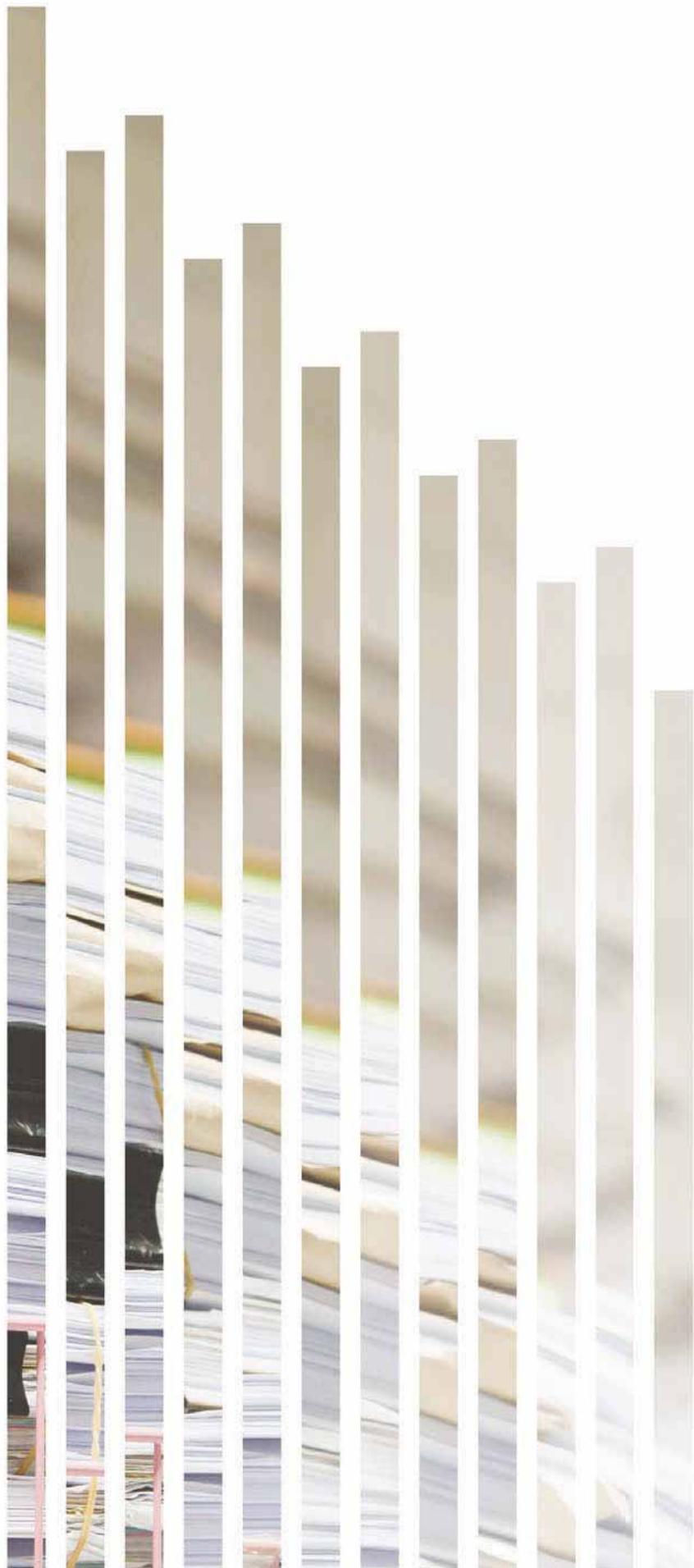


production



BY W. ERIC SCHULT





GOING PAPERLESS

Times Review Media Group shelves traditional workflow and sees positive results

There doesn't seem to be a lot of nostalgia in Mattituck, N.Y. for the recently discontinued use of paper-based ad tickets and wire baskets with which a local group of weekly newspapers had previously tracked production workflow.

Gone are the triplicate forms, the jackets containing scraps of clip art and ad copy, and all the bins where the work was once prioritized. In their place is a suite of software products from Software Consulting Services, LLC (SCS) of Nazareth, Pa., with which the Times Review Media Group of Mattituck partnered to achieve a goal of "going paperless."



