



TreVista Dimensional Graphics. Courtesy of Romo Durable Graphics.

Who Are You, Really?

One company's journey through convergence

Who are you? By the time The Who put that question to music in 1978, it had been a tumultuous decade for America. The end of the Vietnam War, the resignation of President Richard Nixon, high inflation, interest rates and gas shortages made everyday life anything but normal.

Amidst the unrest (but before The Who's classic song), the bicentennial celebrations of 1976 gave us a beacon of hope. If we could celebrate nothing else, we Americans had freedom and liberty. And that was enough to weather any storm.

The bicentennial meant so much because we humans like stability. Certainty means we can invest money to save for our kid's college. It gives us the confidence to take risks, knowing failure won't bring catastrophe. Stability acts like an anchor. Rough water may rattle the boat; the mooring makes sure it holds fast.

Organizations are nothing but a collection of people, tied together with a common mission. The more compelling the mission, the more people believe in it.

Leaders face a steep challenge developing visions compelling enough to resonate through centuries. With technology driving change as fast as it is, creating anything that will last beyond five years may seem a tall task. Let's look back on the past few decades to see what we can learn from our recent history.

The '90s Changed Everything

The early 1990s unleashed a tidal wave of change facing the screen printing industry. The computer spawned a digital revolution, starting with artwork. Previously done by hand, by artists, pre-press entered the Mac world. Most shops outsourced film output. In fact, film output companies played an important role in the industry. They were among the first to succumb to the digital revolution, and few exist today.

SGIA memorialized the changing print world by changing its name from Screen Printing Association International to "Screen Printing and Graphic Imaging Association" in the mid-1990s. What had

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By Jonathan Darling, President, Romo Durable Graphics



TreVista Dimensional Graphics and pressure-sensitive decal. Courtesy of Romo Durable Graphics.

They combined their last names and formed a company called Romo Screen Printing that, by default, served its local market. Manual artwork, done freehand by artists, made it difficult to do business over a distance. They knew screen printing, and that's what they sold. Anything that fit the economies of screen printing proved fair game as potential business.

Thus, the company's early clients reflected the general economic environment in the Green Bay, Wis., area. Romo screen printed grocery store signs, decals for trucks and even the original Green Bay Packers logo. Having done everything from locker room signage to bumper stickers for the Packers, the "G" was merely a bumper sticker for the side of the helmet. It's a safe bet the green and gold flowing through those screens would be the most famous "pulls" in the history of our company.

It's interesting to note that the screen printing segment wasn't alone in the print industry to define itself by process. In the early '70s, the Green Bay Press Gazette took an interest in outdoor advertising. They saw the billboard market as an expansion opportunity to do "outdoor classifieds." Their strategy dictated that they acquire the printing technology to do so. At the time, that meant large-format screen printing. So, they bought Romo.

What may seem illogical now made perfect sense at the time. The Press Gazette saw itself as a printing company. Good articles meant you could print more papers. It's no wonder newspaper companies had such a hard time finding their way in the digital world. They were printing companies.

But why were customers really buying their paper? Content.

been a screen print organization expanded the tent to digital output. SGIA then went one step further in 2003, keeping the initials, but changing the name to what we know now as the Specialty Graphic Imaging Association

While the association recognized broader changes, many within it misunderstood the digital impact. Contributors to the SGIA Journal commonly focused on topics like, "How digital can enhance your workflow." Most people missed the fundamental changes occurring in the market because of it. This was easy to do.

Most Companies in the Industry Were Very Much Like Ours

Romo Durable Graphics was founded by two artists, Les Rose and Bill Motre.

Here's the Lesson

When you define your mission merely by the manner in which you produce your products, what is that shelf life? As long as it takes someone to find a better way to deliver the same products. Usually, that disruption comes from outside the industry.

Forgive a quick transgression, but if you were making typewriters in the '70s, what kept you up at night? You were probably figuring out ways to make the keys not stick. Or white outs to correct mistakes. Or improve portability. Sounds reasonable.

