

“Does a Plumber Need a Web Site?”

Case Study #7: Small Quick Print Shop

Company Name and Location: Rapid Reproduction,
Toast, North Carolina

Founded: 1970

Company Background:
Small quick print shop.

Markets/Industries

Served: Local businesses
and individuals.

Interviewee: Larry Lepus, owner



The Story So Far

“I started Rapid Reproduction in 1970,” says owner Larry Lepus. “I had a Ph.D. in biology—specializing in lagomorphology, that is, the study of rabbits. To pay off my student loans, I opened a print shop. Everyone told me it was a hare-brained scheme, but within a few weeks of opening, business was hopping. The name Rapid Reproduction seemed to bridge both my professions.” It was clear that Larry’s reputation as a punster among his friends at the Chamber of Commerce was well earned, and he’s been quite a hit at their annual dinner.

Rapid Reproduction was one of a new breed of “quick print” shop that had been enabled by new prepress technologies, such as the Itek photographic platemaker. They started with a few offset duplicators and specialized in fast-turnaround mostly black-and-white job work. “It was letterhead, business cards, envelopes, price lists, stuff like that.” Early promotional efforts included

telephone directory advertising, **print advertising** in the local newspaper, membership in a **trade association** (the local Printing Industries of America affiliate), and, predominantly, their **physical location** in a well-traveled strip mall coupled with distinctive **signage**. “My initial concept involving rabbits was a bit too racy for the early 1970s,” says Mr. Lepus. “It worked for that Hefner guy, but it didn’t make sense for me.”

Over the course of that first decade, business was brisk, and Lepus found that he didn’t really need to do a lot of outbound marketing and promotion. “There wasn’t a lot of real competition at that time. There was a big sheetfed shop across town, but they served a completely different, higher-end niche than I did. We were a real resource for local businesses.” Lepus joined the local Chamber of Commerce, and over time started adding



Larry Lepus

inserts to Chamber mailings. By the end of the decade, he had adding mailing services, and to “test the waters” did his own **direct mail** campaign to Chamber members.

Rapid Reproduction also gets substantial **word of mouth** referrals from current or past customers.

Doing It On the Desktop

Over the course of the 1980s, things started to change. “When desktop publishing first appeared around 1985, I saw immediately how everything was going to change, and we quickly sought to get up to speed. We used to outsource all our typesetting, but this seemed like a great way to offer that ourselves. Not that ‘RageMaker’³⁹ made it easy at first.”

³⁹ Designers and others always have special names for their software, especially if it can’t do things that they want or are hard to figure out. RageMaker was obviously PageMaker, and QuarkXPress has been called Quirk. It’s the same way business travelers call certain airlines UseLessAirways, NorthWorst, etc. PageMaker did usher in desktop publishing in a big way in the mid-1980s.

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In 1990, Rapid Reproduction had a 20-year anniversary party, requiring printed **invitations, signage, banners,** and other related accoutrements. “We were just starting to do four-color printing, so this became our test case. In fact, for most of our new initiatives, we served as our own guinea pigs, to bring up another type of rodent. ‘Rabbit test’ probably wouldn’t be appropriate here...”

The 1980s and 1990s were the golden age of the **user group**, for hardware and software, and Rapid Reproduction participated in growing Mac and Adobe user groups, and other groups that were forming, such as a QuarkX-Press users group. “They used to host a ton of events; we co-sponsored as many MacFairs as we could. For a time, we hosted the monthly Photoshop User Group meetings at our shop. I recall—this must have been around 1993—most of our members had just mastered Photoshop 2.5, and I came into our monthly meeting clutching a CD-ROM and announced, ‘Photoshop 3 is out, and everything is completely different!’ There was a lot of initial sighing at first. But Layers...man, how did we ever live without that? So everyone was introduced to it at our shop, and we looked like we were experts because of it.”

Events like user group meetings and small local computer fairs required **printed sales materials** like “services offered” and the like, **leaflets and flyers, business cards, banners, signage,** and so forth. “During the 1990s, we were always adding new things—we became a PostScript service bureau, we had the first color copier in the Carolinas, and we started adding more digital equipment. All this stuff required that we keep updating our promotional materials.” What helped keep Rapid Reproduction’s service list current was also a wake-up call to Lepus. “We had a **Web site** early on, and I realized that I could save time and money, and at the same time keep our services roster up to date, simply by regularly updating the Web site. Then I sat back, thought for a moment, then went ‘Uh oh.’”

