

Features

Channel Evolution in Action: Trade Shows Represent the Changing Industry



by Amy Weiss

It seemed timely that our “channel evolution” issue was scheduled to go into production as we were returning home from the ITEX conference. A frequent comment regarding trade shows is that they are a microcosm of the industries they represent. That has commonly been the case in the imaging channel, as trade shows have evolved along with the trends in the industry. Large OEM presences, a plethora of Chinese supplies companies, a focus on managed IT services – you name it and industry trade shows have been exemplary of the trend.

This was certainly the case at ITEX 2015, held in Ft. Lauderdale March 10-12. Once known as “the copier show,” ITEX has gone through a series of changes over the years, and in 2015, ITEX was as much an indicator of the channel evolution as its exhibitors and attendees.

As evidence of the continued importance of managed print to the channel (although the importance of the “print” portion of that title continues to be subject for debate), the Managed Print Services Association (MPSA) held its board meeting and inaugurated its new board of directors and executive committee at the event. To welcome its new officers and thank its members, the MPSA held a reception on the first day of the show at the nearby Bimini Boatyard. Hosted by MPSA corporate member Epson, incoming and outgoing officers mingled with MPSA members and guests, and the mix of members at that event was again indicative of the mix within the industry. Independent dealers joined hardware OEMs, software firms, consultants, VARs, supplies manufacturers and resellers, and more.

The evolution continued on the show floor itself, where one of the most striking examples of the changes in the industry could be seen in UniNet Imaging’s booth. UniNet, known historically as one of the major aftermarket components manufacturers, was showcasing not drums or toner, but printers. The company has evolved in a huge way to become an OEM, and is now producing label printers.

We will be exploring UniNet’s story more fully in a future article, but suffice it to say that this is a very big deal. The aftermarket has been struggling with any number of forces, causing the companies that operate within it to become stronger, smarter, and more flexible in order to survive, never mind thrive. We have seen a number of evolutionary shifts from these companies, but UniNet’s may be one of the most dramatic. UniNet demonstrated the LED-based iColor printers, which print in full color, white and fluorescent on T-shirts, cards, envelopes and other media and surfaces.

This is a revolutionary move for an aftermarket equipment manufacturer, but it is representative of the type of evolution we saw at ITEX. Green Project, another aftermarket stalwart, had a line of economy 3D printers marketed under the company name GP3D and selling for under \$600. With a small footprint and at the cost of an iPad, the Sprout printers, while not designed for industrial-strength manufacturing, could easily fall into the “hobbyist” category and make for an interesting alternative market for Green Project.

Another example of the shift in the remanufacturing and supplies segment of the industry was the Clover Imaging Group. If that name sounds only semi-familiar, it’s because its launch was announced just as ITEX began. Clover Imaging Group brings under one marketing umbrella the numerous divisions developed or acquired over the years: MSE, West Point Products, Dataproducts, Clover Environmental Solutions, OPRA, Axess Managed Print Services, MPS Engineered Solutions, Depot International and Latin Parts. From an industry perspective, it’s a major evolution, although from a trade-show sales perspective, it represents a significant loss in number of booths. Consolidation has many effects depending on where you stand in the industry, both good and bad, but it’s a reality that has become part of the environment in which we work.

Document management and workflow are also becoming an important part of the channel evolution. A section of the floor designated “document management” yielded an interesting mix of software providers, traditional OEMs promoting their scanner lines, and companies like Plustek doing the same. Plustek, just a couple of booths down from industry behemoth Fujitsu, was promoting its less expensive standalone scanners, which do not require connection to a computer (the firm also offers larger, faster devices).

Education sessions, always a good indicator of the temperature of the industry, were many and diverse as well. Included in the lineup were tracks for document management, managed services, and perhaps most tellingly, “transformation.” In “Transformation by Example: A Dealer Case Study,” BPO Media’s own Chief Analyst Robert Palmer led a discussion between PERRY proTECH’s Jeff Boate and MWA Intelligence’s Mike Stramaglio, exploring fundamental shifts in technology and workforce dynamics. The session examined how PERRY proTECH transformed its model to capture new revenue streams and reduce its dependence on print and print-related services – a definitive example of the quickly evolving channel.