

PROFILE

Leader puts firm's focus on the future

CEO John Place sees new technology as a key for Mercury Print Productions

By VELVET SPICER

He may not be psychic, but John Place has an uncanny ability to see where the commercial printing industry is headed and steer his company in the right direction.

While the rest of the industry takes its recessionary lumps, Mercury Print Productions Inc. is growing, expecting to add to its offerings and increase its staff by 10 percent to 15 percent in the next year.

"We're on a growth track. There's a lot of new technology that's coming out," says Mercury's 48-year-old president and CEO. "We see ourselves investing into inkjet technology, and we feel that this technology will revolutionize the whole printing industry."

Mercury, which employs some 200 people at its locations on Lee Road and



Photo by Julian Horn

John Place

Position: President and CEO, Mercury Print Productions Inc.

Age: 48

Family: Wife, Mary Beth; daughter, Elyssa, 18; son, Ian, 13

Home: Irondequoit

Hobbies: Fishing, antiques, racquetball, landscaping, time with family

Quote: "We do many things. We had to diversify, because if you were just putting ink on paper, you'd be in a lot of trouble right now. So when one part of our business is down, the other businesses pick it up."

Hollender Parkway, is a commercial sheet-fed printer with a digital educational book division and new online printing for one-off books or one-at-a-time jobs. Adding inkjet printing capabilities will allow the company to take a digital web press and print millions of unique images or pages a month, increasing its productivity and visibility, he says.

Place expects the company to purchase a new press by the end of the year. With that purchase will come the need for a larger facility and more staffers, he says.

"We've got a lot going on," he says. "We just have to make sure we do it right, because that's a big piece of equipment and it could hurt us if we don't do it right. But we think there's a great opportunity out

there for it and we really need to stay on the leading edge of technology. You can't get any closer to the leading edge than an inkjet machine."

Mercury was founded in 1969 by Valerie Mannix, Place's mother. Mannix, who retired two years ago, started the business with a \$400 printing press and four employees in the basement of her Gates home. Four decades later the company has grown to rank third on the RBJ list of commercial printers, with revenue of roughly \$28 million in each of the last two years.

Diversification

Place joined Mannix in the family business after his high school graduation in 1979. His first job, however, was working for family friend Richard Pontarella at Turner Bellows Inc.

"He brought me in and taught me when I was in high school about working and how hard you work and the ethics of work," Place recalls.

Place also learned about diversification, and he is a firm believer in diversifying to strengthen a company's bottom line and place in the market.

"We do many things. We had to diversify, because if you were just putting ink on paper, you'd be in a lot of trouble right now," he says. "So when one part of our business is down, the other businesses pick it up."

Mercury offers offset sheet-fed printing. Sheet-fed presses print on individual sheets of paper, as opposed to web presses, which print on continuous rolls of paper. Marketing collaterals often are printed on sheet-fed presses.

The company also offers digital printing, which uses a digital file rather than the plates that are used in offset printing. In addition to its digital on-demand printing, Mercury works with publishers such as the McGraw-Hill Cos. and Pearson Education to publish books for both the K-12 market and higher education.

More recently Mercury has developed Turning Pages, an online ordering system to compete with companies such as Shutterstock Inc. or Snapfish by HP, owned by Hewlett-Packard Co., which publish photo books. The ability to publish one-off books will help Mercury grow its market, Place says.

The one-off application streamlines the front-end process, removing the overhead associated with higher-quantity runs, he says.

"We needed to be able to print one. Pearson does a lot of higher-ed books, but they have to show a proof of the book first. These professors are building their books online; they're taking chapters and building their

own books," Place explains. "Then they send the file to us, we produce one copy of the book and send it out for their approval. Once approved, we will receive the full order of 200 or whatever they want."

Moving beyond traditional commercial printing options is a must, Place says, given the recession and consolidation in the industry.

"The biggest challenge in the industry is there are too many cylinders out there for the same amount of work," Place says. "So people are cutting their prices down to where they're just keeping the presses going, not making any money. That's very difficult for us."

Hoovers Inc. reports that top trends in the commercial printing industry include the transition to digital technology, private-company consolidation, smaller print runs and digital image storage.

"It's a very struggling business. We've

"The biggest challenge in the industry is there are too many cylinders out there for the same amount of work."

done OK this year, and a lot of that is because of the educational market," Place says. "Sooner or later it's going to turn around. Mercury is going to be pointed in the right direction. A lot of that is because we're doing many different kinds of things."

He adds: "It's hard right now with any business. You better be really buttoned up, making sure you're watching everything, because it's so tough out there."

What Place enjoys most about his job and owning a business is having the ability to move the company in a different direction if and when it is called for, either because of technological advances or because the economy dictates it.

