



# Peter COBER

## PRINTER of the YEAR

With typical little fanfare, Peter Cober takes his place among industry innovators

THE FIRST THING YOU'RE LIKELY TO HEAR ABOUT PETER COBER, president of Cober Evolving Solutions, in Kitchener, Ont., is how low-key he is. Always. Peter under stress is the same as Peter relaxed. You'll hear that he's rational, ethical, and cautious. He "looses his cool in a measured sort of way," says Glenn Zavitz, owner of Ozone Communications in Waterloo, Ont., an old client and friend. Even his self-deprecation is mellow and low key: I e-mailed him that I was having a hard time finding anyone who didn't rave about him; he replied he was glad to hear they were following the script he had paid them to follow. But in the next breath most people will tell you that this all-round good guy is a progressive, innovative, and determined leader who's not afraid of making bold moves. He moves quickly when he has to, and he's adept at recognizing and exploiting opportunity. Bold, determined leaders are seldom low-key humble folk, but Peter Cober appears comfortable bucking that trend.

PHOTO: Terry Scott White

Cober Evolving Solutions, by most people's definition, is one company that is doing almost everything right. It's investing, growing, and evolving at a time when most talk in the industry is about constrictions. It has travelled over time from a small, almost run-of-the-mill commercial printer, into a communications and marketing distribution company for blue chip clients such as Sun Life, Manulife and RIM. Peter Cober is a third-generation owner. He's turned on its head the notion that the first generation starts the business, the second grows it, and the third squanders it. Instead, he's taken the company further than his father or grandfather likely ever imagined, to a place where, with 110 staff, it does offset, digital and wide format printing, distributes material throughout North America, takes online custom orders through custom-built customer sites, develops software to manage client documents, and handles e-mail, text, and PURL campaigns. Its strategy is built on investing aggressively when the market is down, adopting technology ahead of the curve, and evolving its business base in step with the economic times. Not bad for a low-key guy. Says Zavitz: "Peter is the reason they are where they are today. He sees opportunities and he's not reluctant to invest in opportunities that show promise."

**FROM THE UNDERGROUND UP**

Like a few other printing legends, this one began in a basement 95 year ago. Vernon Cober, Peter's grandfather, ran a grocery

store but kept a hand-fed letterpress tucked away on which he printed flyers. Deciding he could make more money with printed produce than vegetables, Vernon abandoned his store to focus on printing. Peter's dad, Lloyd took over the business in the 40s, still in the original location, though now above ground. Peter recalls playing with boxes in his dad's shop and getting his hands dirty with ink. By the early 60s the shop expanded, and got a new start with a Heidelberg 25" single-colour press.

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—GLENN ZAVITS  
Ozone Communications

Coming of age in the 60s Peter toyed with a music career. He played keyboards in The Countdowns, a cover band whose gigs included weddings and factory events, though it also recorded an album. He was working during the day and going to Ryerson in Toronto at night when the time came to make a choice: music or printing, or as he puts it, "fun or printing." His father made it clear what was expected of him; the keyboards were packed up.

By the 70s the shop was still in a residential area and, with six to eight employees, getting a little cramped. Peter went to Lloyd and said "Dad, we gotta move out of here," only to be told no. The next year,

after having done his math homework, he went to Lloyd again, refined his pitch, and got the go-ahead for the move. He also got a surprise. "It's time to turn the reins over to you," said Lloyd. "So if the business fails, it's under your watch." Peter became president and his sister Billie took the role of secretary/treasurer. Still in his twenties, he had learned two lessons: do your homework, and be in control of what you do.

The company moved, Peter earned his printing chops and the company chugged along for the better part of 20 years. By the early 90s he made the first of three pivotal moves. Recession gripped the land and Allprint and Ainsworth, both local printing companies decided to merge into Allprint Ainsworth Group. Peter was, at the time, the fourth or fifth largest printer in Southwestern Ontario, but the merger gave him an idea. This was an opportunity to leap to second place. In a bold, maybe scary, move Peter took on several sales people and a sales manager left out of the Allprint consolidation, expanding his staff to about 35. He bought a new 6-colour 40" Heidelberg and a Scitex Lotem 800 CTP system, moved to larger premises, and began taking on more high-end process work. "We went out on a limb," he says simply.

