Proper project planning crucial to success

BY SAM WAGNER SPECIAL TO NEWS & TECH

These days, new newspaper printing plants are few and far between. There are a number of reasons for this, many of which have been written and talked about at length over the past few years. However, there are several less-talked-about contributing factors that have also played a big part in this demise and, unfortunately, many have been self-inflicted by the industry.

In a word, inefficiency at levels that are almost unheard of in other manufacturing industries.

Across North America and other parts of the world there are examples of this: Extremely expensive production facilities were built costing tens or sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars instead of more efficient, cost-effective production plants. In addition, there were the installations of large, purpose-built machines specifically designed for running that age-old standard broadsheet product with little flexibility to do anything else. At the other end of the scale were plants filled with inexpensive single-width towers, sometimes stretching to 10, 12 or even more towers, making for a very labor-, maintenance-intensive and inefficient way to produce printed products. Often times, additional redundant and equally inefficient equipment was installed "just in case" there ever was a problem. This is not the way lean manufacturing is defined.

This mindset and these types of expenditures leads to unsustainable cost structures, making the production process too expensive and inefficient. As the newspaper economy grew tighter and competition became more intense, it became extremely difficult — in some cases, impossible — to continue. Many newspaper production installations are fast becoming the dinosaurs of our age. But although many are willing to declare this industry dead, there are still opportunities to compete and make a profit.

Simply put, business cannot continue to be done the same old way, using the same old methods. Instead, we must innovate and raise the bar to a higher level in order to achieve the kinds of efficiencies necessary in today's manufacturing environment. As with a tailor making a suit or a cobbler making shoes, one size does not fit all, and although press manufacturers would rather make and sell "standard machines it is now more important than ever for a printer to put together a system customized exactly to their needs and at the same time to be as efficient and cost effective as possible. In other words, the customer must drive the future.

Looking back

Over the past 50-plus years since offset has been used to print and produce newspapers, many things have changed, and yet the basic principle of putting ink and water on paper remains largely the same. Although incremental size changes have been made over the years to save cost, the basic formats of sectioned broadsheets and some tabloids have been around for the better part of 100 years. Presses themselves have evolved, becoming more electrical and less mechanical in nature, and with the advent of computers many functions and tasks have been automated.

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Many bells and whistles have come along with all of this technology — some good ideas and some that came and went. As with many other technical advances in our lives, most of these technologies are promoted as something you can't live without — and therein lies a basic problem. Machine manufacturers are just that — machine manufacturers — and marketing people. They are not publishers or print production people and therefore, really do not understand that side of the business. Therefore, it is critically important for the customer to be prepared to drive a new project, from the design and specification sides to implementation, including the installation, the commissioning and testing, as well as all training and ultimately moving into live production.

Set the bar

From the design and specification side, it is critical for the printer to set the bar and expectations of what they want and how they want to achieve it. Details are important here, leaving no stone unturned and taking into account things such as all possible types of products, functionality requirements, operational procedures and scheduling and manning required. Monitoring current activity and evaluating future needs is key. Equipment selections must be made carefully and methodically, keeping in mind that the latest and greatest in technology does not fit every situation.

A cost-to-benefit ratio should be done for each option and configuration. It may be much more effective to take a few additional minutes to do something instead of paying an extra $1 million for automation that is complex or difficult to use, or requires additional or expensive maintenance. Each situation is unique.

Specifically on the press side, the days of single-purpose machines are long gone. Now there are many different ways to configure a multi-purpose machine and each has it own benefits and drawbacks. There are multiple widths and circumferences such as two, three, four, five or six pages across, as well as either one-, two- or three-around the cylinder. Common size nomenclature includes 2-by-1, 3-by-1, 2-by-2, 3-by-2, 4-by-2, 5-by-2, 6-by-2 and others, such as the multi-format concept, which provide for more than one of these on the same press.

There are inline and various 90-degree press configurations, as well as unique hybrid arrangements. There is also a mix of coldset, heatset and UV technologies that have become more popular as the need for multipurpose production increasingly becomes the norm. There are a few good examples of some very efficient and cost-effective installations and there are equally as many examples of what not to do.

Ultimately, it depends on production requirements and how the printing equipment will be used. This is all the more reason not to leave the decisions up to those who are not infinitely familiar with the particular production environment and all of its demands. Also critical is the heart of the press, the control system and how the operators will interact with the press. This is such a key element and one that is still catching up with other industries. Full system integration is the exception rather than the rule, and it can make the learning process and every-day use either easier or more difficult than it should be.

It's not uncommon on a new press installation to see four or five different monitors and user interfaces instead of a single, easy-to-use interface — much like a coffee table full of remotes at home instead of a single one to simplify running electronics. Terms such as "full integration" and "presetting" are used a lot but can have very different meanings depending on the system and application.

On the implementation side, the main issue at hand is to ensure that all vendors complete everything 100 percent, no matter how difficult or time consuming it may be. Because doing work out in the field is so expensive (airfares, hotels, rental cars, etc.), a lot of focus is placed on getting done as quickly as possible to minimize the time spent on site. Unfortunately, this is in direct conflict with the customer's needs. This is especially true when it comes time for equipment set-up and testing. Although this is one of the most critical parts of a new installation, it's typically the part where time is cut short, causing the press to be put into production too early.

Once people see paper in the press, they too often assume it's ready to run — that could not be further from the truth. Be it the customer or the vendors, everyone has their reasons for wanting to ramp up the press. Many times, the installation schedule is tight or delayed and there are jobs that need to be run. Contractually, there could be milestones or payments linked to this event — and vendors like to get paid. There could also be an old press or building that needs to be decommissioned. The list goes on and on, but the bad news is, not completing a full test program and the remaining details of the installation usually means living with problems for months and even years. And fixing these during production can be difficult and sometimes impossible. It can also be quite expensive when delays or missed deliveries happen because of system deficiencies.

Many printers aren't aware that the first time all the equipment is actually hooked together and run as a single system is in their plant. Although single components are usually tested in the factory, because of the extensive and complex integration between components, the process on site is paramount — no exceptions. Without getting the machine 100 percent, it cannot perform the way it was designed to perform, nor can it generate the calculated return on investment.

It also sometimes makes sorting out why problems occur very difficult. Is it the machine or the people? How many times have you heard or wondered that? Or, is it just the dreaded "learning curve?" No matter how advanced or expensive, there should never be a one- or two-year learning curve on any new machine. If there is, then it's just too complex. After all, printers are printers, not rocket scientists. Of course, sometimes this is just a convenient way to explain away problems and is all the more reason to complete a full testing and training program.

People and training

It is ultimately people that have to make this work, which makes them a crucial part of the process. First, there must be a clear understanding of the type and number of people that will be required. With new technology comes new requirements. In most cases, less manual labor and more electrical and system control type experience is needed.

Including everyone early on to familiarize them with the new processes that are being looked at and evaluated is a critical first step. Then comes the hands-on training. The vendors may do part of this training in their factories and sometimes people can be sent to other installations with similar equipment. But the best possible training is on your equipment as it is being installed in your facility. Putting a key group of people together and making them a part of the installation and testing team from beginning to end will provide extensive benefits for many years to come. ▲

Sam Wagner is president of Sarasota, Fla.-based newspaper consultancy Web Offset Services. He can be reached at weboffsetservice@aol.com