



PRINTING INDUSTRY PERFORMANCE & INSIGHTS

Providing regional printing association members
a printing industry outlook view and actionable knowledge.

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2023-2024 Growth for Specific Printed Product Areas

Insights from our Printing Industry Performance & Insights Survey

From February/March 2025 Survey

***2023-2024 Growth for Specific Printed Product Areas
Insights from our “Printing Industry Performance & Insights” Survey***

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Introduction

In our February/March 2025 “*Printing Industry Performance & Insights*” survey, we examined nine printed product areas (listed below) to assess their current growth trends. While the sample sizes for each category were not large enough to yield statistically definitive results, the findings, along with our comments, may help printing company leaders gain a better view of the big picture. Our goal is to help printing company leaders better understand the broader market landscape and identify potential areas of opportunity.

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Political or Election Printing

In our survey, we included this question: “How did your firm's 2024 political/election revenue compare to your expectations?” Respondents answered on a one-to-five scale with these options: Much less than expected (1), (2), Pretty much as expected (3), (4), Much higher than expected (5). We had 39 responses, with an average of 3.13. That’s a little on the positive side, a little above “pretty much as expected.”

Prompted by an association leader, to assess the difference in political/election printing since the last presidential election, we asked this question: “How did your firm's 2024 political/election revenue compare to its 2020 political/election revenue?” Respondents answered on a one-to-five scale with these options: Much less than 2020 (1), (2), Pretty much the same as 2020 (3), (4), Much higher than 2020 (5). Thirty-four responses averaged 2.94, just a little below “pretty much the same as 2020.”

These averages suggest that political/election printing demand is staying consistent.

We also asked, “If your political/election printing revenue changed significantly in 2024, you might share why.” Some of those responses are below.

- Hotly contested local elections with volatile issues. We don't engage with regional or national political races because we require payment upon delivery of service. Regional and national politicians won't abide by those rules, and we are not flexible.
- Increased the number of government agencies and their support groups we dealt directly with, and not through a Broker.
- Yes, our political revenue increased by 25% over the last primary cycle and 60% over the previous year.
- The party we usually do work for in IL didn't have candidates, so they didn't put money into this cycle.
- Statewide and national elections were bigger.
- Decreased. Not sure why. Possibly not as many contests near us.

- There are less campaigns using print. The larger campaigns are printing out of state. Social media is playing a big role in political printing. Also, the price of postage is affecting campaign mail.
- Made some new helpful contacts.

Here are a few takeaways from the responses shown above. Although the political/election market appears somewhat stable in the averages above, the nature of local elections may greatly influence how much political/election printing is procured from individual companies. Social media and increasing postal rates may challenge political/election printing. If your firm heavily depends on political/election printing revenue, you might keep these factors in mind. In our first printing business, we produced a decent amount of political printing. However, we didn't seek political customers; they knocked on our door. If you are focused on political/election printing revenue, market it and sell it.

Here's a thought: I wonder if political bias affects what political customers printing company leaders seek?

Mailing Printing

We asked, "How has your firm's mailing printing revenue changed over the past year?" Respondents answered using a one-to-five scale: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). Sixty-two printing company leaders responded with an average of 2.53. That average is a bit on the downside of our scale.

To see how USPS price increases have affected mailing printing, we asked, "To what extent have recent postal price increases affected your customers' mailing strategy?" with these one-to-five scale options: Not at all (1), (2), Some (3), (4), Greatly! (5). Sixty respondents answered with an average of 2.72, which is a little toward the "not at all" side of our scale. That was a bit surprising. One would expect continual postal rate increases to have significantly affected customers' mailing strategies.

It's interesting that our average for the "How has your firm's mailing printing revenue changed over the past year?" was a bit on the downside of our scale, indicating a potential decline in mailing printing, but our "To what extent have

recent postal price increases affected your customers' mailing strategy?" answer average didn't strongly point to USPS price increases as a drag on mailing printing.