Robert Engel, who's been with Peter for 17 years and is the finance man at Cober, remembers that when the sales rep and manager came on board there were adjustments on both sides. Peter had never worked with sales reps before, he had done it all himself; for their part, they

weren't quite used to his "will to get it done." Engel also remembers that Peter considered CTP for a long time, but after he did the research and took the plunge, he did it full tilt. "Within two weeks of installing CTP we had stopped using film," Engel recalls.

Cober was the first company to go CTP in the area and among the first shops to put in a CTP and a 40" press at the same time. "It was transformative, it changed the business completely," says Ed Gamelin, Paperlinx general manager for Toronto and Southwestern Ontario, who's been dealing with Cober since 1986. Glenn Zavitz remembers another image from this time, before all the automation came to the shop. Peter was always on top of everything. "He always wore a button down shirt, with a paper in his chest pocket with every job going through the system. It was a big joke, he could ask any person about the jobs, but he knew where all the jobs were."

**THE DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY**

As growth continued Cober Printing moved again in 2000, to a 43,000 sq. ft. location and bought a second 40" press, this time a 10-colour model. It was the largest press in the area. But it wasn't until a few years later that another pivotal event sent the company down a new road.

After two years of study, research and thought, an Indigo 3050 arrived on the shop floor, though the short-run work expected for it didn't materialize. Erwin Driever, vice president of technology at Cober, joined the company shortly after



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—DANNY IONESCU  
vice president of sales  
graphic arts, HP

the Indigo arrived. He says the thought process went like this: "We are a printer and we have this, so let's do short run. But in short order it became, what can we do with it?" What they did is use the digital press as the jumping point, the catalyst, for

what Cober Evolving Solutions would eventually become. It began with variable data, and automation to handle hundreds of short orders cost effectively. "Those two things—variable and automation—gave us a huge advantage over the competition," says Driever.

But the services soon soon morphed into web-to-print, client web storefronts, workflow automation, JDF integration of all the presses—digital and offset—and the back end of the shop, fulfillment, and eventually to what the company does today: full communications distribution of print, e-mails, texts, and PURLS; microsite development and management; and highly customized data management and online print ordering systems for some clients, all driven by a 4-person in-house IT department. The digital side of the business has grown 200% in two and a half years, now accounting for 50% of the revenue, and the original Indigo has been supplemented with an Indigo 7000 and an Indigo 7500.

One project in particular crystallizes how Cober was able to leverage its digital assets. Peter knew he had to embrace internet technologies rather than try to fight them. He approached a large insurance company and pitched it a way to store, manage, and print its informational material and brochures online, on demand. The first reaction was skepticism: how can a printer do this? But they were open to the concept.

For four years, Peter invested in software development, though he hadn't yet clinched the sale. Eventually the client

**CHARTING GROWTH: Each building and each move ushered in changes and new directions**



Cober Printing has made three significant moves over its lifetime. From humble beginnings in a residential area of Kitchener, far left, it has upscaled to progressively larger offices. The last move was in 2010 to a space that's just over 80,000 sq. ft., above.

**CHARTING GROWTH: Four generations of Cobers build on the early foundation**



Vernon Cober, above left, caught the printing bug almost 100 years ago when he put a hand-fed letterpress in the basement of his grocery store. Lloyd Cober, his son, above centre, ran the business for 30 years, before turning it over to Peter in the 70s, above right and right.



