

Leaving a Legacy

In 2010, a small group of employees organized the first national sales meeting at Empire Screen Printing in Onalaska, Wis. What started out as an opportunity to bring our national sales reps together to network ideas through print education turned into a multifaceted mission: To provide education on printing, to promote the industry and its suppliers, to provide unique networking opportunities, to illustrate how to be good stewards of the environment, and to leave a legacy for future generations. As this show grew, so did Empire. As the show surpassed on-site capacity, the Partners in Printing Expo was formed and is now located at the La Crosse Center, in downtown La Crosse, Wis.

You may be thinking, “A printing expo? Isn’t Wisconsin the land of beer, cheese, brats, and the Packers?” Yes, the state is famous for all those things, but more than 1,000 printing businesses call Wisconsin home. Some of the country’s largest and most respected firms reside in the state.

At the outset, the expo was an addition to our national sales meeting. We had lofty ideas for the expo, but realized we had to start small. We were a manufacturer whose experience in trade shows was limited to attending them. The first expo had five suppliers who agreed to display new products and educate attendees. Our sustainability efforts

were in the early stages, and the “keynote” speakers were employees with knowledge on key areas of printing. Catering was done by our spouses (who informed us afterwards that would change). As Wisconsin’s legendary Packers coach Vince Lombardi said: “The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have.” We didn’t have much at that first expo, but with what we had, we set a strong tone for the future.

Since then, we have been as aggressive and progressive as our imaginations have allowed. From those humble beginnings of five exhibitors, we have grown in size, scope, and international reach. This year, we’ll welcome more than 100 exhibiting companies to the La Crosse Center. The small original group of attendees is joined by printers from all corners of the United States and Canada. Still, the question remains: “Why another print expo, and what makes this one different?”

The Secret’s Out

To achieve our mission of leaving a legacy for future generations, one of the unique aspects of the Partners in Printing Expo is we invite our competition into our facility for tours. When we started the expo in 2010, the industry was like a spy novel. Every bit of information was held closely under lock and key, and printers tried to ▶



By Doug Billings, VP of Sales/Marketing, Empire Screen Printing



Photos courtesy of Empire Screen Printing.



glean information from any source they could about what the others were doing.

We see this expo as a tool to do our part to strengthen printing as an industry. Technology has encroached on traditional print methods. Low-cost illuminated displays are eliminating print opportunities, manufacturers are buying their own digital equipment, and direct mail has declined because of online marketing. We should be more concerned with those threats than each other. Working together, sharing, and collaborating will strengthen and protect our industry.

So, we do not look at other printers as a threat to our business but partners in printing. Our competition motivates us to perform at higher levels, encourages innovation, and forces us out of our comfort zone.

Illustrating how to be good stewards of the environment is another element of our mission. Let's be honest: The public's impression of printers isn't that we are the cleanest of industries. In 2008, Empire drove the development of LED-UV ink curing technology for screen printing. This allows us to be more environmentally sustainable than using solvent-based ink. LED-UV curing technology produces no ozone emissions, reduces energy consumption, and eliminates the need for high-energy mercury vapor bulbs.

Douglas Johnson, president of environmental intelligence and auditor for Wisconsin's DNR Green Tier program, said, "Empire has a winning

hand, but instead of keeping its cards close to the chest, the company prefers to put its cards on the table for peers and competitors, so that the industry as a whole can see it is possible to deliver better outcomes to society and nature. This makes Wisconsin better!"

We illustrate and share these innovations so printers can learn how to apply LED-UV curing to their own equipment when they take the tours offered during the expo — and our attendees appreciate it. In thanking us for the tour, Wilmington Nameplate President Brett Greene said, "We were impressed with the cellular layouts and the level of innovation blew us away. Your team was great as well and provided us with loads of information. Definitely plenty of takeaways for us during this visit."

Solutions for Different Communities

Looking for the latest technological developments from national and international exhibitors? The expo showcases key suppliers not just for screen printing, but digital, flexographic, lithographic and offset markets. Partners in Printing is focused on the whole printing industry, not just a single segment. This allows attendees to look for new avenues of growth from expansion, with new equipment or growth opportunities in new segments.

One of the expo's best elements is the networking opportunities to share ideas and knowledge

to expand business. Many people talk about building relationships, but often they focus more on transactions. This is short-sighted and doesn't bring about the best result. We have gained friendships with many printers whose work we admire and who understand the highs and lows of the work we do.

That's why the expo offers great networking events, such as the Charitable Celebrity Golf Tournament. This 96-person (maximum) event brings celebrities and attendees together to raise money for local charities. All proceeds from the event are donated to a designated charity within our community. This supports our mission to make our community a better place for those who call Wisconsin home.

New for 2020, we're presenting a concert event open to the public at the La Crosse Oktoberfest grounds. This exciting networking addition will allow us to share Wisconsin's rich printing heritage with the local community as concertgoers enjoy a night of food, fun, and great country, rock, and pop music. La Crosse is home to one of the largest Oktoberfest celebrations in the United States, and we are partnering with La Crosse Festivals to utilize the grounds.

This year, the expo also welcomes the support of SGIA — the foremost resource for information and education for the printing industry. They realize printers are bold, driven, and creative, and have chosen to lend their expertise to help us

continue our mission well into the future.

The bottom line at Partners in Printing is, as it will always be, a combination of sharing, networking, and collaboration. The ingredients for a successful expo are accommodating industry growth and diversification. The opinion of those attending is the best barometer of the value and benefit the expo brings — and we value the comment of Ed Cook, president, ECI Screen Printing and past chairman of SGIA: "Being the leader of a small business, we constantly look for ways to inspire our staff and refine our company. Your outreach and giveback to the industry have definitely helped us to continue this journey in a big way."

Lombardi also once said, "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor." We choose printing as our endeavor, and it is up to each of us to consider what we want our legacy to be. Empire's legacy will not be defined by how much we sold, but rather how we impacted our communities, businesses, and environment, and how we inspired future generations. Maybe if football had not worked out so well, Lombardi would have been a printer.

To register for Partners in Printing (La Crosse Convention Center, July 21-23), visit SGIA.org/events/partners-in-printing. ■

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