To take a deeper look at mailing printing, we asked, "If your firm's mailing and printing revenue changed significantly in 2024, you might share why." We share the responses below in two categories: positive responses and negative responses.

Positive Responses

- In the opinion of our customers who use direct mail, they find that method to produce the best results in terms of communication and revenue generation. Federal funding and grants are likely to decline, and our non-profit customers have been stepping up their fundraising programs.
- Political work. Increase – growth in direct mail and growth in political practice. One of the partners is a political consultant, and they have a growing consulting business.
- Mailing sales increased last year as we obtained a new customer who mails 35-50 projects with us each week. Small runs but great work for us.
- We have put a focus on direct mail and omnichannel mailing.
- We picked up some customers who use small direct mail frequently.
- Political season.
- We are actively pursuing projects and clients that involve and require mailing
- We had one client who upped the number of pieces mailed dramatically. This resulted in a significant growth in pieces mailed.
- We have purposely added sales reps and spent more on marketing.
- Our largest customer is using direct mail as a major part of their marketing mix.

Negative Responses

- We had two major publications that either reduce the frequency at which they print or reduced the total number of copies they print to offset the postage increase.
- Some are mailing less frequently and turning to social media.

- However, the July 2024 huge postal increases have reduced mailing quantities and frequency of our "regular" work.
- Mail is not being delivered in a timely manner.
- Postage continues to eat into the budgets of people who mail. Additionally, the USPS's actual mailing service has continued to decline, which is making people consider alternative methods and trim back print & mail.
- A single large client repositioned some of their volume from us. A change from offset printing to inkjet production. We don't offer inkjet web printing.
- Some of our larger mailers have narrowed their target audience, and they have reduced the number of pieces that they mail.
- One customer is consolidating eight books into one.

There is a long-term downtrend in mailing. From 2008 to 2023, first-class mail volume fell 50%, from 92 billion to 46 billion pieces; marketing mail decreased by 40%, from 99 billion to 59 billion pieces; and periodicals sank by 65%, from 9 billion to 3 billion pieces.¹ Some of the responses above may reflect the mailing downtrend – customers downsizing their mailing. However, as shown in our positive responses, there are customers who see value in printed mailings and are using them more. If mailing printing is a key component of your business, continuing to identify potential new customers and “selling” to them is vital. Continuously add to your customer base and insulate your firm from customers who step away from mailing printing.

Also, market the value of mailing printing. Build stories of why mailing printing is effective, with examples of how it helped customers. Consider printing pieces to mail to a mass of potential customers. (In one of our previous studies, it was surprising to find how few printing firms use printed products to promote their firm.)

It is interesting that a couple of our positive responses pointed to political work as a positive for 2024 mailing printing. I wonder if 2024, as an election year, moderated USPS’s negative effect on printed mailing. We’ll see.

¹ 21st Century Postal Worker as referenced by ChatGPT.

Also, from our comments, it appears the effectiveness of USPS's services is declining. It's vital that firms producing printed mailing proactively seek the best approaches for dealing with USPS. You might specifically assign that task to one of your administrative team members and ask them to produce monthly reports. Related, I recently saw an ad on LinkedIn where a printing company stated, "We know more about the postal process than the USPS does."

Here's one last thought from the survey responses and our industry observations. It appears that digital printing technology is affecting printed mailing effectiveness and production efficiency. If printed mailing is a significant part of your business, it appears that you should continually explore the technology options for your product.

Packaging Labels and Top Sheets

We asked, "How has your packaging labels and top sheets revenue changed over the past year?" These were the one-to-five scale answer options: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). The average from our 32 responses was 2.66, which is a bit toward the decline side of our scale, down a little.

We typically connect label business growth to GDP, and the U.S. grew at 2.8% in 2024. Although 2.8% is a little below the 3.2% average over the past 70 years, we were a bit surprised by the 2.66 average response.² This prompted us to seek potential challenges to "packaging labels and top sheets" revenue.