› Andrew Olsen, owner and publisher of Times Review Media Group



› Bert Vogel, Times Review Media Group art department manager



› Cerria Torres, Times Review Media Group display coordinator

The initiative wasn't so much about saving trees as it was about eliminating inefficiencies, according to owner and publisher Andrew Olsen. The impetus for the shift came out of frustrations Olsen observed between his sales team and art department back in February of 2015. Olsen recalled: "I came out of a sales meeting, and there was definitely tension regarding the art department." It had to do with "being frustrated with the workflow and getting copy back."

The frustrations were mutual. "When you talked to the art department, there was tension surrounding the sales team because they would put orders in, but not get the copy in, and everything would come in at the last second on deadline," Olsen said. "To me, there looked like a problem that could be solved that could make us run the business more efficiently and also streamline the workflow that we had."

He subsequently reached out to SCS, with whom his three weekly papers and niche magazines already had an established relationship. The vendor's ad tracking and advertising systems had been in use in Mattituck for a decade or more. "I contacted SCS and said, 'I haven't been there (to the vendor's headquarters) in 10 years. Can I come in and see you guys?' I prepared a PowerPoint presentation for that meeting. I went around and took cell phone photos of the workflow that we had," illustrating the use of an array of wire baskets to orchestrate production work and the existence of carbon copy ad tickets with "all the different pieces of the ad orders" accompanying them. "Everything was being walked around the building manually," Olsen said. "We were also doing tearsheets following a manual workflow, where we would rip the pages out, attach an invoice and send it off to a client. Our invoic-

ing was all being done by paper, as well."

"They'd been using our (systems) in a somewhat traditional manner," said Kurt Jackson, SCS's vice president and general manager, characterizing the Mattituck papers as "an environment that included a lot of paper pushing." The vendor, though, had a lot of experience helping new and existing newspaper customers to shed their dependence on a paper-based workflow that, while familiar and comfortable, may be limiting in ways not be immediately obvious to them.

"That sort of linear-bound process is what's going to restrict the growth you want," said Jackson. "It'll look like you might have to add more people, when in fact if you just reorganize and (go) to a centralized, digital environment, you can get a lot more time efficiency out of your (existing) staff."

"I was going through the presentation, and they were shaking their heads, saying, 'We can help you guys,'" Olsen said. "And they did."

Planning for Conversion

For his part, Olsen enlisted key personnel early on to champion the conversion from traditional workflow to a digital, paperless solution. "When I went to SCS, I brought with me a member of the art department, and also our display coordinator, because those were the two people who were going to have to be key to the implementation of the project, and I wanted to get their buy-in right from the beginning," Olsen said. "They embraced it 100 percent." He said back in Mattituck the sales team and the art department got together and collaboratively documented existing processes and planned the transition to a digital workflow.



We asked newspapers several important questions in a recent survey.*

Here's what you said...

1.

WHAT IS YOUR TOP 2017 PRINT PRIORITY?

REVENUE GENERATION and CIRCULATION GROWTH



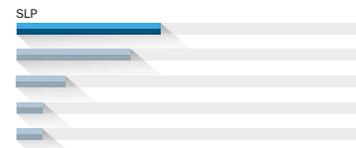
SLP provides newspapers affordable consulting for improving your print products and lowering your costs.

2.

WHICH SUPPLIER DO YOU RANK #1 IN COMMITMENT TO PREPRESS & PRESSROOM PRODUCTION?

SOUTHERN LITHOPLATE

More respondents ranked SLP #1 than any other.



SLP is recognized for its innovations like Liberty NXP no-process plates, CRON-ECRM CtP, KPIplus+ and SLP Solutions to help newspapers improve print.



► **Kurt Jackson, Software Consulting Services, LLC vice president and general manager**

“It was like team-building 101,” said display coordinator Cerria Torres. “We all got together in a room and mapped it out on huge Post-It notes. Being able to map out the workflow with the art department and the sales reps in one room was the only way we were able to make it work for us as a group.”

