

# PRINTING United Digital Experience's Key Takeaways

The printing industry reunited virtually to reset and relaunch for the future.



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Last year marked a pivotal milestone for PRINTING United Alliance with the debut of PRINTING United that brought all segments of the printing industry together in Dallas. Ready to follow up this event's success, the association was preparing for the 2020 iteration in Atlanta when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, turning the world of trade shows — and the world in general — upside down. Determined to transition the experience from under one roof to onto one platform, the association launched the PRINTING United Digital Experience (Oct. 26-Nov. 12).

The virtual event featured 14 days — each focused on different printing segments and technologies — packed with keynotes, educational sessions, panel presentations, and product demonstrations with renowned industry analysts, print service providers (PSPs), and OEMs and suppliers. All 140-plus sessions and product

demonstrations will remain accessible at [digital.printingunited.com](https://digital.printingunited.com) through Jan. 31, 2021. While the event covered a full scope of topics integral to today's printing businesses, these are just a few of the conversations that resonated throughout.

## Keynotes Lay a Business Foundation

The majority of the days kicked off with members of the NAPCO Research/PRINTING United Alliance team — Nathan Safran, VP, research; Lisa Cross, principal analyst; and Andy Paparozzi, chief economist, delivering key insights from research specific to each day's covered segment. These also included industry outlooks and analysis from the Alliance's COVID-19 Print Business Indicators Research Reports.

Following these introductory sessions were keynotes covering key topics and trends relevant to the respective graphics and sign, apparel,

commercial, packaging, digital textile, industrial/functional, in-plant, workflow and software, and mailing and fulfillment days.

And while many focused on opportunities and tips for growing and sustaining successful businesses, some focused on how to build a business.

For the Apparel – Screen/Decoration day, Marshall Atkinson, owner, Marshall Atkinson Consulting and ShirtLab shared how to establish a successful screen printing operation today by examining all facets of a business: purpose, cash flow and sales, skill, technology, processes, people, and staying on top of change.

It starts, he said, with a business plan that identifies ideal customers and their problems, how the business will help them, and determining the right sales channels.

Identifying the right customer is also a matter of looking at the bottom line and profit. "How can we identify our customers so we can work half as



hard for twice as much?” asked Atkinson, adding that this means not doing business with just anyone, but the people who matter, who like what the business does, and will give it what it’s asking for in pricing.

He additionally stressed the importance of continual learning. “You never know what you’re going to find or uncover that’s going to make a big impact on your business,” he said. “Don’t think you’re stuck where you are; you just haven’t learned the answer yet.”

Similarly delving into this topic was Dave Meleo, founder of StepRepeat.com, whose Digital Textile day keynote was a firsthand account of building his business.

Coming from a commercial business where one client was responsible for 30% to 40% of the work, Meleo said he targeted a mix of smaller clients, specifically B2B companies, instead of one or two larger customers.

Reaching his goal of producing products that clients could set up themselves — that looked like they hired professionals to do so — took many years, he shared, and wasn’t without its challenges. One of his earlier lessons was adding hardware or stands to go with the banners he created, having lost a few potential clients without this offering. Now, hardware accounts for a significant part of the company’s revenue stream, and he suggested to others to keep at least one to two months of hardware inventory in stock at any given time.

Meleo also emphasized the importance of taking time to understand equipment and when it’s the right time to make those investments. “You either go big or you go home,” he said. “If you have the business for it, it’s worth it. My biggest mistakes in this industry, honestly, were not spending enough money on equipment. Trying to save money ultimately ended up costing money.”

## Convergence

While Meleo discussed the transition from one industry to another, many sessions throughout the Digital Experience spoke to how businesses have added new services outside of their traditional scope, whether a strategic move prior to the pandemic, or the result of addressing needs at this time.

One panel session in particular, on the Industrial day, featured printers sharing how their businesses entered the industrial space. One of those participants was James Lee, director of Innovation Solutions Group, Jones Healthcare Group. His company, a package producer for a range of pharmaceutical companies, among others, got into industrial printing eight years ago through printed electronics.

With the understanding that packages preserve, protect, and provide information, Lee and his team wanted to make its packaging smart, expanding its feature set to provide track and trace information, and ▶

On the second day dedicated to the wide-format market, Ryan McAbee (right), director, Production Workflow, Keypoint Intelligence, and Eric Zimmerman, director, Wide-Format, Keypoint Intelligence, led the session “Building a Manufacturing Mindset.”



engaging consumers and patients in a more dynamic way. Lee also noted that many of the products they make packages for are very complicated and require lots of instructional use.