One thought that surfaced was potential previous customer oversupply. Manufacturers, in response to COVID-19 and recent paper supply chain issues, may have overstocked labels in the last few years. Indeed, one of the respondents shared, "We had a few customers comment that they had over-ordered in 2023 due to shortages and supply chain disruptions of 2021-2023." If previous overstocking limited 2023-to-2024 growth in packaging label/top sheet revenue, we might see more growth in this product area in the coming years.

² We acknowledge that our small sample size may not accurately reflect all label printers.

As another challenge, environmental sustainability's gaining traction may prompt customers to seek and design packaging that uses fewer materials, which may result in fewer labels or top sheets. Also, packaging label/top sheet procurers may seek lower prices, and that may challenge revenue growth.

We are not painting a negative view of the packaging label/top sheet business environment. We are merely providing thoughts to consider in seeing your business environment. Multiple respondents reported that their packaging label/top sheet revenue was "Up substantially!" One respondent pointed to "efforts in sales" as the basis for building their packaging label/top sheet revenue. That's consistent with what we often see in our financial benchmarking studies – higher performing printing firms invest more into sales and marketing.

Paperboard Packaging and Folded Cartons

We asked, "How has your paperboard packaging and folded cartons revenue changed over the past year?" Like above, the one-to-five scale response options were as follows: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). Our average among 22 responses was 2.95, which is pretty close to "No change."

One of our respondents with solid growth in this product area pointed to "new equipment" as the catalyst for that growth. Digital printing is evolving in this product area, which accommodates short runs, fast turnarounds, and personalization. A respondent shared, "We run smaller orders, so our business picks up when the economy is not doing so well." Automated finishing (die-cutting, folding, gluing) is another area to consider. Firms focusing on paperboard packaging and folded cartons might continuously review new technology and assess potential costs and benefits. As I say often, when considering adding technology or equipment, build a pro-forma budget indicating the potential return on that investment and the revenue needed to provide that return. Then discuss with your team the feasibility of that revenue.

I see "mission" as necessary in this printing industry segment. Mission includes two key items: What is our target market? And what value do we provide customers in our target market? Should you target specialty foods, cosmetics,

pharmaceuticals, or others? Should you provide your target market with more than printing? Should you also provide services such as design or brand consulting? If you provide additional services, do you develop them in-house or build strategic alliances with capable vendors? These are strategic questions to consider.

Corrugated Cartons

Like the products discussed above, we asked, “How has your corrugated cartons revenue changed over the past year?” And again, respondents had these one-to-scale answer options: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). We had ten responses with an average of 2.9, which is close to “no change.”

There are positives in the corrugated carton market. E-commerce is expanding (I see delivery trucks about every time I venture out!) and should continue to do so. Also, printing companies in the corrugated carton market may experience “customer stickiness” – Manufacturers develop long-term relationships with corrugated carton printers that serve them well. Also, there are opportunities to differentiate your firm in this market using digital printing for short and unique runs. So, our average response near “no change” was a little surprising. However, our small sample size (ten responses) and that none of those responders had a significant amount of revenue from corrugated cartons may have affected our average.

Along with the positives, there are challenges to the corrugated carton market. For instance, entering the corrugated carton market may require investment in equipment that does not easily transition to other products, like a sheetfed press that can produce multiple products. Also, a company with experience in printing on paper may have to learn the aspects related to printing on corrugated. Another challenge a company may find in corrugated carton printing is managing inventory and shipping. Corrugated cartons are big and often customized.

Yes, one may see corrugated carton printing as an attractive market. However, one should explore the positives and the challenges before committing to going down that path.

Point-of-Purchase Displays

Here's our question: "How has your point-of-purchase displays revenue changed over the past year?" Again, with these one-to-five sale options: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). From 21 responses, we had an average of 2.24, leaning to the downside of our scale.

