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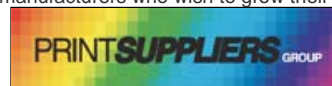


Print Suppliers Group Continues to Make Inroads

The ability to combine purchasing power, share technical knowledge and compete for and service national accounts gives Print Suppliers Group the opportunity to make gains in the marketplace.

**By David Savastano
Editor**

There are plenty of barriers for small- and medium-sized offset ink manufacturers who wish to grow their businesses and compete for national accounts. The ability to get favorable pricing from suppliers and have technical service readily available throughout North America for the largest printers is a serious challenge for a regional company, regardless of the quality of its ink.



However, a group of entrepreneurial ink manufacturers are working together to surmount these obstacles. The Print Suppliers Group (PSG), a consortium of 14 regional ink manufacturers and distributors originally formed with an eye toward combining purchasing power, is now making inroads into some national accounts.

"Everybody complains about Wal-Mart, and that it will ruin small business, but every town has an Ace or True Value," noted Bill Curtin, Press Color president and first president of PSG. "If we want to compete in the ink industry, we have to do something about it."

With a combined \$60 million in sales and a presence throughout the U.S. and Canada, PSG has the potential to be a force within the printing ink industry.

Forming Print Suppliers Group

PSG's formation in late 2001 was spurred by a group of K&E suppliers who wanted to share technical advances and improve their negotiating leverage. Their model was the Independent Carton Group (ICG), a consortium of 21 independent folding carton and litho-laminate packaging companies who combined their purchasing to gain leverage as well as ensure supply in case of a disaster at one of the member's plants.

For the K+E suppliers, negotiating together with K+E and other suppliers meant getting a better price.

"We had seen the ICG, and Peter Reissig of Pertech said we should do the same," said Dennis Curtin, PSG president and vice president of Press Color, Inc. "We started making national deals and saved some money, but we realized there was much more we could accomplish."

"For us, it is a competitive advantage in purchasing, which puts us in a better position to compete for larger accounts," added Doug Stanley, president of American Printing Ink.

The idea that a group of smaller ink companies could band together is an appealing one to these manufacturers. PSG allows these companies to have a more national presence, while still maintaining the local levels of service that customers seek.

"The big ink manufacturers service the large accounts well, while our bread and butter is the small- and medium-sized accounts," Dennis Curtin said. "And some major ones too."

The PSG has enjoyed success, with sales and membership on the rise.

"Our group is growing pretty well," said Marlon Tusche, vice president of sales and marketing for Pertech Printing Inks. "Our new members are adding more buying power and knowledge, plus they are all good people."

"We've been doing really well," said Jim Stanley, CEO of American Printing Ink. "The Print Suppliers Group gives us a lot of freedom. None of our companies are exactly the same."

PSG has added four new members in the past six months, including Great Western Ink, a sheetfed ink specialist headquartered in Portland, OR and concentrated in the Pacific Northwest. For Keith Voigt, president of Great Western Ink and PSG's secretary, the group's potential was a major attraction for joining.

"When I looked into the group, I saw that it has large potential," Mr. Voigt said. "There is potential as a purchasing consortium, as it has a combined \$60 million in sales. There is also the potential for national sales as well as sharing knowledge. Our members want to go after national accounts, which is an intriguing idea."

Shared technology is an additional benefit. By sharing technological advances, PSG members have developed new generations of environmentally preferred ink systems that allow printers to use less ink with sharper dot and quicker startup.

"It's nice to have a group of ink companies sharing information," said Jim Stanley. "It's a vast library of knowledge."

"Knowledge sharing incorporates much, including cost comparisons, applications sharing and troubleshooting guides," Mr. Voigt added.

With its goal to drive growth based on technology and value, PSG offers the industry supplies and systems for flexo, sheetfed, digital and total print support.

"Our products cover the entire gamut of ink, blankets and fountain solutions," Jim Stanley said. "With a complete product line, it gives us a lot more clout. There's nothing we can't supply."

