

Earle O'BORN

PRINTER OF THE YEAR

Destination is everything. Build your own road if you have to. The CEO of The Printing House did just that

DRIVING THEIR HARLEYS through Rogers Pass in the Canadian Rockies—4,534 ft. up—Earle and Scott O'Born did not stop once to look at the view. "We just zoomed through at 100 clicks an hour. He didn't want to stop," recalls Scott, 48, the eldest of Earle's five children. Scott, who has taken many motorcycle road trips with his dad, says that's typical. "He never stops. For him it's all about getting to where he wants to go."

Earle O'Born has been on the go since he was a kid growing up in Toronto's working class neighbourhood of Parkdale. His father was a coalman; his mother worked in a factory. At 16, O'Born left school to take a job delivering type on a bicycle to downtown printing companies. At 22, he and his brother Donald bought a small letterpress shop. Today, at 68, he's the president and CEO of The Printing House—with 72 networked branch locations across Canada and annual sales in 2006 of approximately \$61 million—and *Graphic Monthly Canada's* Printer of the Year.

Not a man to retire, O'Born's eyes are still fixed firmly on the horizon. It's

essential, he says, when managing a successful business—printing or otherwise. "As the driver of a car you always have to anticipate and pay attention—but most people don't pay enough attention. If you get too involved in the day to day, you're

seeing the road ahead. You want to know what's happening in the car—you want to know that everything's under control—but your direction, your mind should be thinking ahead. Because if you miss the next turn, you're out of it. And

THE METHOD BEHIND THE CHOICE

The Printer of the Year Award was created five years ago to celebrate printers who exemplify the best in this industry. We believe we should celebrate and honour the talented visionaries and individuals who have built exceptional companies.

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.

Sponsors of the award include Heidelberg Canada. Sponsors are not involved in the selection process.



Dick Kouwenhoven '02 Warren Wilkins '03 Rémi Marcoux '04 Mary Black '05 David Friesen '06

THE PRINTING HOUSE SNAPSHOT

Year founded: 1961
Revenues: \$61 million
Number of employees: 435
Locations: 72
Services offered: Digital, variable, quick printing

today, if you miss the turn, you're definitely out of it. Your recovery is going to be difficult."

O'Born says this while sitting in his boardroom at TPH's corporate office in Toronto. While talking, he sits back in his chair, then he leans forward, then he taps his foot on the floor and then, finishing with a flourish, he drums with his hands on the table—like a drummer accompanying a comedian's punch line. He is never still.

When asked just how a manager recog-

nizes which bend in the road to take, O'Born does not answer directly, but instead launches into a question of his own, which is followed by an analogy, which is followed by an anecdote. "Someone told me once that I was a random thinker—that I jump all over the place," O'Born says. But it's not so much that his thoughts are random, but that they leap so far ahead that listeners are left scrambling to keep up. It seems we are to decipher the answers, make the connections ourselves, learn through experience.

"I'm a big believer in self learning." In fact, it's what O'Born's done all his life.

"The day I turned 16, I ran out of school," he says. "I took a full-time job [as an apprentice journeyman typesetter] that netted me \$25 per week." At 19, he got married. Then in 1961, when he was 22 and already a father of two small children, Scott and his younger sister Jamie, now 46, he persuaded his older brother Donald to buy a small Toronto letterpress shop with him. They paid \$1,000 for it. "I wanted to be a better typesetter by learning how to operate a press," he says.

For two years Donald worked at sales, while Earl taught himself to run the press and printed the orders—still working days at his old typesetting job. They ploughed as much money as they could back into the business and worked 24/7. O'Born explains: "I had been making \$14,000 a year at the typesetting job. It was a pretty good salary. Then I get into this and I'm back down to \$75 a week, which is less than \$5,000 a year. I guess I had a lot of faith in myself. I guess I was a cocky bugger to pull a stunt like that." And what did his wife have to say about this stunt? "I don't recall she said anything at all."

Eventually that marriage would end in divorce. But before that there were things to do and bends in the road to navigate. Even in 1961, letterpresses were old technology. Soon the company, now called The Printing House, switched to offset duplicators, new-fangled black-and-white Xerox photocopiers and even newer Itek cameras. TPH published a unit-based price list and offered customers "while-u-wait" service—both unheard of at the time. TPH was in the vanguard of instant printing in Canada.

Many people would say O'Born saw an opportunity and seized it, but that's not what he would say. "Personally I don't believe in opportunities. Opportunities only exist in hindsight."

Okay, if it wasn't an opportunity what was it? Well, we're back to the roadway analogy. According to O'Born, if you are really paying attention, what direction to take is obvious—and if there is no road in the direction you want to go, you make the road yourself. You don't wait for opportunities, you create them.

Which is why he created TPH's branch system—known within the company as "branchizing." Four years in, business was going so well that the brothers were contemplating expanding the shop into larger

FROM THE TPH ARCHIVES



FIRST TPH BRANCH IN CENTRAL TORONTO IN THE EARLY '60s

After his first location in downtown Toronto, O'Born decided to expand. He opted for small locations that were faster and easier to manage and that could speed up delivery by locating closer to dense business centres and customers. The second location opened in Toronto in 1965 and since then, a branch has opened every year or so, depending on market demand.