Point-of-purchase (POP) displays are complex, with multiple materials applied in a three-dimensional format. As with the products discussed above, printing firms in this market may need special equipment. Three respondents with solid POP display revenue growth pointed to equipment additions as the catalyst for their growth.

We wondered if the following two factors may challenge POP display revenue growth. First, as we see multiple printing companies adding wide-format capabilities, does that add to the competitive environment of the POP display market? Second, is e-commerce's growth and the declining number of stores (in some retail segments) reducing demand for POP displays. Two respondents pointed to the retail sales challenges as the reason for their POP display revenue decline. "People are cutting their budgets for display advertising." "Retail market struggling, stores are closing." Could these more printers in wide-format and a decline in retail establishments produce more supply but less demand for POP displays?

Books

We asked. "How has your books revenue changed over the past year?" Once again, we applied this one-to-five answer scale: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). The average for our 28 responses was 2.89, a little below "no change."

The book segment of our industry faces challenges. Many readers have transitioned to E-books or audiobooks. Indeed, I have multiple friends who listen to audiobooks during their morning commute. Some propose that younger generations are more likely to read E-books. However, it struck me on a recent trip how many of our grandchildren were reading printed books. Indeed, printed

books have a tangible value. I often smile when seeing books on my shelf that I read decades ago.

Printing firms may find it challenging to build a strategic customer relationship with book publishers, distributors, or retailers. In the third printing company I led, we had a great “bond” with a book distributor. Building that strategic relationship took time and focused effort, but it was worth the investment.

Self-publishers, such as Amazon KDP and IngramSpark, who digitally print books on demand, may challenge printing firms’ ability to increase book revenue. Related, I wonder if book retailers may apply “vertical integration” – using digital technology to produce books themselves. However, in providing for multiple retailers, printing firms may experience more “economies of scale” than a retailer printing its own books. Also, printing firms may use digital printing to reduce inventory needs for book retailers.

There are barriers to entry for the book printing industry segment. Given the expertise and equipment needed to efficiently print and bind books, along with the customer relationships needed, one would not expect many new entries into the book printing segment.

Magazines or Catalogs

Here’s our question: “How has your magazines or catalogs revenue changed over the past year?” with these one-to-five scale response options: Down substantially! (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Up substantially! (5). We had 37 responses with an average of 2.19, which leans toward the downside of our response options.

Compared to digital material, magazines and catalogs have more tangible value and engage a reader more. Also, magazines and catalogs may provide distributors the opportunity to differentiate themselves from competitors who promote only through digital media. Multiple respondents shared points supporting the effectiveness of magazines and catalogs: “Advertising in our house publication was up by 10%...” “Two customers ordered larger catalogs, and one customer ordered a catalog for the first time.”

However, there is an overall battle over the cost and effectiveness of magazine and catalog printing versus digital media. Related, one respondent shared that

“Customers are doing lower quantities and printing less overall on marketing catalogs.” If customers are reducing magazine and catalog quantities, exploring other technologies may help. A respondent shared that “One publishing client switched from offset production to Inkjet web. We don't offer inkjet web printing.”

From responses shared by leaders who increased their magazine and catalog revenue, it appears that marketing, selling, and building relationships was vital to their success: “New relationships.” “Increased with the increase in overall clients and new sales.” “A medium-sized client in 2023 moved all their work to us in 2024.” “More referrals from existing customers... all due to turnaround times.” Again, we consistently see in our studies a connection between applying resources to selling and marketing (spending more) and higher printing firm performance.

One respondent pointed to the “Benefits of focus” as the foundation for their magazine and catalog revenue growth. As mentioned above, mission is vital – who do we serve (target markets) and what value do we provide them? As suggested above, if you have a mission, consider printing it on a brochure with testimonials and putting it in the hands of existing and potential customers.