Olsen credited both his team and the vendor for their separate roles in a successful conversion. “A really important part of this is getting the architecture correct in terms of the process,” he said. “Even if you have the best software, the software doesn’t do anything for you unless you think about what you need and why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

Part of what his team contributed was tracing the path of an ad order through the workflow process, taking note of all the different steps. “When you do that, invariably you may see something that maybe could be done a little bit of a different way that might make it easier and better for the people who are doing the work.” As for SCS’s role, in addition to providing the software upgrades and missing modules that helped fulfill the papers’ objectives, “we especially needed all of the attention in terms of the architecture and the workflow design”— the vendor’s consulting services. “That was a really big element to the whole equation,” Olsen said.

Paperless ad order entry and prepress workflow was the first order of business for the company, with electronic tearsheets and billing to come later. But even the order entry step was measured.

“We started just with our magazines, because we thought that was a little bit simpler,” Olsen said. The magazines were monthly; the ad volume was lower than with the weeklies; and there wasn’t the issue of combination ad buys (into multiple publications) with which to contend. “We kind of wanted to walk before we ran.”

For more results from the research visit:
SLP.com/commitment

For more results with your print profitability:
Call us at (800) 638-7990





3 QUESTIONS WITH...

Aaron Barbero, vice president of operations, San Francisco Media Co.

What has been your greatest challenge and how did you overcome it?

Moving to San Francisco, I found the greatest challenge was improving the company's image as our boxes, the main distribution point for our papers, were in terrible shape. With the high incidence of vandalism and the need for daily maintenance, we faced a steep uphill climb in getting the city and the decision makers involved, organized and working in the right direction. Through working hand and hand with the city of San Francisco, their contractors and our distribution company, we have been able to reduce the amount of unusable distribution points from an astounding 34 percent to the current 7 percent. We were also able to reduce the repair time for distribution points from one or two months to three to four days.

Where do you see the future of print production?

Contrary to many, I do believe that most people will always want their local news and advertisements in a form that they can physically hold. With that said, I do believe newspaper executives are in a position to do what has never been done and push the envelope into new areas. Sometimes it is scary to break out of what has always been and forge a new path for the industry. We are at a time in history when what has always been is not what we will be doing tomorrow or next month. I have had the pleasure of working with a publisher that pushes the envelope for both advertisers and readers alike. The end result has been better pickup rates, happy advertisers and a product the city loves to read.

What printing technologies are you most excited about?

Technology in our industry changes at an alarming rate, day to day there are new innovations and steps to make production as a whole faster, cheaper and environmentally friendly. With this said, I think for smaller publications we are going to see digital printing becoming more common in our press facilities. This technology allows for faster turnarounds and is generally cheaper than with offset printing for smaller runs. Now, if we combine this with the erasable printing technology, we could reduce waste and increase print quality significantly.

Aaron Barbero joined the San Francisco Media Co. as vice president of operations in 2015, bringing more than 25 years of newspaper, circulation, information technology and pressroom experience to the company that publishes the San Francisco Examiner and the San Francisco Weekly.

Within a week or two, however, the team had enough confidence in the system and in their comfort level with it to step up the pace of implementation. "We said, 'You know what? We can also do this with the papers,'" Olsen said. "Within a few months, everything was implemented."

Realized Benefits

"In the case of the art department and art production, it's night and day," said Bert Vogel, who manages that team. "It's so much easier. Everything just functions better; it's faster."

Hunting down ad elements that might or might not be in the possession of the art team isn't the chore it once was. "All the copy and art is supplied right there; my artists don't have to look for anything. It's all usually in a folder that they have access to," he said. "There's no more hunting and gathering from the salespeople."

The system also affords him a level of control he didn't have before. "I can watch everything that's going on," he said, "I know what each graphic designer is doing, what ads are being done, what's produced, what's not produced."

Torres said that the system helps her track workflow farther out than she could before from a more comprehensive perspective. "It gives us the ability to sort of look at the whole week's production in one screen so we're able to have a very good overview of what we have ahead of us for the day, for the week." It tells her "where the artists are at with an ad, and where the sales reps are with supplying copy for the art department."