Why Don't We Do It In the Information Superhighway

The first thing Lepus did was hook up with Web designers and developers. “It seemed obvious to me—and this was around 1996—that things were going to change. Print-to-Internet seemed like a radio-to-television sea change. I knew that the road to survival was to not only become involved in what was called ‘new media’ at time, but also figure out how to keep print relevant. Digital printing seemed the obvious route.” Lepus got rid of all his offset equipment and replaced it with digital. “We had a DocuTech, an Indigo, and a couple of Canon CLCs.” Rapid Reproduction was one of the first quick print shops to offer variable-data printing (VDP). “Again, we were our own guinea pigs. We hosted a seminar for local businesses on VDP and used the Chamber of Commerce mailing list as the basis for a **variable direct mail** campaign of our own. Essentially, I produced a post card that had each recipient’s name look as if it had been painted on the side of a white rabbit. There was a whole *Alice in Wonderland*/down the rabbit hole analogy behind the campaign and the seminar... I was also able to map each business’s address in relation to the event’s location and use as a headline on the back of the card, “You’re just 2.5 miles from Wonderland’ or whatever the headline had been. I think it was something more clever than that.”

At the time, there were also a number of trade publications, often with local editions. “We used to **advertising in print** in publications like *Southeast Graphics* and there was also a Southeast Edition of *Micro Publishing News*, which had been a great publication. It’s a shame what happened to it.”⁴⁰

Rapid Reproduction also started to compile an e-mail database, and began doing **direct e-mail campaigns**. They also started a regular **e-newsletter** that replaced the thrice-yearly **print newsletter** the company used to

⁴⁰ Yeah and they had a good editor named Romano once, too. Last we heard, he was hanging around ne'er-do-well Ph.D.s.

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produce. “I used to subscribe to TrendWatch Fast Facts, so I would take their data and basically just do my own riff on it. It was quick and dirty, but our subscribers thought we were sharing great info.”

Harder and Faster

As the millennium turned in 2000 (“actually, it turned in 2001, but let’s not go there,” says Lepus), Rapid Reproduction stayed current with the new media and channels. “Actually, my background in rabbit research stood me in good stead, as the rapid proliferation of all this stuff was not a foreign concept to me. And in some ways the name of our company became especially apt, as we were offering all these things to our customers, as well as using them for our own purposes.” In 2001, Rapid Reproduction started a **blog** where they offered not only practical software usage and file-formatting tips, but also media trends. They started a weekly **podcast**—“The Rapid Running Commentary”—hosted by Lepus and his business partner Harvey Dowd. “I was really the face of the company; Harvey tended to be invisible.”

Today, Lepus is an active participant on **social media** like **Facebook**, **LinkedIn**, and **Twitter**. The company also uses **online video** to educate customers about the printing process, how to properly format files, as well as all the new media marketing options. “I may be in my mid-60s, but I’ve never lost my curiosity about new technologies. Look at the history of Rapid Reproductions—when has *anything* ever stood still? In fact, my company was only really made possible by a brand new technology, photographic platemaking. It transformed the industry in its day, enabling the emergence of new kinds of printers. Technologies today do the same thing—we just need to realize that instead of ‘printers’ you just need to say ‘communicators.’”

Lepus was the first on his block to get an iPhone and an iPad, and became active in app development. “I came up with an idea for a **smartphone app** for print buyers to find the nearest commercial print shop,” he says. “I tried

Webb & Romano

to license it to a major trade association but they had no idea what I was talking about. But, again, it was just a way to figure out how to do app development. So now we can offer it to other companies.”

While Lepus is active in online social networking, he also sees the importance of old-fashioned in-the-flesh networking. “I attend **local business events**, Chamber mixers, Small Business Association meetings, local American Marketing Association functions, and so forth. I can walk up to any business owner or manager and give them no fewer than five brand new ways of marketing their business.” He also draws on his own family for inspiration. “I have kids and grandkids now and I have always drafted them into working for the company, not just because they’re a great source of cheap labor, but also I get to observe how *they* interact with media and new technologies. I have a nephew who likes to text while skateboarding, which I am hoping is not the wave of the future. Fortunately, one of my clients is a local urgent care center.”

The Final Word

Lepus says that one of the keys to making it all work was setting up a separate business to handle all the non-print media work. “Rapid Reproductions has a tremendous **brand recognition** here in Toast, even if they only recognize it while driving by. But it is still predominantly a print business. I set up Fast Rabbit as a more or less independent services company to handle marketing strategy services. So far, we’ve been going gangbusters, and the print work that comes out of Fast Rabbit feeds Rapid Reproduction.”

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How the Channels Have Changed

What They Used To Do: 1960s/1970s

- Yellow Pages advertising
- word of mouth and referrals by designers/print buyers
- signage
- trade association listings

What They Do Now: 2000s/2010s

- Web site
- location in well-traveled strip mall
- blogs
- online video
- social media
- signage
- location services
- sponsorship of local events and organizations
- Larry’s pun of the day on Twitter