

Onward and Upward Down Under

By Mark Fitzgerald

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In today's business world, appearances often make or break deals. An honest handshake and a smile can mean the difference between winning a client and losing one. Even a company's location sometimes is enough to attract new clients or turn them away. In Australia, it's no different. For E-bisprint Pty Ltd., a distributorship in New South Wales, image and advancement go hand in hand.

"We weren't too happy with our former surroundings in West Gosford," says Paul Freeman, the firm's managing director. "We were stuck in the back of an industrial area." In November, E-bisprint moved to Tuggerah, about 60 miles north of Sydney. More modern and five times larger, the new site easily can accommodate E-bisprint's office facilities, manufacturing, prepress and warehousing needs.

Starting with Gradual Improvements

Freeman started selling printed products and services in 1990 under the company name Print Management, and over the years he has collected a significant number of clients. In 1997, he began developing electronic forms, and a year later he took his first email orders. In 1999, he began implementing a web-based ordering system with the help of small team of engineers.

"It was a gradual process," says Peter Miller, E-bisprint's systems development manager. "There were a lot of suggestions, and we started seeing what worked and what needed improvement, adding things bit by bit, and making changes." Spurred by online development and the burgeoning success of e-commerce, the distributorship changed its name to E-bisprint in 2000.

Since then, the distributorship's online capacity has grown considerably. Clients now can log on to the firm's user-friendly ordering system to generate artwork for business cards and letterhead, requisition warehoused goods, create marketing materials, and order thousands of promotional and stationery items. "Being able to do everything in house is a big plus," Miller says. "We can perform a whole range of tasks, and make updates and modifications very quickly."

Optimizing Service Through Technology

In just 90 seconds, customers can log on to E-bisprint's web site, place orders, request proofs and submit final orders. Someone who needs business cards in a rush can have his

or her order dispatched the same day. “We handle quite a bit of work that’s urgent,” Miller says.

With its online system, E-bisprint has reduced delays and supply-chain costs, so clients pay less and receive products faster. Newsletters, E-bisprint’s largest product segment, previously had a 3-week turnaround. Now, they’re designed, proofed, printed and shipped the same week.

E-bisprint’s ordering system also is multifaceted and easy to use, the company says. Clients can view inventory levels for stock held in E-bisprint’s warehouse, preview product images, create new artwork, view job statuses and place additional orders. “We’ve learned that it’s best to keep it simple,” says Miller, who also notes the software’s approval system and ability to link to other systems.

E-bisprint’s ordering system links with software from distributor operations software supplier TopForm® Software Inc., Norcross, Ga. The distributorship has been using the software for a year, says Freeman, who travels to the United States frequently for conferences and networking events. The software “does everything from payroll management to warehousing—it’s very proactive,” he says. It also creates inventory reports, controls shipping and invoicing, and communicates scheduling information to vendors.

The only company in Australia that uses TopForm’s software, E-bisprint believes the investment will pay off once customers realize how responsive and efficient the system can be. “We think TopForm will help us compete with some of the leading printers in the country,” Freeman says. E-bisprint also competes for business internationally--particularly in the United States, where the dollar is worth twice as much as the Australian dollar. “The exchange rate is a real advantage in the U.S. marketplace,” Miller says. “American companies can save a great deal when they order through us.”

E-bisprint is working on a new online quotation system that will integrate fully into TopForm, reducing the time required to process quotes. “This will expedite turnaround and also allow us to maintain competitive prices,” Miller says. Seconds after a client requests a quote, the system will requisition quotes automatically from multiple vendors and quickly determine the best one. In the meantime, the client will be able to track the progress of its request online. Once the best price is established, the system will email or fax the quote to the customer instantly.

Adopting a 3-Tier Approach

In addition to investing in technology, E-bisprint has invested in its people, some of whom have more than 20 years of experience in the industry. With 30 employees, ranging from sales executives to system engineers to customer service representatives, the staff is cohesive and self-sufficient, Miller says. “Everyone works together and knows their role,” he says, adding that many employees understand multiple roles. For example,

a systems engineer may have to tackle network administration or order tracking. A sales executive may ease a client's uncertainty about converting to online ordering by demonstrating the efficiency of E-bisprint's print management software.

Employing a 3-tier approach, E-bisprint assigns a sales executive, systems engineer and customer representative to each client, ensuring the implementation process is smooth. "They all go out to the site to assess the customer's needs," Miller says. "Each person makes suggestions, and each is equally important." After a complete analysis of printed products, the team notes areas that could be eliminated, consolidated or converted. The result is a customized print management system that saves customers time and money.

Managing inventory, identifying reorder levels and optimizing ordering to control cash flow are three major areas the E-bisprint team tries to improve and facilitate. The team provides customers with monthly management reports detailing savings and expenditures to track ordering patterns and predict supply needs.

The E-bisprint team also has patience and tact, Freeman says. Clients who are hesitant about change and technology often are most comfortable with understanding vendors who listen. By making the transition as seamless and pleasant as possible, the team can build trust with clients, who then are likely to respond positively to the technology. Freeman predicts further growth for the distributorship's internet ordering system "once more people begin to understand what we do and what our software can do."

After years of testing its online ordering system, E-bisprint is ready to begin marketing more thoroughly. In addition, its development team constantly is adding new features and exploring new markets. "This was the first year we offered Christmas cards," says Freeman, noting other seasonal items such as flowers, diaries and calendars were incorporated into the ordering system recently. "We hope next year brings an even bigger response," he says.

Cutting Costs by More Than Half

It's hard to believe that TMP Worldwide, a leading recruitment enterprise in New South Wales, could save so much in printing expenses. But it did--more than \$400,000 in one year thanks to E-bisprint.

"We chose them because of their flexibility and technology," says Ross Kirby, a TMP business improvement manager. "We went from spending \$750,000 per year to \$320,000 per year." By consolidating TMP's needs and utilizing technology, E-bisprint helped maximize staff time, streamline brand consistency and cut stationery costs. Now, TMP uses a custom online catalog to order popular items such as business cards, letterhead, envelopes, invoices and checks quickly.

Prior to partnering with E-bisprint in June 2001, TMP used standard forms and had very little coordination of its supplies. “Everything was done ad hoc,” Kirby says. “We tended to buy things at a premium.” Because TMP didn’t have a firm grasp of its printing needs, major variations in product, quality and pricing existed. Company growth also contributed to the high cost of printing. Within a year, TMP’s sales had risen 42 percent, Kirby says. “It doesn’t surprise me that our printing costs were so high,” he says. During the next year, however, E-bisprint helped TMP save more than \$18,000 in business cards alone.

According to Kirby, E-bisprint encountered some resistance from TMP’s staff during the initial stages of the changeover. “There was a slight discontent among the masses, an uneasiness about upturning the old system,” he says. “That put E-bisprint under a great deal of pressure.” Suddenly, E-bisprint’s team found itself walking a tightrope. Would TMP accept the technology and give it a chance?

Sure enough, TMP’s staff began to embrace the online ordering system. After a few weeks, the conversion was complete. “I give E-bisprint a lot of credit,” Kirby says. “They passed the test with flying colors and proved that they’re very dedicated to what they’re doing.”

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