"The best part of my job is going out and developing new business (opportunities)," he says. "I think that's where I shine the most."

Leadership style

Mercury's vice president of operations, Christian Schamberger, calls Place a visionary and a hard worker.

"He is driven, probably the hardest worker in the company," Schamberger says. "He gives it his all each and every day."

Place is the face of the company, he adds, and is the company's greatest salesman. It is Place's vision that makes the company a success, Schamberger says.

"Mercury tends to be focused on new technologies, and that's been a key attribute to Mercury in being able to go out and meet the needs of our customers," he

explains. "A few years ago (Mercury) really started to diversify and get into various markets, and that's been another key attribute, especially in the midst of the recession."

Place's leadership style differs only slightly from that of his mother, Schamberger says. Whereas Mannix's focus often was on the internal workings of the business, Place is a big-picture type of leader. He works heavily with customers and suppliers, as well as researching technological advances in the industry. With Mannix retired, Place has learned to focus more of his energy on the employees, Schamberger says.

"He's very employee-focused, as well as customer-focused," he says.

Operations manager Jeffrey Quartley says Place sees the good in everything and is an eternal optimist. He also has his mother's gift for dealing with people.

Every employee receives a gift card for his or her birthday, Quartley notes. Place delivers the gift cards in person to all employees in both facilities.

"He is very much for the people and about the people," Quartley says.

However, where Mannix was more reserved in her management style and not as quick to react, Place is more opportunistic, Quartley adds.

"John is a very reactive guy, whether it's a sales opportunity, whether it's a problem, whether it's an issue with an employee; he's an opportunist," he says. "When he sees and recognizes opportunities, he goes after them instantly."

That quick decision-making and opportunism is contagious, Quartley adds.

"His personality is very infectious," he explains. "It's hard not to like John, and when you're around him it's hard not to be affected by his enthusiasm."

"I do love my job. It's exciting. It's never boring," Place says. "It's a tough time right now, too, because of the market and what's going on, but I've got a great crew around me that supports me."

Place says his mother was his role model and mentor while they worked together.

"We were really good partners. She would stay in and take care of the managing of all the people and just let me go crazy and go out and develop new accounts and get new business," he says.

Place is an opponent of micromanaging, he says.

"I let people do what they have to do," he says. "But I expect my managers to do what they need to to get the job done."

He meets with his various managers each day and holds a weekly staff meeting so everyone is on the same page, he says.

"We have a lot of communication going on," Place says. "Well, with 200 employees we'd better have communication."

While his management team praises his people skills, Place says his biggest strength is his ability to anticipate the next big thing and point the business in that direction. Managing the people and putting policies into effect are not his areas of expertise, he says.

"That's probably one of my weaknesses," he acknowledges. "That's why I make sure my production manager is very detail-oriented and very policy-oriented, to make sure these are being done."

The company has a low turnover rate, Place says, and as it is for many business leaders, the worst part of the job is having to let someone go.

"What I strive for is when we let someone go, they better not be surprised," he says. "If they're surprised, then we didn't do a good job. We have to make sure we took all the steps possible to try to keep that employee."

Despite there being 200 staffers, Quartley

calls the atmosphere at Mercury close-knit.

Adds Schamberger: "It's a very comfortable, fun place to work. It's professional yet very friendly. John is very cognizant of the fact that employees are such a key attribute of the business."

Place says his biggest professional accomplishment is the growth and longevity of the company.

"Where we started and where we are now, it's impressive that we did this and we did it over 40 years," he says.

If he could pass on a piece of advice, Place says it would involve balance. Because Mercury runs around the clock, Place often gets calls and e-mails at night and on weekends. But even though he cannot live without his Blackberry, he knows when to turn it off.

"Try to balance as much as possible your home life and your work," he says, "because you could become a workaholic. That's tough."

At home

Place was born and raised in Rochester and now calls Irondequoit home. He and

his wife, Mary Beth, have two teenagers, daughter Elyssa, 18, and son Ian, 13.

Place and his wife are avid antiques collectors, and his office is decorated with vintage Coca-Cola signs and memorabilia, as well as a vintage gumball machine and other antiques.

A favorite family memory is taking his wife along on what would have been just a business trip to Rome, Italy, he says. They had never taken a vacation like that before, he says, and being in Rome made it more exciting.

The Places have a cottage in the Thousand Islands where they take minivacations, and Place enjoys fishing there with his son.

He also enjoys landscaping and beautifying the outdoor living space of his home.

Longtime friend Angelo LaRocca fishes and plays racquetball with Place and calls him driven and ambitious.

"He's a very outgoing, motivated person," LaRocca says. "Even when he was a kid, he was always very motivated. He always wanted to win at Monopoly."

vspicer@rbj.net / 585-546-8303