Is Your Technology Partner Driving Your Business Forward?

5 things to consider when evaluating your partnerships.

By Jim Tomblinson

MODERN LITHO

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If there's anything I've learned in my 40 years at Modern Litho, it's that having the right technology is critical for the health of your business. And having the right partner to support that technology can make or break your ability to be successful. The good news is that there are tons of technology providers out there who want to partner with you. The bad news is that most of them are just in it for the sale. I've found that a real partnership is more than a sale—it's a relationship that requires trust and commitment. You want someone who will be honest with you and there to support your business for the long haul. And most importantly, you want someone that has your business' best interests at heart.

THESE ARE THE FIVE THINGS I CONSIDERED WHEN EVALUATING POSSIBLE TECHNOLOGY PARTNERS:
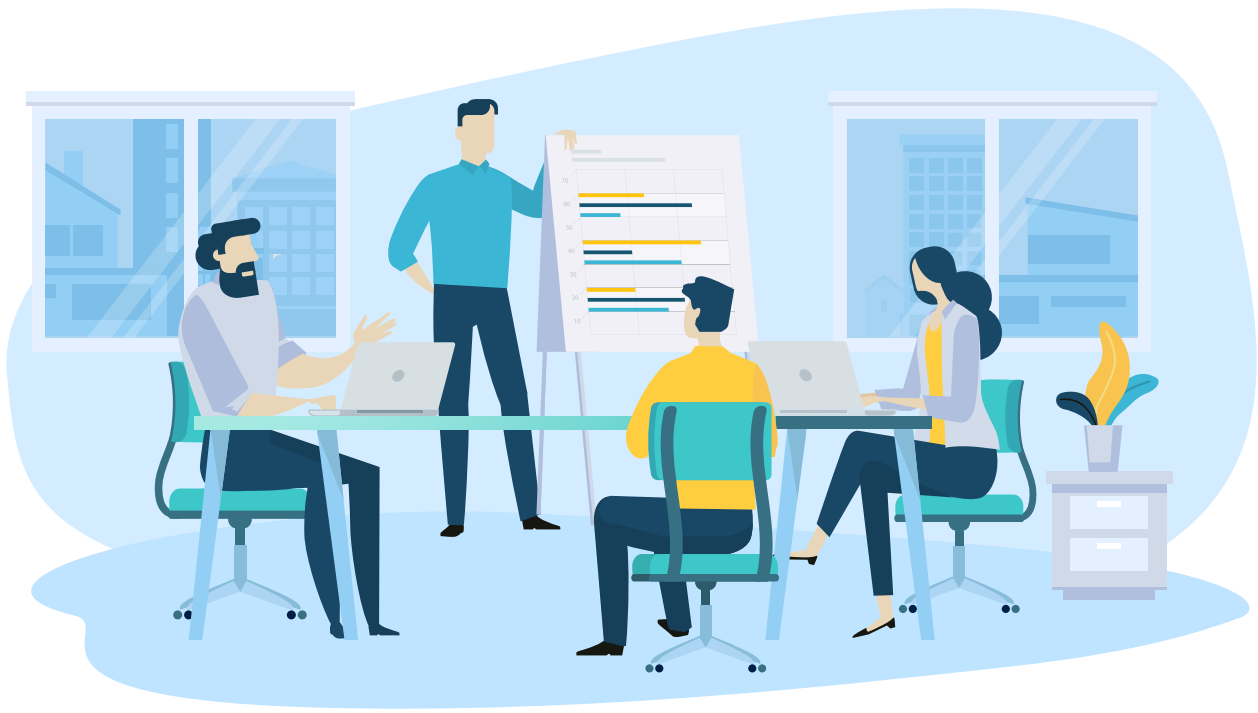
1 Are they invested in helping me grow my business, or are they just trying to sell me a product?

Being invested in your growth means having an understanding of where your business is today and where you want to go. I recommend looking for a partner who understands your strategic vision as well as the software and hardware needs, so they can help you think through all the details. You'll also want someone who can stand behind their products from the moment they're brought to market—who really knows the ins and outs and the value they can bring for your business. In addition to product expertise, you'll want someone who has a track record of delivering on their promises. They should support you every step of the way so you get the maximum value from your investment.