CHARITABLE OFFICE

In 1983, TPH established a separate charitable office with the mandate that, as long as TPH continued to earn a profit, it would support registered charities in Canada with donations of in-kind services, time, or money. O'Born's wife Janice runs the office with four full-time staff.



TYPIST GUIDE

In the early '70s the company identified a major shift in the typical print buyer role. Receptionists, now empowered with a Selectric typewriter, began creating documents and placing orders. TPH created the *Typist Guide* to help them create documents more efficiently.

"WE MAKE YOU LOOK GOOD ON PAPER" CAMPAIGN

During the late '80s TPH launched an award-winning radio commercial called *the Office Manager - Master of the Universe*, played by some of the original cast of

Second City: Eugene Levy, Rick Moranis, Debra McGrath and John Hemphill. The radio spots introduced TPH's trademark phrase "We Make You Look Good On Paper."

premises. O’Born’s instinct was not to go that way. He explains why not by talking about shoes. “I always compare the printing industry to the shoe business. Think about it: everybody is a potential customer and it’s competitive as hell. And how does a buyer distinguish what they’re paying for? Can the buyer really tell the difference between a \$1,500 pair of shoes and a \$100 pair? The trick is for the seller to present

himself as the distinguishing difference in his customers’ eyes.” And O’Born believes you do that through customer service. If they expanded the shop and took on many more orders, they would not be able to provide the same speedy delivery of jobs, but if they opened a second small shop at a location near a cluster of existing clients, TPH could maintain quality and even increase speed. In 1965, TPH opened its

second location in Toronto. Branches have sprung up on a regular basis ever since. In the 1970s, O’Born moved the family to Vancouver and began to open branches in B.C. and Alberta.

But when franchising became the norm in the instant printing business, why didn’t TPH turn its branches into franchises? O’Born shrugs, “Why would I give up control?”

Control is a big issue for O’Born. “I guess I’m a bit of a bully,” he admits. It’s a management style that does not suit everyone and led to the amicable departure of his brother Donald from the business 15 years ago. His admission to being a bully seems contradictory in some ways. Minutes after declaring that the only way to run a business is to be a dictator, he says that he has great faith in his employees, has no problems delegating and in fact gives his branch managers a great deal of autonomy. Can both be true?

“Yes,” says his son Scott. “He’s a great champion of his employees.” Scott has worked for TPH on and off for 30 years, starting part-time as a courier at one of the branches when he was 12. He worked his way up through bindery, finishing and finally learned to operate a press. He now works at the corporate office as vice president of operations technology. That means he oversees the digital network that connects all 72 branches and allows hundreds of orders and jobs a day to flow from customer to branch, or from branch to branch.

Daughter Jamie, TPH’s executive vice president and chair of business development, agrees. “He’s got very good emotional IQ. He’s fostered a culture of empowerment and self-direction.” Jamie recounts the story of how she started at TPH. It was during the Vancouver years. Their parents had split, Scott and Jamie stayed in Vancouver with their father, while their younger brother Jason returned to Toronto with their mother. Jamie was 18 and procrastinating about going to university. Her father wouldn’t allow her to sit around all day and hauled her into a TPH Vancouver branch. He gave her a briefcase, filled it with TPH promos, and told her she had two weeks to deliver the items to each business in the patch (TPH lingo for the 10-kilometre radius around a branch).

“Well, after two weeks I come back having done as he asked, and he fills up the briefcase again and sends me back out. And then I come back and he does it a third time and I get impatient and he tells me, ‘You are going to continue to

CHARITABLE GREETING CARDS

Each year since 1991, TPH has donated the proceeds from greeting cards it creates, produces and sells. The artwork, stock and printing are donated by Canadian artists, Buntin Reid, Domtar and TPH. Since inception, the program has raised more than \$1.2 million for Canadian charities.

CD/DVD DUPLICATION SERVICES

In 2004, TPH opened its first on-demand, short-run dedicated CD/DVD duplication branch in downtown Toronto.

ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

All 70 locations of TPH have received Chain of Custody (CoC) certification from the Forest Stewardship Council.

ONE OF 50 BEST MANAGED COMPANIES

In 1999 and 2000, TPH was recognized as one of Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies.

STAYING CONNECTED

The Printing House maintains a sophisticated coast-to-coast network to keep its branches connected. Its nerve centre is the Network Services Data Centre at the company headquarters in Toronto. The centre was created in late 1993 when TPH participated in Microsoft’s Beta program for Windows NT Advanced

Today, all locations are connected to TPH’s high-speed network, giving each branch access to powerful operating systems that generate and manage workflow, produce real-time employee recognition based on daily measurable achievements, manage information and reporting, and provide customer-relationship tools.

The centre comprises the latest technology from Dell, Cisco, Juniper, EMC, Microsoft and TrippLite. Systems are monitored 24 hours a day seven days a week combined with a network of three separate backbone providers.

