

CRITIQUE A PRINTING COMPANY

IN 90 MINUTES!

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Ask a printing consultant how much time is sufficient to assess how well a printing company is performing, and depending upon the size of the shop, a reasonable answer may be three days. Let's assume, however, that you don't have nearly that much time, that instead your assessment is limited to a 90-minute plant tour. How much can you glean about the company's performance in that brief time? Plenty, I think, as long as you're a keen observer and asking the right questions. Here are eleven areas that, in total, can give you a good sense of operational and financial performance.

1. Workplace Organization

Cleanliness and organization speaks to an efficient and quality-focused organization. Does everything seem to have its own place, and is everything stored in its place? Are areas cluttered and dirty or clean and organized? A lack of attention to organization and cleanliness creates wasted time (as employees search for tools and materials), safety hazards, and the inability to spot problems quickly. Companies adhering to Lean manufacturing practices use a process known as 5S (Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize, and Sustain) to achieve this level of organization. Companies that have high standards of organization throughout the entire operation, not just in the production areas, are the rarest. For example, some companies ensure that CSRs organize their cubicles and files in a standardized way so information can be quickly accessed by other CSRs, as necessary.

2. Sales/Marketing

These functions are too critical to ignore during your visit, although the information may be difficult to get. You can ask about the number of active clients, their longevity, and whether the top customers account for a dangerously large percentage of sales. How tenured are the sales reps? Are they more or less productive than the competition? How impressive is the company's print collateral and online presence? Does it regularly optimize its website for search engines, send press releases, and track responses from various marketing communications?

3. Communication

Profit leaders understand the effectiveness of communication within their plants. Is there information posted in each department showing progress toward annual goals, such as spoilage, productivity, and safety goals? When asked, do employees know the key metrics for their

departments and how they're tracked? Look for displays indicating that those metrics are provided to employees in a timely manner so they know how well their processes are performing. Do you see a production environment full of information (e.g., process documentation, status boards, color coding, etc.) that helps employees do their job correctly? Do employees receive periodic updates on how the company is doing overall? It shouldn't take long to determine how much a company emphasizes open and constant communication.

4. MIS

A management information system (MIS) is the foundation in cost estimating, job definition format (JDF) automation, and supply chain integration. These systems can be utilized to communicate to a broad range of different manufacturers. A quick overview of what processes are automated will give you an idea as to the extent of automation the company is utilizing. Is the MIS system simply supplying an imposition plan to the prepress workflow system, or is JDF/JMF data repopulating the MIS in order to compare estimated cost versus actual net profits from the work?

5. Quality Control

Do you see quality control targets and measurement devices in use? It should be apparent that there are plate control targets placed in the bend area of the imaged plates and a plate densitometer within arm's reach of the operators. Digital proofs should include a reference control strip that includes solid colors, overprint colors, screen tints, and three-color process builds to validate that proofs are produced within a specification and monitored for consistency. During your stroll through the pressroom, look for color bars on printed skids. Those color bars should include a combination of identical data from the proofing targets of printing process color work. Some shops may sacrifice a color bar in lieu of fitting more work on the sheet, but there is absolutely no method of monitoring your quality with this approach.

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6. Condition of Equipment

It's no secret that printers tend to hold on to equipment long after the payments have been made in order to maximize the ROI. A brief conversation with operators will help give insight into the frequency of preventative maintenance, and a schedule should be posted of regular maintenance records. A well-maintained piece of equipment is integral to producing a consistent and predictable product. Is the printer following an enlightened approach to maintenance or the tired old recipe for downtime and lower profits—"we'll fix it when it breaks."

7. Continuous Improvement

Companies committed to operational excellence must have systems in place that foster continuous improvement. Ask company executives to describe those systems. What was the company's last improvement event, and how many are typically held throughout the year? Do you see evidence of an effective system for capturing, evaluating, and implementing employee ideas? Are charts visible that demonstrate progress toward improvement goals? Does the company gain improvement ideas by routinely measuring the satisfaction of its customers and employees? A rapid pace of improvement gives a company a distinct advantage in the marketplace by reducing costs and lead-time faster than competitors, listening better to customers, and cementing its reputation for quality, dependability, and ease of doing business.

8. Workflow/Automation

Too many manual touchpoints are productivity killers. With that in mind, more commercial printers are using Web-to-print storefronts for job submission so work can flow untouched from the customer to the workflow system. Is the company following suit? Are preset inking data being sent to the presses to reduce makeready time and waste? Is JDF planned or currently being used to automate finishing and shipping?

Regardless of the method of receiving digital files, are there preflight procedures and color management policies in place? If so, is there a clearly defined path to communicate problems back to the customer. Prepress departments typically fall into one of two categories—those repairing problematic files at no cost and those billing directly back to the customer. A more progressive printer will supply job parameters to their customers, thereby lowering the risk for late-term file issues.

9. EHS Procedures

EHS programs are critical to protecting employees and the environment as well as being necessary to avoid large penalties for violations. While there are many requirements, key compliance indicators are chemical and machine safety along with air emissions and waste disposal. Can an employee, when asked, show you the SDS (Safety Data Sheets) for any chemistry used or direct you to where it is kept? Are employees wearing personal protective equipment when working with chemicals?

Are machine guards in place when equipment is running and are there specific safety procedures in place such as those for lockout/tagout? Are waste inks, toner, and cleaning solvents properly identified and managed as either a hazardous or nonhazardous waste? Does the company have an air permit or know if it needs one? These questions may seem rudimentary but are critical to employee safety and environmental protection.

10. Employee Training/Retention

Even in the best economic conditions, employees tend to move from job to job several times during their careers. For many companies operating with a lean staff, one critical method of retaining good employees is through training and educational programs to foster their careers. During brief discussions with employees, is there evidence of longevity or are you hearing that there is a revolving door with regard to the average employee's tenure? What is the overall morale on the shop floor? Do employees perceive working at the company as a career or a job? Do employees receive skills and safety training? How often? How is that training perceived? Do employees believe their suggestions are taken seriously? Have they ever recommended a friend for a job at the company? Do they like their supervisors? What is the top complaint?

11. Culture

A healthy culture is essential to maximize company performance. You can get an indication of the culture by something as simple as how you are greeted at the reception desk. Do employees smile and talk to you during a tour? If you are being shown around by an executive, does that executive know people by name, and is there obvious respect for the employees (and vice versa)? Is there a spirit of industriousness and teamwork? Are the mission and values of the company posted and known by the employees? Cultures develop based on the perceived values, attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately behaviors of executives and managers. Executives in the best companies actively manage and assess their culture. The culture in most companies develops haphazardly, with poor cultures exemplified by lack of trust, tendency to blame others, and fear of making mistakes. Odds are that you'll be able to form an opinion during your tour about the company's culture.

Conclusion

When you tour another printing company, observing and asking questions about these eleven areas should give you a reasonably accurate picture about its performance level despite not having access to its financial statements. Even a short assessment can expose companies' waste, roadblocks, and performance issues. Conversely, paying attention to these areas can reveal whether a company is progressive and positioned for future success.

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