Your ERP/MIS system is the lifeblood of your business and it should wow everyone on your team—from sales to shipping. If your current system isn't getting rave reviews from the people who use it daily, you should be evaluating why. For too long, we as print shop owners have stuck our heads in the sand without asking if a better system exists. We're too caught up in the daily operations to think about a better way. But we can't allow our MIS to push us backwards just because the software company doesn't want to invest in new technology. If you want what's best for your business, it's worthwhile to take the time to find a software partner that's investing in the very best technology and investing in their relationship with you as a customer.

2 Do they have the expertise and support to help me integrate business and production solutions so I can move beyond the disconnected systems my business runs on today?

Managing multiple disjointed systems is time consuming and leaves too much room for error. By integrating your business and production software, you can reduce friction within your business and also discover new growth opportunities. You'll want a partner with an open and agile platform that allows for a centralized software architecture that can seamlessly connect and exchange data between systems and applications. Furthermore, you'll want one that can help you unearth new opportunities for growth with analytics and artificial intelligence.

One of the best parts of integrating your business and production solutions is fully comprehensive analytics, but make sure you're getting analytics that are presented in a format you and your staff can actually use. Look for a partner that can give you simple, intuitive reports that show you the areas where you can cut costs and streamline your business.

In addition to powerful analytics, you should also be looking for a provider that employs artificial intelligence that can turn your data into actionable insights for growth.

3 Does management listen, understand and care about my unique business challenges?

It's one thing for your account rep to care about your business, but does their leadership care about businesses like yours? Look for the company who is investing in innovative print technology to solve the challenges of tomorrow, not just today. Are they selling you as a plate customer but discontinuing plates? Are they equipped to help you make the transition to digital if that's where your business is headed? Leadership should demonstrate that they care about the products that impact your business and are putting research and investment dollars towards them – from plates to inkjet to software automation or wherever your sweet spot may be.

4 Have they taken the time to ask about my experiences with my current software, and do they understand how their product impacts my business?

There are certain programs you can always count on to roll out and work as they should. Microsoft programs are a great example. Adobe programs are another. As printers, we need our ERP/MIS systems to do the same, so look for a provider whose software is going to roll out smoothly and seamlessly.

How many times have you upgraded your system with a particular software, only to find out you have issues due to the upgrade not being tested properly? It could be hours or days before you have everything working again. Meanwhile, you may have missed deadlines or compromised your customer service. Make sure the product has been tested with businesses like yours and will move your business forward, not slow it down.

Another thing to consider is that many ERP/MIS systems are strong on the business side but weak on production, or vice versa. Business owners cannot afford to be fighting with their systems to make up for weaknesses or vulnerabilities. I strongly believe it's time for printing companies to demand more from their systems. Margins are too thin, and the competition is too fierce to accept mediocrity.

Most importantly—look for a partner that puts your needs first without surprising you with unforeseen costs throughout the process. They should be integrating the solutions you need to run your business effectively and working with you to get the most out of your system.

5 What is their data security & monitoring strategy and how does it work?

Sitting back and hoping your data will never be compromised is a recipe for disaster. We need to take control of our security by looking for partners who have the backbone and experience to handle the challenges we all face today. Over 80 percent of all intrusions come from human error. These errors cost billions of dollars each year and in addition to the costs associated, you're also putting your reputation on the line with your customers.

If you haven't yet moved your software platform to a secure, cloud-based platform – you are putting your data and your customers' data at risk. By moving to a cloud-based workflow system, your security doesn't just fall on the shoulders of your in-house IT team. Instead, you get enterprise security from a company that specializes in safe data storage, with millions or even billions of dollars in R&D behind it. Another benefit is real-time monitoring that can detect and eliminate vulnerabilities before they become a real threat. Leverage Artificial Intelligence to get smarter and even more secure each time.

Print manufacturers have historically been behind when it comes to technology. But by actively seeking a technology partner that can integrate your systems, eliminate waste, identify new areas for growth and increase your security—you will set yourself up for long-term growth.

We at Modern Litho are making big, bold changes that are going to carry our business into the future.

If you want to learn more about why and how, we're documenting our journey with KODAK and invite you to follow along.

Click here to watch our progression to end-to-end workflow.