COLORADO STATE PRINTER: LOOKING FORWARD

"My personal opinion is that if you don't continue to look at the future and try to position yourself for success, you're going to be one of those shops that goes away," says Mike Lincoln, Colorado State Printer.

Mike knows all about looking to the future; when he took over as head of Colorado's in-plant printing facility 11 years ago, one of his first goals was to look at what the state in-plant was offering and how he could transform it to better meet its customers' needs. "One of the things we didn't do very well when I first came on board was spend time marketing and telling people what, exactly, we do."

Instead, he says, the department had one customer service representative who did outreach work. This consisted of contacting each state agency and asking what print work, graphic design, or other services they needed. "It was a really super soft sell," Mike says. "Here's what we can do. Do you need us?' If not, we'd just move on to the next agency."

Part of the reason for this soft-sell approach is that, like many in-plants, the Colorado State Printer has first right of refusal – technically, state agencies are required to use the state's own printing service. But this requirement created a very low emphasis on marketing within the department; as Mike notes, "There was no effort to explain why [those agencies] needed the state in-plant to do these jobs for them. We knew why we were here, but not why we should *still* be here."

So, for the first year of his job, Mike worked on getting a handle on what his department did for the state, what they'd done in the past, and what their customers needed that they'd never thought of before. This understanding of his department and its customers' needs helped Mike approach projects in a more holistic manner.

"Now, if an agency has a PowerPoint presentation for a meeting and needs handouts, we ask them what the meeting is about and what they're hoping to accomplish from it. Can we provide mailing services – maybe a save-the-date postcard? Do they need follow-up services such as thank-you postcards or surveys? We try to focus on our customer's need and what opportunities we can find within that need to offer value-added services."

Mike says that simple shift in how his department looks at customer orders was a game changer. Instead of looking at the state in-plant as just a printer, customers now looked at it as a solutions provider and partner.

Another big change that grew out of this holistic approach was an expansion of the customer base the in-plant serviced. Instead of just focusing on state agencies, Mike and his team cast their net wider, looking at cities, counties, water districts...280 entities that qualify as political subdivisions within the state, and therefore potential customers for the state's in-plant.

That, Mike says, is where the marketing piece of his job grew. The state printer started working with a few counties; as more counties heard about what they were doing and asked for help, this outreach turned into more of a marketing strategy. Five years ago, the state in-plant started going to quarterly meetings for various county entities, such as county commissioners, tax assessors, and voting registrars. In exchange for providing free printing for these meetings, the in-plant would get a booth to market their services to attendees.

That marketing approach has ensured the state printer's success in an environment where many printers – both in-plant and commercial – are seeing their businesses shrink thanks to the growth of digital media. Because of the outreach Mike and his team performed years ago, they're now seen as a partner by not only state agencies, but also those smaller government agencies.

Mike sums it up nicely: "Because of that partnership, we have thrived, and that strategy has really paid for itself over and over."

GEEK NOTE:

This case study originally appeared in the book *Business Transformation: A Path to Profit for In-Plant Facilities* by John Foley, Jr. I rewrote this book for a new market Mr. Foley's company, InterlinkONE, wanted to engage with; all case studies in this book were new pieces I wrote.