Peter has steered Cober Evolving Solutions for more than three decades. Next up is son Todd who will pilot the company into its second century

CHARTING GROWTH: Equipment and technology has kept the company on the forefront of innovation



A Heidelberg Cylinder press, one of the first presses Cober Printing ever bought, is still part of the shop floor today. At right, a 6-colour 40" Heidelberg was a big step in the growth of the company



Moving beyond big iron, to digital printing, automation, integration and internet technologies took Cober Evolving Solutions from a printer to a marketing communications distribution company

came on board, and today Cober manages all its documents, fully templated on a secure site. The documents can be updated and ordered as the client wishes with next to no human intervention. It was a perfect example of Peter anticipating a client's needs, finding a solution and selling it.

One rhetorical question that's asked about Peter is: how is it that when other printers have gone out of business, he grows? "A lot of people buy a digital press, but don't capitalize on its growth potential," says Danny Ionescu, vice president of graphic arts sales at HP. "But he's always looking at things saying, 'I'm doing this today, how can I do it better tomorrow?'" Many in the industry are talking about doing today what he was doing years ago, Ionescu adds. Peter has refined networking with customers through a digital infrastructure, to the point that printing has become just a means of delivering the solutions that customers need.

He was also bold in the kind of customers he went after over the last 10 years—big insurance companies such as Sun Life, and Manulife, tech giants like RIM, along with pharmaceutical, education and agricultural enterprises. And he wasn't afraid to move away from other big clients, like GM, and lose their business. "He's taken risks that others do not," says Richard Armstrong, president of Heidelberg Canada. "You don't see a lot of companies doing that type of thing."

**INTO THE INTERNET AGE**

By 2009, history was about to repeat itself. Another recession; another opportunity. Having grown out of its offices again, Cober

needed a new home. Allprint Ainsworth hit an economic roadblock and closed and Peter picked up about 10 sales reps and some customer service reps, taking his staff to 110. He also bought a second 10-colour 40" press. People who were there remember it as a bit a scary time because there were a lot of changes and investments when it looked like the economy could spend a long time festering. "He took in about 30 people from Allprint, amalgamated them, bought a second 10-colour press, and renovated and moved into a new building, while the economy and the industry were in the toilet. It's amazing he kept his head screwed on," says Ed Gamelin. "His head could be spinning, but you'd never know it. I'd say 'Pete you ok?' He just smiled and said 'We're getting through it.'"

They did get through it and by the time the company held an open house last fall in

**HOW WE CHOOSE PRINTER OF THE YEAR**

The Printer of the Year Award was created to celebrate printers who exemplify the best in this industry.

The Printer of the Year is chosen by the publishers and editors of *Graphic Monthly Canada*. The award is given to an individual who best fits the following criteria: 1. A printer who, in the course of building his or her business, has changed the industry and placed his or her mark upon it; 2. A printer who has also made a contribution to the betterment of the industry as a whole.

its new building, the firm had also ventured into wide format with an HP Scitex FB700, an HP 25500 latex printer and a Kongsberg cutting table. "We had wanted wide format for some time. Clients said they were willing to support it, if we moved it in-house. We had done the due diligence, the time was right. Some just want to be a printer, they're afraid to try. Peter's not afraid to fail. If we do, we'll fix it," says Erwin Driever. The investment in a large-format printer pales against a 40", 10-colour press, but it was a risky move because the company lacked experience in the area. Yet, at the open house customers came, saw the new equipment and signed on.

Managing change is a tricky thing. But Peter has done so much of it, with so much success, that he has actually incorporated that history into the company name. Last year he adopted the moniker Cober Evolving Solutions to reflect where he intends to take the company. "In the future," he says "we may not have anything to do with printing."

Whether that's true will depend on his son Todd. Peter, at 59, is laying the groundwork for another big change—handing the reigns to the 4th Cober generation. Todd, 29, is credited as the main architect behind the expansion into digital. The plan is to build a middle management team around Todd to support him as Peter contemplates stepping away from the business over the coming years. If the past is anything to go by, it'll be a fully rational, measured and successful transition with a dash of visionary genius thrown in. Maybe then, Peter can pick up the keyboards again. 