All data contained in the data centre is secured with the latest cryptography, virus protection, and intrusion detection tools. Firewall devices are located at all perimeter points of the network as well as between the DMZ and internal networks, including all production and corporate operating systems. The physical area itself has biometric and other controls for restricted access with physical back-up centres located in Ottawa and MCI/Verizon Canada. Secondary systems, such as DNS and Web services, come online if there’s a problem at the main data centre. TPH employs its own internal team of Microsoft-certified engineers, technicians, and software developers.



walk the patch until you learn how to sell.' That was my introduction to self-direction and taking ownership of what I was doing. I've never wanted to work for anyone else." Today, she is based out of the corporate office and all 72 branch managers report to her.

Where then does the control come in? "He's resolute and focused. He has a very clear vision of his business model and a huge passion about how to make that model work," says friend Doug Lord, president of Xerox Canada. O'Born and Lord met in 1995 when Lord became Xerox's man in central Canada. O'Born's control is in running the business model and setting clear guidelines and sales targets for its branch managers to follow. To that end, in 1979, TPH unveiled PAR—an internal recognition and reward program wherein each manager and branch staffer is expected to strive for and achieve pre-determined operating standards. Those achieving bronze, silver, gold and platinum levels each year are financially rewarded, sent with their families to a resort in some exotic locale for a little R & R, and get their names in gold letters on the walls of corporate head office's conference room.

The control also comes in O'Born's decisions about technology. "He's always completely aware of the new technology, but he's never on the bleeding edge. He waits for the right product and the right price," explains Lord. The corporate office has a tech lab, which tests new technology before it appears in any of the branches. In fact, Xerox has used TPH's lab as a test site for its own in-development machines.

Not that TPH goes with the latest all the time. In the early '80s, TPH got into Desktop Publishing like everyone else, but O'Born always refused to equip his branches with Macs, because the majority of his customers were not publishers and graphic designers, but local businesses who were not going to give up their PCs.

The adoption of colour photocopiers in the mid '90s was to O'Born a no-brainer, but how about today? Has TPH fully embraced the decline-of-print digital world? Yes and no. TPH has long ditched the moniker "instant printer" and now calls itself a business-to-business web and on-demand printer. It uses the web to speed production and delivery, for job ordering, invoicing and tracking and for customer service, but TPH's emphasis is still on printed products. It does not as a rule offer web design and hosting. "Anyone can get a website designed and

hosted for like \$15 a month," says son Scott. "We can't make any money on that." TPH is waiting for the dust to settle a bit, while figuring out how it can distinguish itself from all the other players in that market. It currently hosts about 10 client websites—but these are not straightforward brochure sites. These are interactive and complicated sites and it's that sort of value-added service that TPH is exploring.

O'Born's emphasis on customer service has resulted in a very low profile within the printing industry. Despite his huge personality, he is an unknown quantity to most of his fellow printers. He does not hang around with industry cronies, partly because he considers them rivals, but mostly because he finds it more profitable to hang around with his customers. It's his customers who signal the bends in the road—not other industry players.

Though he has never served on the board of an industry association, that does not mean he has never volunteered. In fact, he and his second wife Janice, who he met and married when living in Vancouver, have a long track record of working for the

community. And when he wanted to move back to Toronto in the early '80s, he bribed a reluctant Janice by telling her he would set up a TPH Charitable Office that she could run. The bribe worked and today TPH is one of the few printing companies in Canada with a charitable wing. It is housed in a separate office in Toronto and has a separate staff. Its mandate is multifaceted: it supports registered Canadian charities through donation of in-kind services, time or money; it offers charities project management and labour; and it encourages TPH's more than 435 employees across Canada to participate in TPH Volunteer Days in aid of their local communities; and it offers employees the opportunity to support charities with financial donations through its Payroll Participation Program. The volunteer culture is fundamental throughout the entire TPH organization and as its branch employees help their local communities, they are generating a great deal of goodwill and customer loyalty.

The O'Borns' charity work has also garnered them a pretty impressive group of friends. They hang with Senator Jerry

Grafstein and his wife Carole, Douglas Bassett, chairman of the board of CTV Television Network and Michael O'Mahoney, president of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Kids Foundation. Not bad for a kid from Parkdale.

These days, O'Born, though still in TPH's driver's seat, plays more golf than he used to. He occasionally tinkers around his farm near Alliston, Ont., on his John Deere tractor and in his woodworking shop. He has succession on his mind. Scott and Jamie work for TPH, his other three, Jason and the two children from his second marriage, Andrew and Sara, now in their early 20s, do not. He's been thinking about the future for a while. There's on-going family discussions. But if anybody knows the outcome of these discussions—no one is saying. No doubt, when the time is right the family will navigate that bend in the road with finesse. Meanwhile, Earle O'Born will be driving down the highway on his Harley at 100 clicks an hour. ●

Freelance writer Nancy Clark is the former editor of Graphic Monthly Canada.