

Talent Development

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At the end of the last century, A&E unveiled a series entitled “Biography of the Millennium.” This look at the 100 most influential people of the preceding 1,000 years included historical figures you learned about in school such as Isaac Newton (#2), Charles Darwin (#4), and Christopher Columbus (#6). It also recognized current icons like Bill Gates (#41), Nelson Mandela (#81), and Steven Spielberg (#91), plus a few people whose exact contributions to society are hard to remember: Copernicus (#9), James Watt (#25), and Descartes (#32).

So why is a seven-year-old list important to you? It’s because of who A&E selected as the most influential person of the last millennium. Martin Luther (#3), William Shakespeare (#5), and Galileo (#10) ranked high, but not at the top. Instead, the folks at A&E placed Johannes Gutenberg number one.

Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press some 550 years ago expedited the spread of knowledge throughout the world. Centuries later, one might suggest, it also gave birth to the quick printing industry. Like all great inventors, Gutenberg looked at things the way they were and sought a better solution. Through trial and error and perseverance, he earned his place in history.

While you may not desire to create a world-changing event that lands you on a future “greatest” list, you do have the opportunity to improve your printing business by adopting a new mindset. Pick up any best selling business book these days and chances are the word “innovation” plays a role in the story. In fact, if Gutenberg were doing his movable type thing today, the media would likely label him not so much an inventor as an innovator.

Innovation Sensation

So what exactly is innovation? A simple definition is the implementation of creative ideas. Here is how writers at a major business magazine described the importance of innovation: “In an era when Six Sigma controls no longer guarantee competitive advantage, when outsourcing to China and India is universal, when creeping commoditization of products, services, and information hammers prices, innovation is the new currency of competition. It is the key to organic growth, the lever to widen profit margins, the Holy Grail of 21st century business.” [*Business Week*, June 19, 2006]

“Creeping commoditization of products, services, and information hammers prices...” Sound familiar? That “commoditization” word keeps popping up all over the printing industry. We’ll leave the debate of whether printing is or isn’t a commodity to others. Instead, let’s focus on the next five words in that article: “Innovation is the new currency.” For your printing business to thrive during the changing times we’re living in, you and the talent you employ must understand and be willing to make innovation a major focus.

Step by Step

As a professional business coach who focuses on the quick printing industry, I help owners just like you navigate through the challenges that stand in the way of getting customers’ projects out the door. One of the continuing themes that comes up in my work with quick printers is the need to better communicate with and involve employees in the overall vision and strategy of the business. When things are moving quickly and there are so many fires to deal with each and every day, who has time to think about the future, let alone share it with others? The answer: It needs to be you.

So how do you start changing your printing business into an innovative organization? Here are four suggestions to prepare your team for a brighter future. Dedicate yourself to implementing these and you’ll discover new opportunities, create more loyalty in your employees, and leave your competition wondering how they didn’t get the message the world changed all around them.

1. Seek fresh ideas.

Innovation isn’t a top-down effort. A 3M employee who marked passages in his Bible with torn pieces of paper came up with the idea for Post-It Notes using a failed adhesive. Ask your team members to look for new and better ways to do things—from workflow, to customer service, to marketing. Little adjustments lead to big results.

2. Envision a new way.

With your team, place a brick, pencil, or other ordinary object on a table, and see how many unordinary uses you can come up

with for it. This is a great way to open everyone's minds to creative solutions. Then, when the juices start flowing, select a specific area of your printing business, and brainstorm ways to do it better. The more suggestions you receive, the more innovative ways you'll find to improve.

3. Remove barriers.

Change is hard, and understanding why employees struggle with it is essential to your success. Fear, lack of control, and inability to see "What's in it for me?" all stand between you and achieving your goals. Be sure to share your vision, and communicate—more than once—how employees will benefit from accepting the challenge.

4. Be audacious.

Henry Ford said, "If I'd asked the consumer what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse." You can't just think like everyone else. Innovative companies like Google, Apple, and JetBlue are all willing to take big shots in hopes of creating special results. If you're comfortable being where you are, then you're destiny is already set.

Take a Chance

Interestingly, Johannes Gutenberg never enjoyed the success of his world changing invention. His financial backer ended up suing to collect the money invested over their seven year partnership. When Gutenberg couldn't repay the debt, a judge awarded the investor most of the printing equipment and the rights to the Gutenberg Bible.

While taking an innovative approach may not make you legendary, it will give you a better chance at lasting success. Engaging your employees in creative thinking and allowing them to participate in the direction of your printing business might even lead to something truly historical.

David Handler is the founder of Success Handler, LLC, and leads clients in the quick printing industry to their desired outcomes by providing coaching on strategic planning and talent development, and removing barriers in their way. Visit www.successhandler.com to learn more, or contact David at coach@successhandler.com.