Non-Traditional Printed Products/Services

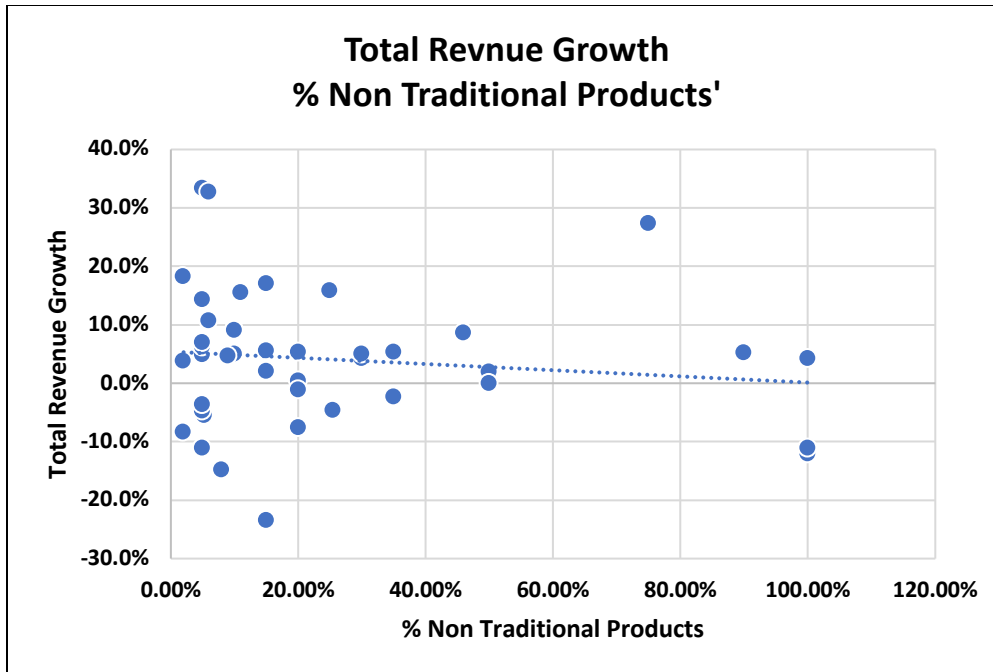
By non-traditional printed products and services, we are referring to items such as marketing, wide format, creative design, data management, apparel, screen printing, fulfillment, photography, etc. We asked this question: “How did your revenue from non-traditional printed products/services change in 2024 compared to 2023?” Here are the one-to-five scale response options: Decreased significantly (1), (2), No change (3), (4), Increased significantly (5). We had 61 responses, and the average was 3.52, which is on the “increased” side of our scale. Indeed, that’s the highest average response of all the printing company products we explored.

There are potential positives to adding non-traditional printed products/services. For instance, diversification into other products or services may make a printing company less dependent on one product, printing. Also, providing multiple products may enhance “customer stickiness” through a “one-stop shop”

