

Alex Scott

Print needs leaders with courage and vision

Look at the print industry today and what do you see? An industry that sits at number six in the top 10 of industrial value within the UK (its total value circa £15bn), comprising an estimated 12,000 companies. Yes, that's 12,000 companies.

The sheer magnitude of the print sector is quite staggering, and yet in terms of its composition, print is still a cottage industry.

Equally, it is an industry of two extremes. For example, the top end boasts major corporations, with hundreds of millions of pounds of turnover, and at the other end, the majority of SME companies struggle to turn over anywhere approaching £1m while retaining a decent margin.

Within such a highly fragmented industry, there are obvious issues that impact the sector. But it seems increasingly obvious that one of the key issues is a need for leaders with stature and presence: people who stand out in the industry and can act as a single voice to try and create a platform for change, and therefore a better future. Good examples in other industries might include Steve Jobs in computers, Sir Alex Ferguson in football, and Sir John Harvey Jones in manufacturing. Currently, I don't see anyone fulfilling this role in print.

There are of course dealmakers and a few personalities, but these individuals are hardly shouting "change" from the rooftops for the future benefit of the industry.

Considering all of the above, my question is: can this state of affairs be maintained in an industry that's crying out for leadership and mass consolidation, as well as a drive to professionalise itself? In other words – where have all the leaders gone?

Let's examine *PrintWeek's Power 100* of leading industry figures. The figures represent an excellent cross-section of the industry, from manufacturing to suppliers and peripheral service providers. Clearly, all of these individuals are doing a great job for their companies – very committed, very focused and professional in every respect.

But what is being given back to the industry? This question not only applies to the *Power 100*,



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but to every business manager and owner across the sector.

How would you define leadership, and how would you quantify what is needed for the print industry in 2005 and beyond? Leadership involves showing the way, directing or guiding, influencing – generally "going first". In other words, inspiring others to follow a lead by creating a compelling vision of the future.

In my experience, I find that far too many managers are generally too reactive, rather than being proactive. It's time for change.

The issue of change has an ongoing effect on the print sector. The threats of new technology, competition and overcapacity are ever-present. And one of the biggest threats at the moment is a regulatory one.

The impact of regulation on business today is truly overwhelming. Combining the sheer volume of directives coming out of Whitehall and Brussels, small companies are simply not in a position to respond to every new rule. I have no doubt that every SME in the UK is probably in breach of some rule, and they don't even realise it. This fact alone convinces me that there should be a move for major consolidation in the sector.

Companies with a sub-£5m turnover do not have economies of scale, not in terms of their buying power, internal resources, or their potential to leverage deals. Perhaps more importantly, consolidation would drive greater efficiencies, cut out overcapacity and therefore improve margins.

There are several positive leadership-orientated initiatives going on in the industry at the moment. However, we need more high-profile individuals to create positive change.

I am convinced that one person of sufficient charisma can be a catalyst for change, a "transformer" in any organisation. Such an individual is the yeast that can leaven an entire loaf. It requires vision, initiative, patience, respect, persistence, courage and faith to be a transforming leader.

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