AZPRO streamlines retail POP production and sales for long-term growth

Chris and Jason Prenovost started printing and installing wraps for trucks and trailers in the Phoenix area in 2004. Word of their work got out, and they organically grew their business to a company that now provides national-level branding for companies headquartered throughout the United States. Today AZPRO provides retail, point-of-sale, and point-of-purchase signage, graphics for corporate environments and rollouts, and vehicle graphics for corporate fleets.

Success drove too-frequent MIS changes

As AZPRO grew, their MIS system of choice had to evolve over the years. They started with spreadsheets, yet by 2012, they had moved to a vendor-hosted solution. As time passed and emerging technology became more reliable, they eventually landed on a third, paperless system implemented in 2018. Even with their web-based MIS upgrade, within a year, AZPRO was thoroughly frustrated based on that system's lackluster performance as reports and invoices began to take minutes to load.

Alex Smith, the company's MIS Solutions Architect, realized that AZPRO needed a new print MIS/ERP system, even though the system the company had been using had only been implemented less than two years earlier. This time, he wanted to ensure that the solution and vendor would meet their needs and grow with them.

The search for a solution

Smith scoured the internet looking for resources but found that most solutions were tailored to specific software abilities, such as just managing design and proof or just managing production and print. The next level up seemed to be a full, custom build using templates, but he wanted to avoid taking that route if at all possible. Then, he found the EFI™ Midmarket Print Suite. "EFI was on a short-list of companies that we were considering," Smith says. "They seemed like a really good fit that could grow with us over time because of the tools that they offer and the flexibility those modules present."

Challenge:

Slow invoicing and reporting on a recently installed MIS.

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AZPRO is a full-service, award-winning large format printing company that specializes incorporate branding. They offer project coordination, design, creation, printing, fabrication, color management, production, fulfillment, and installation. Their niche markets include retail POP/POS signage, corporate environmental rollouts, and vehicle fleet graphics for medium to large-sized businesses nationwide. The AZPRO team is fully dedicated to its slogan, "Going Beyond," by delivering extraordinary results every time, whether starting from a broad concept or a detailed design.

AZPRO

650 N. 99th Ave.
Suite 101
Avondale, AZ 85323

866.503.8345
www.azprogroup.com

Solution:

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- Alex Smith,
MIS Solutions Architect

AZPRO, which also uses a high-volume VUTEk® inkjet printer from EFI with an EFI Fiery® proServer digital front end, went through numerous software demos to see overall capabilities and specific solution elements to get a feel for how the Midmarket Print Suite would enhance with the company's existing business process and workflow.

In the end, AZPRO selected Pace™ MIS/ERP software, along with PrintFlow, and Metrix from the EFI Midmarket Print Suite. The Suite is a comprehensive portfolio for the print industry with scalable, integrated solutions. With EFI Pace at its core, the Midmarket Print Suite improves visibility, communication, and performance through certified end-to-end workflows designed to optimize resource utilization, eliminate manual touchpoints, reduce waste, grow revenue, and boost print businesses' bottom line. It also offers valuable Super Wide Format features and capabilities specifically designed to streamline and automate wide- and superwide-format display graphics production.

AZPRO chose PrintFlow as a component in its Suite to improve scheduling capabilities and automate them as much as possible. The company's previous scheduling method was essentially a job board where people could drag and drop jobs. Smith's team needed a tool that performed better, one that could give information without requiring multiple reports and significant mental effort to figure out how the current day was going.

AZPRO also selected Metrix – a component solution for the Suite that automates planning and prepress processes to make print operations more efficient. It features advanced automation and cost-driven layout creation tools, which help AZPRO reduce planning and prepress labor cost, and shorten job throughput.

AZPRO signed the contract and had two site visits from EFI before COVID-19 hit. Afterward, the implementation was done virtually. Smith was, understandably, nervous about having EFI remotely manage the installation while many of his staff were not on site. Having been through an MIS implementation before, he was well aware of the value of in-person interaction. However, he was surprised by how well the remote implementation and training proceeded, and he even witnessed some unexpected benefits.

Recording and saving the online meetings meant that no one missed a session, even if they could not attend due to a conflict. It also meant that AZPRO could build a personalized "mini-learning database" staff can utilize whenever they have questions. The company could not have easily done this with traditional, on-site training.