And then what comes along? Computers, followed shortly by word processing software. This combination obviously took out typewriters, but it didn't just affect that industry. How about

those who used it? Soon, secretaries went from a necessity to a luxury. A little while later, you could send a letter electronically instead of mailing it. It's fair to say that impacted the post office. Virtually every business on the planet felt the impact, good and bad. Entirely new markets emerged from the rubble.

You may chuckle looking back at those who might have referred to computers and word processing as something akin to "workflow improvement." Yet some of our best and brightest have fallen into the same trap:

- "Everything that can be invented, has been invented." – Charles Duell, Patent Commissioner, 1899
- "Movies are a fad. Audiences want to see live actors on stage." – Charlie Chaplin
- "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is way off." – Decca Recording Company turning down the Beatles, 1962
- "We will never make a 32-bit operating system." – Bill Gates, Founder, Microsoft, 1989

Funny, right? But remember, every one of these came from experts, the top people in the field, from all segments of society. And they no doubt held the prevailing opinion at the time.

That's why it's so important to look beyond our corner of the world. Disruptive change can come from anywhere. We don't know where it will come from, but I can confidently predict we're not going to find it sitting in our offices.

Like virtually every company in our community, when I joined my father Fred (a former SGIA Chair) at Romo in the mid-'90s, the company faced seismic change. Suddenly artwork could travel around the world in a matter of seconds. Digital output enhanced production options; it sometimes changed them altogether. Local customers had more supply choices, driving specialization. Customers demanding more competence made it difficult to be great in a variety of markets.

Who Were We?

Were we a screen printing company? Were we a one-stop shop that did all types of printing? Were we a quick print?

Without fully understanding it at the time, we were looking to build an organization about something more transcendent than being a "screen and digital" company. We were searching for identity.

We started thinking through what it really was we were doing for customers (mostly original equipment manufacturers (OEMs)). What did they value? In going

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Pressure-sensitive decal. Courtesy of Romo Durable Graphics.

Hundreds of years from now, humans will still love lasting impressions. Lines will still form to see the Mona Lisa. People across the world will travel to see the Sistine Chapel.

back through our history, we discovered that the lifeblood of the company had always been producing beautiful artwork that endured, regardless of how it was created. We weren't a "wide-format this" or "narrow-web that." Customers loved the graphics. They didn't care how we made it.

We Were All About Durable Graphics

This revelation unveiled itself over several years. We played around with it, shaped it and tried a variety of odd ideas. Many of those ideas failed, but we found they unleashed creativity. Instead of thinking about foisting a capability on the market, we started dreaming about what we could create that might excite the customer, and then we'd figure out how to make it. Outside in, rather than inside out.

To this day, we avoid describing ourselves as a "printing company." It implies process, and process constrains thinking. Are we a printing company? Of course. But who knows what they may look like in the future? And who knows what technology may come along that allows us to deliver durable artwork in different ways? I certainly don't.

But I do know one thing: Hundreds of years from now, humans will still love lasting impressions. Lines will still form to see the Mona Lisa. People across the world will travel to see the Sistine Chapel. Artists today use tools far beyond the imagination of Michelangelo and Van Gogh, yet they

still create compelling images that will last well into the future. That doesn't mean the oil and brush will disappear. (Let's hope not!) But isn't it wonderful to look at the new ways as additive to our hopes and dreams, rather than subtractive?

It is in this spirit that I believe SGIA took the bold step to unite many areas of the imaging world into our showcase event. Congratulations, SGIA! You're leading us on a bold new path, while honoring what we do decorating the world with beautiful images.

Welcome to the world of PRINTING United!

Jonathan Darling joined Romo Durable Graphics in 1994 after stints with Ernst & Young consulting, Ford Motor Company and commodity trading at the Chicago Board of Trade. Jonathan gained a finance and engineering education at Purdue University and returned "home" for his MBA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Jonathan serves as President and chief troublemaker, taking the reins from his father Fred, who retired in 2007. The family acquired Romo in 1983. Romo innovates, designs, engineers and produces durable graphics that bring new and better tomorrows for its OEM client base. Romo has been a proud, active SGIA member since its inception in 1953. In his off time, Jonathan enjoys his family, golf, fishing, perfecting the art of ridiculously spicy bloody marys, and bratwurst. Jonathan aspires to be a wedding-speech-giver-for-hire in his next life.