

MODERN REPROGRAPHICS

www.modrepro.com

A New Plan for the Future

shop profile



By W. ERIC MARTIN

If you need to deliver printed documents to another part of the country, you might think about finding a printer in the destination area and having them handle the job directly. After all, shouldn't the local talent be the best avenue for insuring the timely delivery of your project?

Not necessarily, says Dwayne Adamson, owner of Plan Express in Memphis, TN. No matter how close the printer is to the final destination, the documents won't land on the right desk until they're biked, couriered, or mailed out. That takes time, of course, which means that the papers probably won't reach their target until late in the day.

The ability to squeeze out that time—and reduce the cost of delivery—is behind the business model that Adamson developed for Plan Express, a

six-year-old company that transformed its operations to take advantage of advances in digital technology.

SAILING THE C'S TO SUCCESS

"We're about 180 degrees away from [the current trends in document distribution]," Adamson says, describing his company's benefits as the three C's.

The first C stands for cost savings. By setting up in Memphis—almost on top of Federal Express's main distribution center—Plan Express can hand packages off as late as midnight and have them in the client's hands the next day. "We use FedEx as our delivery boy. Because of our volume and location, we can deliver a typical set of documents in large-format the next morning for around

\$8," Adamson says. "It's hard for even a local reprographics shop with a kid in a Gremlin to deliver it for that price."

The second C is for convenience, which is what Adamson says the client gains by using Plan Express. "The client doesn't have to get his plans back by noon so that he can get them all packaged up for the FedEx guy at five o'clock," says Adamson. "He waits until he's on the way out the door, e-mails or faxes us a list of subs that he wants bid packages for, and we go to work. We work second shift to put this together for him and deliver it the next morning. It's convenient because once you get used to our system, it's something that you just

do on your way out the door at night as you go home."

Finally, there's the third C—additional control that comes from using a single source for every project. "When you use places around the country, you don't know who to call to make sure that everything's getting done," he says. "Let's face it—what leverage do you have e-mailing one set of documents to a reprographer, who that same afternoon might have one of his large local clients dump a bunch of plans on his desk and say, 'I need these today'? You're going to take a back seat."

When a client consolidates all their work at one location, they can take advantage of the efficiencies of large-format printers; Océ's in the case of Plan Express. "When an Océ starts running at capacities that are not typically obtainable by a local shop, the price drops down dramatically," says Adamson. "When you're doing jobs all over the country you can take advantage of large scale discounts." Thus he brings the argument back to cost savings.

Adamson isn't alone in thinking that his business model is a good idea. He recently scored a number of alliances with ProjectEDGE, eProPrint, constructionbidding.com, Collaborative Structures, and Bricsnet.com. "What some of these alliances have done is validate what I've been arguing," says Adamson. Moving from bricks to clicks, Adamson, whose background is in the construction industry, started Plan Express back in 1994. "I was the owner of a construction company and had the same problem most contractors do," he says. "About two in the afternoon on a big bid day, you lose half your employees. Everyone's scrambling, helping to fold plans, roll plans, type up transmittals, and

package FedEx tubes. I thought, 'Geez, this is an incredible waste of time.'"

He realized that even when you're in Milwaukee and the job's in Chicago, the plans first pass through Memphis. This got him thinking about when the pick-up time would be if his firm was located in Memphis. Research gave him an answer of midnight, assuming that he had sufficient volume, in addition to the cost savings that resulted from him cutting the trip in half. "One thing led to another," he says, "and I ended up selling my construction company and working on the Plan Express model."

Adamson describes that model as follows: "We're more than just reprographers. We'll put together a client's entire bid set, with a transmittal, bid instructions, bid form, and any introduction they might want. We do all the packaging, folding, and bills of lading, then ship it from the best place to ship something from—the airport in Memphis."

Initially, the company catered only to the retail construction industry. "Back then it was a much harder sell," says Adamson. "Contractors sent us their drawings, and because digital technology was in the process of being invented for large-format, we made copies of the drawings, sent it back to them, waited for their order, then made more copies. Once digital came on, we could scan them and wait for their orders."

"Now that modem speeds are such that you can transfer 50 megabyte files in a minute, we've made Plan Express an Internet-based company and it's really opened up our market," he continues.

Plan Express's current volume, 500-600 bid sets per day, is double what it was six months ago. Adamson says he expects to reach 1,000 packages by fall, thanks to the new alliances he's created.

This growth mirrors the company's new advertising and promotion efforts, which began in March after five years of maintaining a low profile. "We've never had a booth at a trade show. But in the last four months, I did five trade shows, some advertising, and more aggressive marketing—only because modem speeds are such that we can now transfer electronic files in a timely manner."

Even eProPrint, which typically e-mails documents to local reprographers, has made use of the Plan Express system. Not every city contains an affiliate printer, but since FedEx will deliver anything anywhere, Plan Express has become their default back-up plan.

More impressively, Adamson describes how he convinced a contractor in Los Angeles, who does work only in Los Angeles, to try his services. Not only was the price of Plan Express's printing less per square foot, but the shop could deliver a package for half the price that the contractor was paying. In addition to the monetary savings, the service also freed up the contractor's staff for more important work. "He sat back, thought about it, and said, 'I'm going to try you,'" says Adamson. "Well, he's one of my customers now. When I started extrapolating from that, I thought, 'Wait a second, why shouldn't everybody be my customer?'"

That sounds like a lofty goal, but Adamson's already made great progress toward achieving it. "When I look at a list of the top 50 contractors in the US, I can check off a dozen that are my customers," he says.

At its current rate of growth, Adamson figures Plan Express will nail down the rest by, say, November. At least that's the plan. ♦

Reprinted with permission *Modern Reprographics* August 2000