Olsen appreciated how the system impacted the way sales reps work. "What it did is it made the sales reps accountable for the copy." Not that they weren't before, he noted, but "now they actually are (personally) uploading the different elements of the ad themselves, so they're fully accountable for it."

Run date, ad instructions, copy, etc. are all provided that way, so there's no bottleneck waiting for "somebody (else) to key in information." Reps can do all this from their home or car, or before even leaving the advertisers' place of business, eliminating potential delays in delivering hard copy elements to the newspaper office for submission. "If they're keying it in at 10 o'clock at night when they have time," Olsen said, "then when the art department gets in first-thing in the morning, it's already there."

To the extent that ad copy and instructions are keyboarded (rather than written on scratch paper), the system can be helpful to the artists dealing with illegible handwriting, but it's not a panacea. It's still possible, for example, for a rep to layout an ad on a napkin. "They just take a picture of it and submit that," Torres said. "I would say that's a rarity, but it happens. I think that (the hard-



Software Consulting Services, LLC and the Times Review Media Group of Mattituck have partnered to achieve a goal of “going paperless.”

ships) exist and always will because we’re humans that are using machinery, but from an overall standpoint, it has made us more productive.”

Olsen reported querying his team and asking for assessments on the impact of the new system on the operation. They told him they absolutely wished they had made this transition sooner. “There was a feeling that we gained up to 50 percent productivity.” That hasn’t, for Mattituck, meant any reduction in art department or sales team staffing, but rather enhanced levels of service. “It’s definitely given us much more capacity from a sales and art department standpoint. We’ve been able to do more spec ads,” he said.

It’s also improved the turnaround for the production of online advertising. “We incorporated our web ads into that same workflow,” Olsen said. “When you’re on a deadline cycle for print, a lot of times what would happen is that those web ads would get pushed to the side, and they wouldn’t get done till the end of the week when

we’re off deadline. Now they’re incorporated right into the workflow every single day, which allows us to produce everything much more efficiently. And it has allowed us to grow the web side of the business—the digital side.”

Paperless Tearsheets and Billing

Broadening the scope of the initiative to include paperless tearsheets and billing has had similarly positive impacts on the business.

“It doesn’t happen overnight. You have to really work at it for a period of time,” Olsen said, but the effort resulted in “increasing our cash turn,” since now, with the click of a button, the department can send an invoice. “We’re able to collect faster, because people are getting the digitized invoices (sooner).”

Gains in productivity were realized, too. “We were able to free up two of the front office’s admin people who are now actually helping in the circulation department. Be-

fore, they were not able to do that, because they didn’t have the time,” Olsen said. “It’s given us back basically 40 hours of availability during the course of the week.”

Big Picture Perspective

To Olsen, the move to a paperless workflow is primarily about “taking the manual tasks out of the day-to-day, if you can.”

“There are certain things where you need the intellectual capital to be able to review something or analyze it, but there’s a big portion of all of our businesses where there’s manual workflow that is really antiquated that needs to be looked at.”

Changes in the industry make it particularly important to use human resources wisely. “Our workload has increased exponentially because of all these different channels and areas where we have an audience,” Olsen said. “In order to be able to coordinate all that, you have to be really integrated. You have to have good workflow. You have to have very strong leadership in place. And you have to have good software. When you combine those different things, then you’re able to create efficiencies that essentially allow you to reinvest back into the company for the benefit of your readers and advertisers. That’s how we’ve kind of been viewing everything.”

Having the right partnerships in place is also essential, Olsen said. “There are tons of different software companies out there that do these sorts of things, but you have to get them all to work together, and that’s where I’ve found working with the team at SCS to be really helpful.” He considered it an advantage that he did not have to integrate software from three or four different companies to accomplish his goals, but rather, he had “one company with different elements” to be integrated, and the result was a solution that worked seamlessly. ■

W. Eric Schult is a retired, 35-year veteran of the newspaper business. He most recently served as senior operations and technology executive at The Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer. Contact him on LinkedIn.com.