With the Midmarket Print Suite, AZPRO's employees quickly started seeing benefits in efforts to get costs and estimates under control. The PrintFlow component in AZPRO's workflow automatically determines the optimal production path for every job, synchronizing, and sequencing work. Operators can get automated, up-to-the-minute run lists for all work centers in a system that continuously factors in thousands of constraints, including customer requirements, job specifications, and the capabilities and availability of materials, tools, equipment, employees, and more.

As jobs are assigned to specific print and finishing devices at AZPRO, the Metrix component in AZPRO's Suite uses stored printer and finishing equipment speeds, stock, user logins, and permissions, along with the company's manufacturing standards, to further streamline and automate production. For example, AZPRO can automatically and

AZPRO's EFI workflow includes advanced automation and cost-driven layout creation tools, shortening the time it took the company to create new social distancing signage for clients in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

dynamically determine the optimum layout for each sheet on a job sheet. A libraryof the most successful project manufacturing plans within Metrix applies the company's cumulative intelligence to future projects, ensuring that cost-effective plans are in place for new jobs.

The benefits – especially the ability to reduce waste with accurate planning – are important because profitability depends on the efficient use of expensive large-format media. And, the workflow has a significant upstream impact on sales. How the production department will impose jobs multi-up or gang them together needs to be clear when salespeople make estimates. With the Midmarket Print Suite's integrated knowledge of costs, constraints, and capabilities, AZPRO's salespeople can significantly lessen their risk of losing jobs because their quotes are too high or the turnaround times they quote are too long.

Currently, AZPRO has implemented and is using Pace, Metrix, and PrintFlow for scheduling its Print and Production department. An additional PrintFlow implementation is underway for the company's Design and Installation departments to leverage the benefits that PrintFlow's rules-based automation can provide. "Scheduling is done through PrintFlow," Smith says, "It is a very powerful tool, but also complex. Print and Production is pretty much click-and-go, and we're pretty much set. Design and Installation are messier because they involve client approvals and input, which is more difficult. We are working through those rules now."

Result:

> "The Suite gives us a lot of flexibility in reporting. It's easier for me and the leaders I work with on my team to see the results of sales efforts in real-time."
>
> - Scott Wellman,
>   Sales And Marketing Director

Rapid improvements in management and sales

Production staff, management, and sales teams have accepted the new tools. Much of this is due to eliminating many of the previous system's issues and EFI's ability to quickly provide solutions to any problems.

The sales management team can now track how they drive sales better than they could with their previous system. Scott Wellman, the company's Sales and Marketing Director, says, "What I really like about this system is that it gives us a lot of flexibility in reporting. It's easier for me and the leaders I work with on my team to see the results of sales efforts in real-time. We can create, tweak, and get more data out easier. That's been a real positive for the leaders of our shop."

But the benefits to the sales team are not limited to management. Account managers used to create reports for everything manually. Now they can see what they need with reports that let them do their homework before approaching a client much more easily than their old system.

Considerations when starting this journey

Wellman and Smith advise anyone considering solutions like this to:

- Start with the basics and build from there. Identify the minimum viable product you need and work towards that goal without being distracted by extra features. Staying goal-oriented and looking at your implementation's practical benefits will minimize implementation time.

- Ensure that you have one or two people with a little bit of a technical background to work on this system. The EFI Midmarket Print Suite provides a lot of freedom and power, but you need to learn how to use it. Smith also points out that having someone on staff with coding experience helps to get the most out of some components in the Suite.

AZPRO's vision for the future

AZPRO strives to be the number one option in the U.S. in its niches within ten years and expects that the company will evolve its implementation of the Midmarket Print Suite to get there. The streamlined, accurate quoting the company now has, and the workflow advantages that have helped AZPRO efficiently get jobs out the door leave AZPRO looking for the next opportunities for automation within the Midmarket Print Suite. "We can expand with the Suite's Pace API. We can write any script, set it to any trigger within Pace, and have it pull information, read it, update it, and push it back," says Smith of the versatility he now has with the Suite. "We are already looking at ways to simplify the UI and increase automation and efficiency."

Knowing the range of capabilities possible with EFI's MIS/ERP platforms, Smith has learned that the Midmarket Print Suite is perhaps the only one that can handle the complexity required to manage a company as diverse as AZPRO. "There isn't another program we would use," Smith says. "If we didn't have it, we'd have to build our own."

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