"Sometimes an opportunity comes up, whether it is for liquid inks, blankets or chemistry, and we'd rather buy from our partners," Mr. Tusche said. "If we can't purchase from our partners, we still have our combined buying power."

One of the keys to PSG is that members aren't overlapping their territories.

"The PSG makes sense for us, as we are smaller companies in different regions, all of whom focus on quality and service," said John Toigo, president, Grand Rapids Printing Ink and vice president of PSG. "We want to be strategic as to who we add and where they are located, and who can add value to our group. We're getting excellent coverage."

"Our focus is ink, but everyone has another piece; for example, a few of our member companies and ourselves are blanket converters, while Press Color has flexo inks," Mr. Toigo added. "It rounds out our product line."

Dennis Curtin mentioned one example where an important national printer asked Press Color for a sample.

"We sent them the ink, and then gave the account to American Printing Ink," he said. "People need local service, and for us, this is a win-win situation."

"There is very little competition among the group, and we are trying not to add members who would be in direct competition," Mr. Voigt added. "It's laid out to get national coverage."

The Future for Print Suppliers Group

The Print Suppliers Group has come a long way in the past seven years. The ink industry is constantly changing, and PSG has seen some changes within its own operations. For example, K&E was merged into Flint Group. For the companies within PSG that distribute K&E products, that change has been a positive one.

"We're excited to have Flint Group come into the picture," Dennis Curtin said.

"Being able to work with Flint will be a very big advantage for us," Bill Curtin added. "They have been very encouraging."

As for its national aspirations, Dennis Curtin expects the PSG brand to compete for more national accounts, and he noted that there are still regions available.

"My main goal is to launch the national brand with the Print Suppliers Group logo," he said. "We all need a competitive edge and a national presence, which will allow us to serve customers with multiple locations."

Atlas Graphic Supply, Brunner Consultants and ESI Technology Advisors were the new members joining PSG along with Great Western Ink. Atlas Graphic Supply extends PSG's reach more solidly in Canada with its location in Markham, Ontario. Brunner Consultants of Miami adds strength to PSG's presence in Florida and the southeast, while ESI adds to the company's presence in the midwest.

"We have a few companies contacting us every quarter," said Mr. Toigo.

"Our next step is to further develop a more cohesive organization, which will allow us to secure some national accounts," Mr. Tusche said.

While the PSG is primarily focused on offset inks, Press Color has successfully moved into the fluid ink market. Dennis Curtin sees an opportunity for the organization to make inroads into liquid inks.

"I would like to have some new members come in on the liquid ink side," Dennis Curtin said. "I've been getting into the water-based side of the business, and having more companies join would allow all of us to buy raw materials better."

Ultimately, PSG will continue to make inroads in the ink industry.

"This year, we are trying to define everybody's priorities," Mr. Voigt said. "We are gaining a lot of momentum, from the previous focus on K&E to more of an ink company owner's group. I'm happy with it so far. We have a pretty powerful combination of younger and older ink entrepreneurs."

"We all can see there is value to what we do, and we're excited about the brand," Dennis Curtin said.

"We're all entrepreneurs and have a great deal of pride in what we do," Bill Curtin said.

"It's amazing how well this has come together," Jim Stanley concluded. "It is just like family. This is a great idea for independent ink companies. We would not be where we are today, and I see this only getting better."

Current PSG Members

American Printing Ink Co. - Chattanooga, TN
Atlas Graphic Supply Inc. - Markham, Ontario
Brunner Consultants - Miami, FL
Columbus Printing Inks - Columbus, OH
ESI Technology Advisors - Indianapolis, IN
Farbotech - La Verne, CA
Grand Rapids Printing Ink - Grand Rapids, MI
Graphic Ink Company - Salt Lake City, UT
Great Western Ink - Portland, OR
Mallard Ink Company Inc. - St. Anthony, MN and Lincoln, NE
Miller Cooper Company - Merriam, KS
Ohio Valley Ink & Blanket - Covington, KY
**Pertech - Elizabeth, NJ; Hartford, CT; Pittsburgh, PA; Buffalo, Rochester and
Commack, NY**
Press Color, Inc. - Milwaukee and Appleton, WI