

Learning, Networking, and Innovating at Partners in Printing



By Doug Billings,
VP, Sales & Marketing,
Empire Screen Printing

The biannual Partners in Printing Expo (PIP) began in 2010, when it was held in Empire Screen Printing's manufacturing facility in Wisconsin. Now a three-day event (July 20-22) which will be located at the La Crosse Convention Center in La Crosse, Wis., this unique expo has continued to see large-scale growth driven by its exhibitors.

Our first expo was actually part of the company's National Sales Meeting, which was made up of five print suppliers: Sun Chemical, Flexcon, Tekra, Water Ink Technologies, and TKO Graphix. Each of these companies agreed to set up small tabletop displays with just a two-week notice. Zac Furger, a sales representative for Tekra at the time, recalls his impression of the first expo, saying, "Groups of Empire sales folks would walk through the presentations and discuss applications or materials of interest, but the suppliers were really not the focus for the first meeting."

Mike Steinke, who worked at Flexcon, shares, "We, along with four other vendors, set up a table in one of the long narrow hallways in Empire's old office area."

Though not much of a first expo, it laid the foundation for future expos, building on a passion for making a difference in the industry. Passion isn't something you have; it's something you do. It's a course of action and a plan of attack. The course we set with the expo was to help those in the print industry create a strong future. This passion has gone into our exposition for over a decade, and it's what makes this event worth a closer look.

Importance of Exhibitors

The expo has significantly upgraded from that narrow hallway and a few tabletops. The exhibitors would play a larger role in not just the expo, but all facets of the event. After the first attempt, we started asking exhibitors questions, with their feedback laying out the blueprint of what PIP looks like today.

"Within days of the show wrapping up, Doug was on the phone asking for feedback on how the event went and what could be done to improve the experience," Steinke recalls of the inaugural expo. "To be honest, this seemed a little excessive. After all, it was five vendors, Empire employees, and a few small businesses. There wasn't much feedback to give other than it was a great expo and a very welcomed opportunity to help educate and learn from the Empire team. This pursuit for feedback was (and still is) a hallmark of the PIP Expo and, looking back, the passion and drive to make this show a success was clearly visible. Today, the show welcomes

over a hundred exhibitors showcasing their products to printers both large and small, from around the United States and Canada. The momentum was definitely building, giving us signs of things to come."

Feedback was the primary driver for increasing the event's duration to three days, enabling exhibitors more 'face time' with attendees, and affording attendees a longer period to visit booths and take advantage of PIP's many networking activities. One cannot stress exhibitors' important role in this event: They spend a tremendous amount of time, effort, and manpower attending, exhibiting, and networking at the expo.

Popular Offerings and New Experiences

This year's expo will kick off with the Partners in Printing 3M Cup, held at Dragan's Castle Mound golf course outside of La Crosse. This limited-person event is open to exhibitors and attendees with the requirement that 100% of the proceeds are used locally. This helps to make our community a better place for those who call Wisconsin home. The tournament combines amateurs and celebrities golfing together for a cause. Past celebrities include Grammy-nominated artist Ira Dean from Trick Pony, Saving Abel founder and former frontman Jared Weeks, Bigg Vinny from Trailer Choir and NBC's "The Biggest Loser," and Jared Blake from season one of "The Voice." Through the generosity of our sponsors, partners, and participants, we are able to further our mission of making a difference in our community.

The second day features our professional learning sessions with nationally recognized speakers. This event is open to PIP exhibitors and by special invitation only. Past speakers have included Judson Laipply, YouTube superstar and motivational speaker; Patrick Henry Hansen, sales trainer/author; William Strauss, Federal Reserve Bank Senior Economist; Richard Leinenkugel, president of Leinenkugel Brewing; and Dan Black, motivational speaker.

Each of the speakers has given insightful perspective on important business trends, such as increased personal branding, higher sales, game-changing innovation, and economic planning. These speakers have inspired, engaged, empowered, and motivated those in attendance while giving them ideas to discuss and put into action.

This year's lineup of speakers includes Frank Winters, former Green Bay Packer and Super Bowl winner; Gene Marks, national columnist; and Tracy Spears, internationally recognized thought leader. In addition,

we will welcome Tom Thibodeau, distinguished professor of servant leadership, and Brian Parsley, business intelligence strategist.

Immediately following the speaker sessions, attendees can enjoy one of our signature events, The Wisconsin Backyard BBQ. Open to exhibitors and by invitation only, the BBQ is a special networking event which showcases Wisconsin's breweries, wineries, chefs, and hospitality. The combination of food, friends, and fun makes this event special. Curt Baskin, field marketing manager, Sun Chemical, says, "The BBQ has been one of the many exceptional experiences. It has allowed Sun Chemical to interface with other industry experts."

The final day is the biggest, and starts with the expo. Looking for the latest technological developments from national and international exhibitors? The free expo showcases key suppliers not just for screen printing, but digital, flexographic, lithographic, and offset markets. PIP is focused on the whole printing industry, not just a single segment. This allows attendees to look for new avenues of growth and expansion, exploring equipment or development opportunities into new markets. You also never know who you may run into on the expo floor. We have been honored to have NFL players, television personalities, Guinness World record holders, and other celebrities in attendance.

To add to the experience, consider taking a behind-the-scenes tour of Empire's facility to catch a glimpse of the manufacturing process that utilizes many of the products shown at the expo.

One of PIP's new offerings is the Tattoos and Tailgates Concert Series, which is open to exhibitors, attendees, and the public. This year's lineup includes guest emcee and eight-time Grammy-nominated pop superstar Chris Kirkpatrick from 'N Sync, opens The Nashville Cartel, country duo Trailer Choir, triple-platinum-selling rock group Hinder, and country rocker Tyler Farr, who has three No.1 songs to his credit. The concert allows us to highlight and share with the local community the rich printing heritage in Wisconsin

while having a fun-filled evening of networking under the stars.

This year, even more companies have been asking for additional ways to expand their brands by not only exhibiting, but becoming sponsors of the Tattoos and Tailgates Concert Series. These sponsorships are popular among exhibitors that want to put their brand in front of a larger audience. For 2021, we offer unique sponsorships to promote a company's brand, such as the Official Rooftop Sponsor Party VIP Experience.

A Strong Future

"Each new event is truly focused on networking, collaboration, and education — not only [for] attendees, but all of [the] supply partners," adds Furger. "The Partners in Printing Expo evolved tremendously over the course of the last 10 years, which makes every other year seem like a new experience. The Empire team that makes this happen likely doesn't want to be in the spotlight, but their passion truly has made each event creative, educational, fun, and exciting to participate in, and 2021 does not appear to be any different. I'm proud to say that Tekra has been with the expo since the beginning of this 'small idea' and we truly look at this event as being very valuable. We now look forward to participating in the upcoming 2021 Expo as a continued Platinum sponsor."

Baskin adds, "Sun Chemical will continue to support the Partners in Printing Expo. Thanks [to] Empire for the opportunities they have provided over the years."

PIP is about more than just discovering the latest products and services within the industry — it's about networking, learning, innovating, growing together, and above all, brand building. If you want to stay ahead of the curve, then your business should consider exhibiting or attending this event. ■

If you would like more information on exhibiting at or attending Partners in Printing 2021 visit empirecreen.com/partners_in_printing.

Once Empire Screen Printing's national sales meeting with five suppliers, the Partners in Printing Expo has continued to grow to now include educational sessions, a plant tour, and different networking activities.
Courtesy of Empire Screen Printing.