So, they learned more about printed electronics, and printing the components into the packages themselves, rather than embedding a component built elsewhere, or with another technology. With its unfamiliarity in designing electronic products, and lack of materials and equipment to facilitate or manufacture electronics, the company joined a Canadian consortium. However, Lee noted they brought something to the table with their knowledge on how to “depose materials onto the substrate” (i.e., “printing”), how to manufacture packaging at high speeds and volumes, and knowing there was a market for this type of combined product that wasn’t yet being met.

The company started small, with a single silver-printed circuit on plastic, and then moved up to a more complex version, figuring out how to scale it up and how to print it all on paper instead of plastic. It took a lot of trial and error, producing prototypes, and modifying a press to better handle the substrates and necessary reactive inks, but by 2018, Lee said they had a working blister pack for the pharmaceutical industry with the electronics printed right into the final design.

### **Business Highs and Lows During a Pandemic**

Whether it was the specified topic,

or briefly addressed, COVID-19’s impact on businesses was a common discussion across industries during the virtual event.

In the in-plant day keynote, Consultant Howie Fenton advised on how in-plants, and businesses in general, can thrive during and after the pandemic. One tip, he said, is, “Think like you’re a startup.” In other words, focus on building sales, which can be started with in-plants creating a list of customers from the past three years that shows who has used their services the most and the least. Fenton said to then create a marketing campaign to engage the latter group to raise awareness of what the operation can offer, adding how pivotal sample books and videos can be in promoting capabilities.

When it comes to rebuilding after COVID-19, he advised in-plants to look at projects that might have been put on the back burner, and to use this time to focus on training staff on color management and equipment, as manufacturers can train operators via video calls.

Fenton also noted the importance of cross-training, which is all-the-more essential during COVID-19 so that multiple operators can run each piece of equipment in the event someone gets sick.

During the Apparel – Screen/ Decoration day, three screen printers — Justin Lawrence, owner, Oklahoma Shirt Company; Amy Baker, owner, Threadbare Print House; and Rich Santo, CEO, Culture Studio — shared how they and their teams

pivoted to navigate the pandemic.

Threadbare Print House primarily prints for restaurants, breweries, and schools — industries all significantly impacted by COVID-19. In addition to crediting her community and the local small businesses supporting one another, Baker shared the three areas currently helping her business are masks, online stores — which they have increased from two to 100 during COVID — and the cannabis industry.

The majority of Lawrence’s business is custom screen printing, while a third is attributed to subscription based-products, and a small amount to retail. Emphasizing how the pandemic is a time for businesses to improve processes, or start a new grind or hustle, he said though his business ultimately bounced back to compensate for its lull earlier in the pandemic, it wasn’t an easy road. When entering the mask market, he learned the hard lesson of “don’t sell something unless it’s in your hand.”

Culture Studio’s primary niche is retail and tour merchandise for music. Set for what he thought would be a complete disaster, Santo said masks pushed the shop through March and April, and shared the business has actually had growth months in August and September from 2019 because all of its artists have been able to sell on e-commerce or at retail. He also shared that the business has invested in \$500,000 worth of equipment in the last month.

And his operation is not alone in making a capital investment, as the day prior — Graphics/Wide-Format – Hardware and Consumables day — featured a panel on purchasing equipment amid the pandemic. Among the participants was John Dumouchel, president, Artcraft, who had been looking into T-shirt equipment prior to the pandemic, even purchasing and testing some smaller solutions.

But he pivoted when COVID-19 hit after a client approached him with a large-scale job that would require installing additional wide-format presses. For Dumouchel, it means he is now “ready and prepared” for that side of the business to explode, ▶

## Despite a push toward automation, 28% of surveyed graphics and wide-format printers indicated being fully manual in their systems.

and continue to build on it and new services once business starts picking back up.

He also noted how, with less volume coming through, the shop has used this time to change all its systems, such as the OS the shop runs on and the Web-to-print systems.

“If anything, COVID gave us time to reevaluate everything and see what we need,” said Dumouchel. “If we’re going to be the company we want to be in a few years, now is the time to fix it. I haven’t worked this hard in 15 years, but the creativeness is fun, and I have lots of optimism for the future. ... I’m really happy with what we did and what we can accomplish, and I can see future plans for products we are going to offer.”

But amid the success stories, there are also the difficult realities of COVID-19’s impact, as shared by Marco Boer, VP, IT Strategies, while presenting the Commercial – Digital Inkjet day keynote.

“COVID ... is accelerating the shift away from offset to digital by at least two years,” he said. “In other words, all of a sudden we’ve accelerated that decline [of offset] much faster than the trajectory that we were on.”

