TRG REWRITES THE ECONOMICS OF CORRUGATED PRINTING

Kevin Miller explains how centralized digital preprint could give a century-old packaging business a more responsive future

A snack goes viral. Millions watch, demand surges, and a brand discovers that marketing success can become a supply-chain problem. The packaging supplier must respond before enthusiasm fades. For Kevin Miller, president and chief executive officer of TRG Packaging and Display Solutions, this is the test of modern corrugated manufacturing. A box must protect a product, but the business making it must also help its customer capture an opportunity.

TRG's answer involves more than buying a digital press. Its investment in a BHS Jetliner Xceed industrial digital preprint system, the first installation of its kind in the United States, is intended to change how an entire production network operates. By moving printing upstream, the company aims to combine centralized graphics capability with local manufacturing responsiveness. The interesting question is how much value one installation can create beyond the building that houses it.

The company has plenty of buildings. Previously known as The Royal Group, TRG traces its history back more than a century. Miller describes a network of 23 corrugated manufacturing locations and more than 50 physical sites when fulfillment operations and other facilities are included. Many businesses retained their acquired identities. The recent rebrand brings them under a common name and a promise of a consistent customer experience.



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Behind TRG sits the Schwarz family and Schwarz Partners. Miller, who joined the business 20 years ago, credits its culture with preserving local initiative while supporting substantial investment. Plant managers retain an entrepreneurial role; employees should feel that their contribution matters. That combination becomes more consequential as technology connects operations which once worked more independently. A unified network still needs people who understand local customers.

The pandemic sharpened the case for investment. Miller recalls orders falling abruptly in early 2020, then demand accelerating so quickly that the industry struggled to keep up. Manufacturers which had already invested enjoyed an advantage. Those ordering equipment later faced much longer waits. TRG installed a Durst digital press in Pennsylvania in 2021, gaining experience of customers' appetite for faster responses and more flexible graphics.

The commercial environment has since become harder. Miller points to rising costs, competition and reductions in paper-making capacity. Customers still demand competitive prices, while expecting more agility. His distinction between being a low-cost producer and the lowest-priced supplier matters. Sustainable competitiveness depends on removing unnecessary cost throughout production and distribution, rather than repeatedly surrendering margin at the negotiating table.

Graphics are part of that calculation. Traditional preprint can require brands to commit to substantial runs before knowing whether a design or message will work. If it disappoints, unused material may become obsolete. Digital printing gives customers greater freedom to test, adjust and respond. For an emerging brand, smaller commitments can reduce the exposure associated with launching a product. For an established one, flexibility can support changing campaigns and unexpected demand.

Packaging also communicates something about the product inside. Miller argues that strong graphics and consistent color reinforce a brand's quality, while poor print can undermine it. Yet marketing enthusiasm must survive procurement scrutiny. The supplier's task is to explain the commercial value of the whole program, including responsiveness and inventory risk, alongside its production cost. Attractive printing alone is an incomplete proposition.

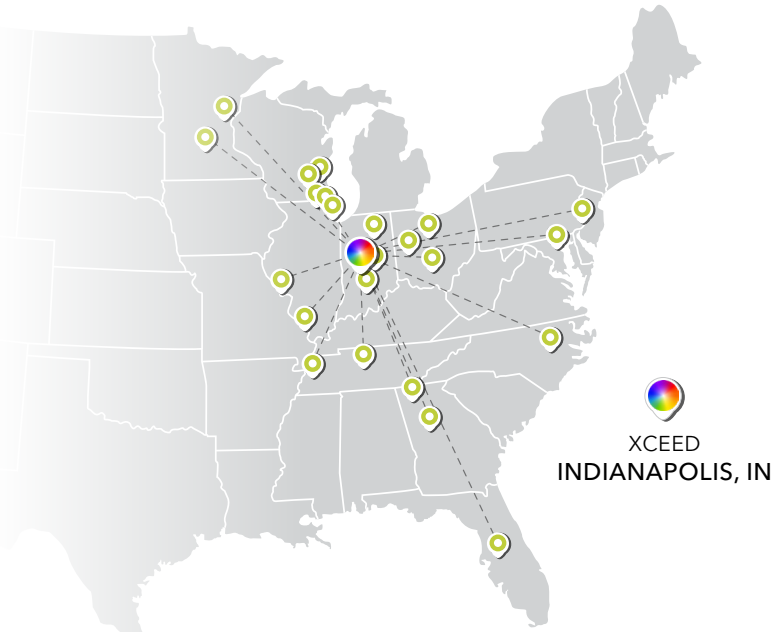
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TRG's network strategy seeks to make that proposition available more widely. Rather than installing another digital press at each selected site, it has chosen a centralized preprint model in Indianapolis. Printed rolls can travel to corrugator-equipped plants; printed sheets can supply other operations. Miller also describes the option of producing sheets in Indianapolis, potentially removing freight stages. The appropriate route depends on where material is needed and how it will be converted.

For local plants, this changes the capabilities they can offer. An operation accustomed to two- or three-color industrial packaging can gain access to sophisticated digital graphics without replicating the central printing investment. It can also draw on central graphics and project-management expertise. The intention is to preserve the short turnaround times customers expect from a nearby sheet plant while expanding the range of work it can undertake.

The capital implications are equally significant. Printing upstream may reduce the need to purchase additional multi-color converting equipment at individual sites. It can simplify downstream work, reduce print setup demands and free capacity on existing machinery. These are opportunities rather than universal, measured results: the gains will depend on the work being processed. But they suggest why digital's economics should be assessed across a network, not solely press by press.

Execution remains demanding. Miller stresses that equipment achieves little without people who know how to use it. TRG's longstanding relationship with BHS Corrugated helped support a decision involving pioneering technology. He acknowledges startup challenges and credits the supplier with helping resolve them. The relationship illustrates a broader requirement of industrial adoption: both parties must be willing to work through difficulties after the purchasing decision has been made.



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One connected network.

Customers must collaborate too. Miller favors commitments which allow suppliers and buyers to plan over one to three years. Greater predictability supports investment and process improvement. Understanding what happens to packaging at the customer's premises, and helping the customer understand how it is manufactured, can expose efficiencies neither party would identify alone. Constant threats to switch suppliers for a lower price make that work harder.

For all its enthusiasm, TRG remains print agnostic. Lithographic labels and flexographic printing retain their roles. A stable, repeatable program may suit a different process from a test launch or rapidly changing campaign. Miller's argument is that customers should receive the best production route for their needs, even after a major digital investment. The ultimate measure of success is therefore straightforward: whether TRG helps customers sell more, and replenish demand efficiently.

A faster press is useful.
A more responsive packaging network could be considerably more valuable.

