

Case Study

Denver Communications Provider ‘Thinking Big’

By **Patrick Kennell**

It's tough to fathom any positive residual effects stemming from the current market malaise. But with a whiff of optimism and some foresight in tow, the possibility of betterment does exist. And the proof is in the niche.

One company that has clearly found its market niche is Think Big Solutions (TBS), a Denver-area direct marketing print and communications provider. Over the past several years, TBS has developed a solution to help franchise companies and multi-location operations to economically manage their brands. Additionally, the solution accommodates individual sales offices and store owners with the tools to create and launch one-to-one marketing campaigns.

TBS was founded in 1998, as a primarily large-format graphic outfit. But as the years passed, Shawn Allison, founder and president, began to explore opportunities to expand TBS by way of diversifying its services. His exploration led him to the plight of the corporate marketing department and the troubles that lay therein. Corporate marketing departments face several daunting challenges when dealing with franchisees:

1. Inadequate Protection of Corporate Brand. Franchisees are creating their own campaigns and marketing materials that fail to reflect the corporate brand. There are few stopgaps in place to effectively manage the creative process. Thus, marketing materials are often inconsistent and brand integrity is compromised.
2. Expanding Marketing Costs. Costs for printing marketing materials are rising precipitously, mostly due to franchisees paying premium prices for individual short-run projects. This makes it nearly impossible for purchasing to take advantage of any economies of scale.
3. Time-consuming Manual Workflow Processes. Corporate marketing departments are often placed in charge of an unmanageable amount of individual and customized design and print requests annually. The process for branded collateral often overwhelms the department.

The Solution:

TBS implemented an easy-to-use, individualized Web2Print system. The TBS system delivers a complete online solution, enabling franchisees to select from pre-approved templates to create campaigns, business cards, store signage, and other marketing materials. In addition to seamless brand conformation, TBS's system facilitates waste reduction, cost reduction, and continuous process improvement.

“What our system does is it gives local flexibility,” said Allison. “These are smart business people who know what’s going on in their local market. You need to be able to give them the flexibility to be able to launch their own campaigns to address marketing needs. But corporate still needs the ability to manage the brand properly so that ‘rogues’ don’t compromise the brand.” TBS’s system, which runs on an XMPie platform, ties in an access-controlled SQL database that not only helps lock down a graphical standard, but also creates an environment where less oversight is required.



TM “For example, for one of our franchise clients, it is very important that employees don’t have the ability to change their job titles [on collateral] on a whim, and our system addresses such a problem,” said Allison.

Why would someone want to change his or her job title?

“It’s good to be the king,” Allison ribbed.

One aspect of his business that Allison doesn’t chaff about is the stability that the TBS system provides to clients.

“Because we bring so much process to the system, we help them define their internal infrastructure... so instead of managing their marketing or point-of-sale with an Excel spreadsheet, we give them a system to manage it by. There’s ‘real time’ reporting so they can see what location has ordered or which campaigns are performing well.”

In this economy it’s imperative that a business gets in where it fits in, and TBS is acutely aware of its place in the market. TBS tends to target multi-location franchises and/or operations with fewer than 300 locations. Or as Allison put it, our “sweet spot.” Allison attributes his business’s target market to its digital and on-demand capabilities. He also said the “one-size-fits-all roll-out style” of the larger chains isn’t particularly well-suited for his company’s business model. With them, “you get what you get,” he said.

About 30% of TBS’s business is generated through its Web2Print sites. And, according to Allison, there seems to be a mushroom effect... a welcomed one at that.

“One thing that we find with our multi-location companies is that they come to us with one problem, whether that’s getting out direct mail or in-store signage. But what we see over time is that the system grows for them, so they continue to add more items and services to their website.”

Profits for TBS’s one-to-one, technology-based offerings saw an increase in 2008. Allison estimated the number to be between 20%–30%—an extraordinary number considering adverse market factors. But as was all too familiar in the industry, Allison stated his more “traditional” business didn’t grow at nearly the same rate for fiscal 2008.

Pundits have opined that the desire to create new revenues should never come at the expense of your core business. Conversely, maintaining your core focus shouldn’t impede your business from uncovering new opportunities to help your customers face new challenges, especially those posed by the challenging economic landscape.

“One thing that the economy has done is it’s made marketing managers more responsible for ROI,” said Allison. “What that means is that they need more trackable ways of making sure their marketing is effective, and that’s what we do. If they can prove to their sales team or higher-ups that this campaign performed well and this is why, or this one didn’t and this is what we did to change it... that really has a major effect on marketing-spend.”

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