This is due to shifting behaviors and the dramatic change in how people buy print as a result of the pandemic. According to Boer, people have been using up the printed materials they had been storing, ordering only small amounts when they need more, while reassessing their need for printing. The result of all this, he said, will be a future marked by very short print runs and an expected 30% to 40% decline in offset pages this year.

Boer also said he expected to see a significant decline in overall volumes that will not go back to where they were in 2019 while predicting that between 2019 and 2024, the total

printed pages will drop 44%. “Many of these print providers aren’t going to survive,” he said — as many as 30% of them — and those that do, he noted will find themselves with 18% fewer overall pages to print, based on shrinking demand.

As a result, he said PSPs will need to prepare for increased short runs. Automation will be essential for reducing setup times and allowing fewer workers to handle the work, the latter of which he indicated is also to be expected.

### Sustainability

It’s difficult to discuss printing businesses’ operations without touching on sustainability. As Debbie McKeegan, CEO, TexIntel, shared in the Apparel – Direct-to-Garment/ Direct-to-Substrate day keynote on how sustainability is driving the next generation of fast fashion, 62% of consumers prefer to buy sustainable products. And with the current global population of 7 billion expected to increase to 9 billion by 2023, McKeegan said this means more consumers for the industry and growing affluence, thus increasing fashion production.

To become more sustainable, she noted, is a matter of realigning and restructuring a supply chain that has long been fragmented as fashion houses offshore large product volumes that can take three to four months to reach stores. By this time, consumers have likely changed their minds and are onto the next trend, resulting in product sold at discount or ultimately ending up in landfills.

One key for brands bringing their production closer to the consumer McKeegan said is analyzing the amount of consumer data from e-commerce, merchandising, and automated workflows within the retail sector, “to make sure we design

create, print, and manufacture the products we need in store.” This is especially important as consumers increasingly want personalization and as e-commerce has rapidly accelerated amid the pandemic.

Sustainability was also a topic of discussion during a Packaging – Folding Carton and Corrugated day panel on opportunities in paperboard packaging. The participants, Kerry Brown, VP of operations for Curtis Packaging; Hilda Murray, executive VP and co-owner of TPC Printing & Packaging; and Justin Stacey, VP of e-commerce solutions for Fantastapack, shared how sustainable initiatives are at the forefront of their businesses.

Brown shared how Curtis Packaging, a folding carton printer and converter, ensures it is sustainably sourcing all of its paperboard and reducing energy consumption through alternative solutions. While being largely powered by wind energy bought off the grid, the company utilizes solar power to produce 40% of its electricity on-site.

With brand and consumer demands for less plastic packaging, Murray said folding carton company TPC Printing & Packaging is providing different solutions to reduce plastic use, including substituting plastic trays with molded pulp trays.

“Any trade show that I’ve been to, it is all about greener sustainability,” she said. “And it’s sticking now. It was not sticking 10 years ago. The younger generation is absolutely dedicated to getting rid of plastic and that’s where we’re trying to devote our efforts.”

In addition to using water-based inks, Fantastapack, an e-commerce platform for corrugated packaging, has reduced its carbon footprint by sourcing corrugated material from a plant located just three miles away. Stacey also shared that for every order it receives, the company donates to One Tree Planted, a nonprofit that supports the planting of trees globally.

### Accelerating E-Commerce

Not surprisingly, a prominent topic

throughout the Digital Experience was e-commerce, an area that has accelerated during the pandemic. A session on the Workflow and Software day had panelists discussing this accelerating shift and the value they've found with their e-commerce services, which included Nelson James, president, Signs.com.

"Companies that know what they're looking for are purchasing more and more online," he said. "It's fast, it's incredibly convenient, and we're all continuing to improve that experience and make it even better than it is right now."

Signs.com offers an online portal with design tools and access to 25 designers, and next-business-day production. "You order by 5 p.m. Eastern time, and we will produce and ship 95% of our products the next day," he said.

While online storefronts are becoming a significant revenue stream for PSPs and will cause a dramatic reduction in face-to-face interactions and consultative selling, James said there is still value in these interactions in certain projects, such as those requiring professional installation.

Touching further on the subject were a group of panelists on the Direct-to-Garment/Direct-to-Substrate day discussing the rise of e-commerce for apparel printing.

Chillybears Owner Ted Pidcock shared how his triangular business model has helped his company

during the pandemic. Its three revenue streams include original custom that has morphed into supporting e-commerce for organizations, and its Beantown resort/souvenir apparel and Teddy the Dog apparel storefronts.

It is the latter's sales that have helped balance out the potential losses in the other two streams. He also credited how the business has positioned itself as a full-service partner for organizations. "We pushed hard to not just be a decorator, but to be a full solution or partners with them. And that has paid off in spades," he said. "We're not up much, but our bottom line is extremely healthy because it's now much more driven by our retail of apparel online."

