



# Masters of the Pivot

## Through a Focus on Problem Solving, the Trabon Group Stays Ahead of the Curve

If you thought that digitization was going to make the printing industry obsolete, please think again. Savvy printers have found creative ways to reinvent themselves and remain relevant to consumers. Take the Trabon Group, for example. Located in Kansas City, Missouri, they know all about reinvention. To borrow the most overused word of the recent pandemic, they know how to *pivot*.

The family-owned business traces its history to the 1950s when Michael Trabon started a press shop in his garage, working at night while employed as a layout composer for the *Kansas City Star* during the day. Michael passed away in 1968 and left his 18-year-old son, Tim Trabon, a Heidelberg letterpress and instructions to carry on the family business. Tim grew the business into a nationally recognized commercial printer focused on servicing restaurant brands with hundreds or thousands of locations. When he passed away in 2018, the business stayed in the family and is now run by his son, Tony Trabon, CEO, together with Mike Magerl, President and 30-year company veteran. Employees tend to stick around, and so do clients. “Most of our clients have been with us for over 10 years,” said Tony, “which is remarkable because there’s so much

turnover in the restaurant world.”

When Magerl joined in 1993, Trabon billed itself as a general commercial printing company. But even then, there were restaurant clients in the mix. Trabon eventually had so many (over 80!) national restaurant chain clients that the company is now recognized as a specialist in printing restaurant collateral – menus, table tents, banners, direct mail and more. “It took us until 2013 to really say we’re not just a general commercial printer,” Magerl said. “We’re a restaurant services company. Now, we haven’t abandoned general commercial printing. It’s still part of our business. We just focus, from a marketing standpoint, more on the restaurant world.”

It was a direction that made sense. Trabon had invested in developing proprietary software that tracks menu items, price and calorie versioning

for location-specific menus across hundreds or thousands of locations. All the data that goes into producing a menu gets collected in a database – and the Trabon team organizes it, stores it and can segment it out to various departments that need it. The data they collect is useful to people well beyond frontline marketing.

### The Great Shutdown

And then came COVID. Restaurants were forced to shut down. And restaurant suppliers were forced to re-evaluate. Trabon expanded its services – but also stayed true to who they are. Trabon is set up for big printing jobs for companies with a national presence. “We have a distribution fulfillment facility here in Kansas City that can ship three-day ground to any location in the continental United States,” Magerl said. “That’s a

big differentiator and a huge growth opportunity for us.”

These capabilities figured prominently in Trabon’s pivot. The company began to produce the much-in-demand face shields for medical personnel at a time they were in short supply – and at a time Trabon needed to keep staff working and on the payroll. Tony calls this “problem solving on a large scale,” and it’s where Trabon excels.

“Our team isn’t just good at putting ink on paper,” Tony mentions. “We’re also exceptionally good at creative problem solving, including big, national problems. Problem solving and service are what built the business. My dad’s dad taught him, and he, in turn, taught me that you can make yourself indispensable when you help someone solve a problem.”

COVID was the very definition of a big problem. And Trabon addressed it early on. The company sold 25,000 medical-grade face shields to local hospitals in the first week. All told, Trabon supplied over 350,000 face shields to hospitals and other healthcare organizations. “We were one of the primary providers for FEMA in the Midwest,” Tony said. “We were shipping shields to New York and every other hotspot you can imagine.” While most

of Trabon’s staff were focused on face shields, part of the team was still servicing restaurant clients. Trabon didn’t lose a single restaurant client during the pandemic.

### Print – More Alive Than Ever

Once restaurants reopened, business looked different. Customers were leery about touching paper menus that other customers had handled. So restaurants introduced QR codes. Trabon had been developing digital menu endpoints as part of their menu management software, allowing the company to be in a position to help their clients immediately.

“We were asking clients: ‘What do you guys need?’ We hosted a lot of digital menus, and we versioned a lot of digital menus,” Magerl said. Tony added, “We told customers: ‘You know we’ll help you with anything that involves your printed menu. If you also need digital outputs, we’ll help you there, too.’ As a printer, you have to be attuned to your clients’ changing needs.”

Ultimately, Trabon’s restaurant clients found that digital menus didn’t drive as much revenue as printed menus. “Having a printed menu is part of the cultural experience of going out to eat,” Tony said. “As soon as restaurants

realized QR codes resulted in less revenue, they wanted to go back on press right away.”

While Trabon hasn’t touted this news to clients, the company recently invested in a Fuji J-Press, a digital inkjet sheet-fed press capable of printing oversized menus. This is pretty exciting for those in the printing industry, but most clients don’t ask – or care – about Trabon’s equipment. “Customers don’t care how we solve their problems,” Magerl notes. “They just want them solved.”

The new press does a better job at eliminating waste during the printing process and handling highly versioned print runs, which is the direction more and more print runs are going.

In a post-pandemic world, paper menus are back, while the use of QR codes is declining. According to a recent *New York Times* story, “A menu is a window to the soul of the restaurant, and a QR code has no soul.” As a result of the pandemic, Trabon now helps restaurant clients with both traditional (printed) and digital menus. After all, they’re problem solvers. At Trabon, print is alive and well – and happily co-existing with the company’s other capabilities. **PM**

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