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Casting a Vote for VDP

BY CHRIS BAUER

FOR Frank McPherson, taking on tough Variable Data Printing (VDP) projects is nothing new.

"The first variable data printing job I did was in 1959," McPherson, President and HDM (head decision maker) of Custom Data Imaging, Inc. in Markham, Ontario, recalls.

"It was a calendar for a pharmacy that was sending out well wishes to some of its customers. We did it with Linotype slugs."

McPherson started his career as a typesetter, and says he has held just about every position imaginable in the industry during his 48 years in the business. He also worked as a consultant for about a decade. But the frustrations that came along with consulting finally drove McPherson back into the print shop environment.

"I got fed up trying to salvage companies that were not very smart, not making money and going to the dogs," McPherson notes. "My wife was in marketing and she was trying to get her suppliers to print VDP jobs and they said it couldn't be done."

So one weekend he gave her a book on VDP by RIT Professor Emeritus

Frank Romano, which changed everything for the couple.

"I said, 'you think I don't know? It's your suppliers that don't know,'" McPherson recounts with his self-described Monte Python-esque sense of humor. "Next thing you know, we decided to open the business."

The company started with just six employees and 1,000 square feet 7½ years ago. Custom Data Imaging now boasts 24 employees housed within a 13,000-square-foot facility just outside Toronto. McPherson reports sales have grown about 25 percent per year.

Since he has been doing some sort of VDP work since the late 1950s, McPherson notes, with tongue-in-cheek, how much the technology and capabilities have changed since his early days dealing with personalization.

And with all due respect to the pharmacy and its calendars, the importance of the work Custom Data Imaging now handles can be classified as having a global impact.

A few years ago Custom Data Imaging was approached by the Provincial



There were six variable subjects, and the front of the card showed a full color image of a voter's concern along with a one-line personal message.



Conservative Party in Ontario to do some variable data work for an upcoming election. The provincial election campaign proved—even though the party didn't win—to be quite successful in the geographic areas where the variable data mailers targeted.

Playing off of the success of the provincial campaign, Custom Data Imaging was contacted by the marketing agency for the Federal Conservatives to put together a program for the national election in Canada that eventually saw Conservative Stephen Harper take over the Prime Minister's post.

"They came to us and said, 'since we had success (with the provincial election), can we do something similar, but a little more broad-based?' And we said 'sure.'"

McPherson sat down with the agency—Responsive Marketing Group—to come up with a different way to communicate across Canada than had ever been used before—by using Variable Data Printing.

"The premise of the job was quite simple: we are going to communicate and grab the information from the doorsteps, so to speak, either by canvassing by telephone or by going door-to-door," McPherson reveals. "That data would drive the printed piece."

Responsive Marketing Group has a large call center and collected information about prospective voters by phone and door-to-door polling. Citizen concerns were gathered and databased for use in the printed marketing campaign.

"If someone's concerns were on industry, the printed piece would have an industrial feel with graphics and text telling them that we know they are concerned about business growth in the country," McPherson explains. "On the back there would be information about the candidate to vote for."

No specific demographic or group was targeted—just voters in general. The Canadian political system is different than in America, which brings with it some distinct challenges. First, many Canadians aren't registered to a specific political party.

"We have people who are party members, but that is a small number," McPherson notes. "So we can target anyone we want. We were targeting everyone within a particular area where Responsive Marketing Group felt there was an opportunity to get a conservative candidate elected."



The back of the card listed candidate information as well as the voter's other concerns.

Close to one million mailers were sent out, produced on HP Indigo digital presses. It was intensely planned and produced, as the Canadian political campaign only lasts 28 days, unlike in the U.S. where it can last many months. The Canadian government can call an election at any time, so the planning stage for such a marketing campaign becomes an ongoing process.

Responsive Marketing Group does the canvassing throughout the year, driving a lot of pertinent information into the database. Before printing, they came up with subjects that would serve as the default images and text; which issues would be focused on; certain geographic areas to be targeted; and collected photos and information about the candidates.

"Building the graphics matrix was quite complex because there are several different things that are variable throughout," McPherson points out. "Defaults could be different for different areas—there might be a default for agriculture in Saskatchewan, but the default will be fishing out on the East Coast. So it is quite complex."

There is not really a way to track the results of such a marketing campaign, McPherson says, but he knows he got the result that he and his marketing client really wanted: the Conservative party won.

"The public spoke—whether or not we made a difference is very difficult to determine," he admits. "I have an idea what the official figures are, but I am not allowed to divulge them. I know what the uptick was in the areas where

we did the campaign. And they won in some places that they did not expect to win."

Political printing is a growing area for Custom Data Imaging, thanks in part to the winning campaign for the Conservative party. It could also be a growth area for other printers, McPherson concedes, but there is an experience factor that has to go into it, as well as having a strong partner.

"It's not as though any printer can all of the sudden say, 'I am going to do a Variable Data Printing job for a political party,'" he maintains. "The key to it was the Responsive Marketing Group because they understand the political world. They know how it works and what is required for such a project to be successful."

McPherson adds that his own interest in the political process didn't hurt, either. Also, Custom Data Imaging is considered one of the leading variable data printing companies in North America as far as ingenuity is concerned.

Things have come full circle for McPherson, who has seen it all in his nearly half-decade in the printing industry. Variable Data Printing has gone from simple Linotype slug changes on a promotional calendar to full-scale personalized pieces aimed at tipping the balance of political power.

"We changed the government in Canada by using VDP," he says with a laugh. "I don't think the government appreciates when I say that—but it is a good selling tool."