Chris Bernat, CRO and partner, Vapor Apparel, said, "If you don't have the ability to take the same product and stick it in three or four marketplaces simultaneously, your model's not as strong as it could be." Vapor Apparel, which started as a blanks manufacturer for sublimation printing, began selling on Amazon five years ago. Touted by consumers as a sun protection brand, it also does full package business for major brands using its own garments and owns several vertical brands. During COVID, Bernat said he's watched its e-commerce partners go through the roof, in addition to its tremendous activity on Amazon.

## PRINTING United Digital Experience By the Numbers

**8,200+ Registrants**

**108 Countries**

**5,700 Companies**

**100,000+ Page Views (and Counting)**

**7,500+ Hours of Videos Viewed (and Counting)**

While there is more complication as a blanks brand, Bernat said his company's biggest challenge in terms of e-commerce and software has been ensuring the inventory is accurate on all its marketplaces at the same time. "That when you sell a shirt on Amazon, it's in real-time deducted from your inventory, so that when somebody else goes to order it, it's already allocated," he said.

### Increasing Automation and Efficiency

Automating and improving efficiencies throughout the production process remains a pertinent topic amid evolving technologies. On the ▶

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**Dave Meleo, founder of StepRepeat.com, opened the final day of the event with a keynote session taking a closer look at how he built his digital textile business, and the challenges he faced along the way that other shops can learn from.**



Commercial – Offset day, a group of PSPs discussed how they’ve profited through automation.

When it comes to where to automate, the group was in agreement on setup and job transitions being among the most critical. “Plate hanging, striking register, bringing color in — that’s where we see we make the biggest impact by running automated,” said Kevin Heslin, president, Seaway Printing. “Typically, 80-85% of our makereadies will be under two minutes (50 sheets of paper).”

Charlie Cox, COO, Wallace Carlson Printing, spoke to how replacing three conventional presses with one automated press made his operation

much more efficient. “In the old model we thought we were fast; we weren’t. Our throughput increased over 20% within the first 12-14 months,” he said.

However, integrating automated technology does not mean a seamless process all-around. Heslin and Cox shared the resulting bottlenecks occurring in their binding and finishing departments, while the latter also shared square footage is a challenge due to expanding into new markets.

Despite those potential hiccups, the panelists were in agreement as to the benefits from a staffing standpoint. While producing better product more consistently, Heslin shared how it’s easier and quicker to train on automated equipment, which is helpful with the millennial workforce that can change jobs more frequently.

“It’s an exciting time for our industry because you see what’s coming on the automation and software side,” Cox added.

The Graphics/Wide-Format – Finishing and Workflow day keynote, delivered by Ryan McAbee, director, Production Workflow, and Eric Zimmerman, director, Wide-Format, Keypoint Intelligence, touched on why wide-format graphics producers need to shift to more of a manufacturing mindset.

Despite a push toward automation, McAbee said that 28% of surveyed graphics and wide-format printers indicated being fully manual in their systems.

Another 21% are “mostly manual,” and just 5% are “fully automated,” with another 14% reporting they are “mostly automated.” If shops are looking to create a competitive advantage and add new opportunities in different print segments, closing this gap is going to be essential in the coming years.

To achieve this, McAbee advised PSPs to evaluate their top three applications, since there will be differences based on the type of work produced. “Literally walk those through each step, from the point that you get the information from your customer, until you are actually shipping it, or delivering it, or whatever the destination is for that particular product,” he said. “Document the ‘People, Processes, and Technology’ that are being used, and see if there are any process loops, or exceptions that have to occur where it goes two steps forward and two steps back. You want to document those too, because those are often where your bottlenecks lie.”

He noted that shops should pay attention to each step of the entire chain between job on-boarding, business and information management, process management, production, and logistics. Some workflow and finishing advancements that can improve any or all of these areas include nesting and ganging automation, intelligent finishing automation solutions that talk to the workflow software and provide continuous feedback, production dashboards, and mobile access.

These conversations merely scratch the surface of what the PRINTING United’s 140-plus sessions and demonstrations covered. PRINTING United Alliance thanks the event’s daily sponsors, exhibitors, speakers, panelists, and attendees for a successful virtual event. Catch up now through January at [digital.printingunited.com](http://digital.printingunited.com) and save the date for PRINTING United 2021, currently scheduled for Oct. 6-8 at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla. ■

*Lauren Seanson has been the Managing Editor for the PRINTING United Journal since November 2017 and has worked in publications for more than 10 years.*

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