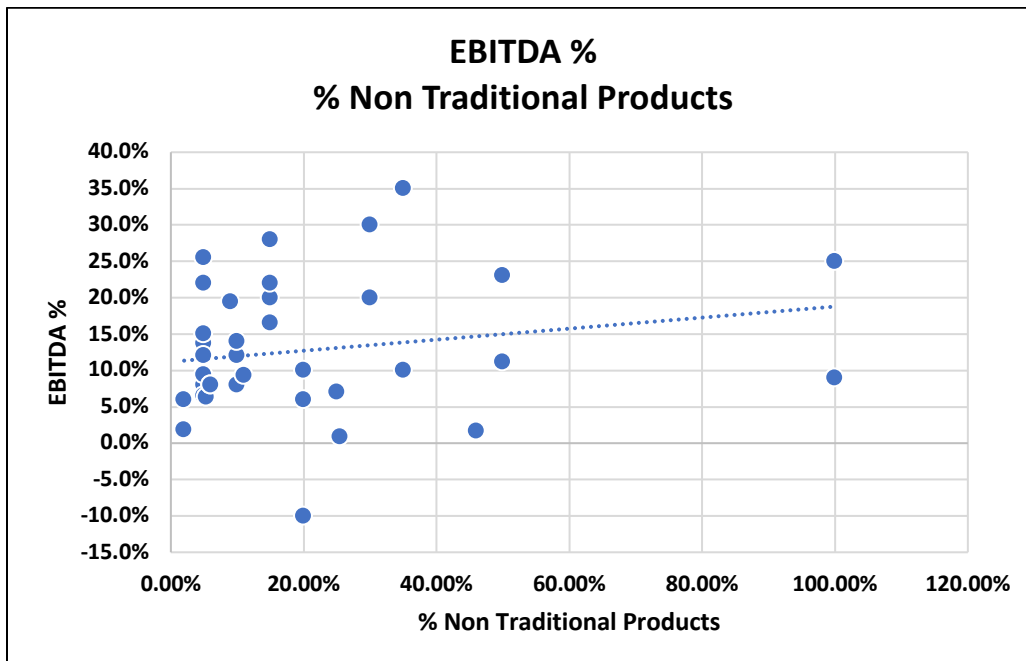
experience. Providing multiple products may prompt customers to see a printing firm as a strategic partner, more than merely a vendor.

However, adding additional products/services can bring challenges, such as the required investment in technology, equipment, and personnel. A firm providing a plethora of products/services may need different and more complex leadership and management than a firm providing only printing. Here are some questions printing firm leaders might consider when considering adding non-traditional products/services: What do our customers need, and what additional products will strengthen our customer relationships? What is the best way to add those products/services?... Build them organically or add them through a merger or acquisition? How much revenue is needed to generate a return on the additional costs and investments (proforma budget)? Is our sales team capable of selling additional non-traditional products/services? And can we compete with providers who specialize in those products/services?

In our survey, we asked what percentage of a company's revenue came from non-traditional printed products/services. We also asked for the 2023 total revenue and the 2024 total, and we calculated the annual revenue percentage growth or decline. Forty-two respondents provided revenue and non-traditional printed product/service information. The chart below shows the relationship between total revenue growth and the percentage of non-traditional products/services in revenue. You will see a negative trendline in that chart, which suggests that as more of your revenue comes from non-traditional products, you might experience less total revenue growth. That possible relationship aligns with the challenges mentioned in the paragraph above.



We also compared the percentage of total revenue generated by non-traditional products and EBITDA percentage. Thirty-seven respondents provided that information. The trendline in the chart below suggests a positive relationship between the amount of revenue generated by non-traditional products/services and EBITDA. More non-traditional products/services of your revenue may result in higher EBITDA. This relationship fits the potential positives discussed in a couple of paragraphs above.



All that said, deciding what products/services to add and effectively executing those additions is not easy. Indeed, one regional association leader shared that he has seen multiple printing firms fail at this strategy. We may explore in future surveys the effective “hows” in selecting and adding non-traditional products/services.

Closing Statement

We hope you find the knowledge provided above helpful. If you have any suggestions or questions related to this report or the “*Printing Industry Performance & Insights*” studies, please email Ralph Williams at ralph.williams@mtsu.edu

Participating Regional Printing Associations

FGA – Florida Graphic Alliance
GLGA – Great Lakes Graphics Association
GMA – Graphic Media Alliance
PGCA - Print & Graphic Communications Association
PIA – Printing Industry Association
PIAG – Printing & Imaging Association of Georgia
PIAMA – Printing and Imaging Association MidAmerica
PIAS – Printing Industry Association of the South
PIASD – Printing Industry Association of San Diego
PICA – Printing Industry of the Carolinas
PIMW – Printing Industry MidWest
PINE – Printing Industries of New England
PMA – Print Media Assoc.
VMA – Visual Media Alliance