the team will make sure all the issues are properly raised. And so issues can sit in limbo. SLP made sure those issues were raised. Plus the SLP team found many, and I do mean many issues, that were not on any list, written or mental, that we planned on addressing."

Dunn-Rankin said it will probably take a full-year to implement all the suggestions, but they are starting on them. "The suggestions were mechanical and maintenance oriented on the one hand, on the



David Dunn-Rankin, Sun Coast Media Group president and CEO



Gary Blakeley, Southern Lithoplate director of global service and technical support

other, processes and procedures to more efficiently take advantage of team and equipment. It is a significant six-figure bottom line improvement once we implement them all."

In addition, SLP Solutions offers KPI (Key Performance Indicators) Plus, featuring 13 key indicators that will help publishers know if they're on the right track when it comes to certain areas, such as newsprint waste, mailroom expense, and ink cost.

"It's a savvy way to understand the numbers," Blakeley said.

Dunn-Rankin said the indicators allow production facilities and newspaper groups like theirs to submit their data and be compared to a group of peers. "The benefit of this for our company is we can hang those monthly comparisons to peers in our pressrooms and let our teams compete to be the best. We don't need to tell them how they stack up; they can see for themselves. Wouldn't you like that for every department in your paper?"

According to Blakeley, what makes SLP Solutions stand out is their years of experience working in print production and their ability to "look deeper" into issues to find the right solutions. Because Blakeley and his team all started in newspapers, "We listen and understand what operations are going up against...At Southern Lithoplate, we're committed to the industry and to giving back to them so they can save money."

For more information, visit slp.com or email slpsolutions@slp.com. ■