

WhatTheyThink?

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Richard has written about communication, graphics hardware and software trends for the past 15 years.

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Growth Opportunities: A Conversation with SpeedPro Imaging President Boris Katsnelson

Founded 10 years ago, SpeedPro Imaging is a network of 120 franchises—or "studios"—located in 30 states that specialize in wide-format printing, from trade show and event graphics, to vehicle graphics, to wall murals, and beyond.

SpeedPro President Boris Katsnelson acquired the company a year ago from its original founder, and brought both his background in finance and in helping companies optimize their businesses to help develop a strategic direction for the company and its network of studio owners.

"My passion is getting involved in businesses, creating a vision of where they need to go, and then developing the strategic plans to achieve those goals," said Katsnelson. With SpeedPro, he added, "I see really a terrific brand that we can leverage and it's our franchise partners who are really key to that."

The Prime Directive of the corporate team of a franchise network like SpeedPro is giving the individual franchise owners a comprehensive series of tools and resources to, in turn, help their own customers, who consist of ad agencies, marketing firms, and other brand owners. This becomes key, as SpeedPro specifically looks for franchise owners who don't have a traditional printing background.

"The core essence of our brand is really getting business professionals," said Katsnelson. "We don't really want them to have sign and graphics experience. We want people focused on quality and customer service and who really understand that. We educate them on the print side of the business."

That said, it's the owners who also offer valuable feedback as to where the overall SpeedPro business should be going. "[The franchise owners] offer quite a bit of guidance in what they see the needs are from their customers," said Katsnelson. "They are the feet on the street, so it's critical to get their input. They're the ones telling us, we need to be looking in this area."

One of those areas is soft signage, and SpeedPro is looking to expand its equipment portfolio and thus its service offerings in that area. "You see so much soft signage out there and a lot of our customers are demanding it, so we're looking at how we can play in it," said Katsnelson. As a result, SpeedPro is currently evaluating a Mimaki dye-sublimation printer. "We have one of our owners installing the equipment in his studio in the next few months, and we're excited about what he can do. He's one of our top owners," said Katsnelson.

Another big opportunity that Katsnelson sees in the sign and display market is dynamic digital signage, although the company is still in the early stages of its investigation. "We do believe that's an area that's going to be growing," said Katsnelson. "People in the sign and graphics industry haven't truly embraced it yet, they're trying to get their arms around it. We've started to really learn more."



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Roland is one of SpeedPro's biggest partners—at present, the Roland SOLJET Pro 4 XR-640 is the starter equipment for new SpeedPro studios—so Roland's Display Studio digital signage system caught Katsnelson's eye. "What we want to deliver is a real turnkey solution for our owners to sell this to their customers," he said. "We think [digital signage] is a natural extension and we want to be there with the right solution. I think you'll see SpeedPro in that arena with an offering within the next 12 months."

To evaluate new equipment and technologies, Katsnelson appointed Tom Curry as SpeedPro's corporate Director of Technology. Curry has been with SpeedPro for a decade, ran his own studio for a number of years, and also serves as SpeedPro's North Texas regional developer. "Tom has decades of experience in bigger brands in a CTO type role looking at technology, total cost of ownership, and things like that," said Katsnelson. "He's interfacing with vendors and franchises to see what technology we should be focused on."

In addition to Roland equipment and the Mimaki machine under evaluation, SpeedPro also partners with HP and about one-third of SpeedPro locations have an HP Latex press, which the company has found ideal for its fast-growing vehicle wrap business. "That allows us to install right away without allowing the cure time that you may have with a solvent printer," he said. Most recently, SpeedPro partnered with EFI to offer the H1625 mid-level hybrid UV LED production printer, hailed for its versatility and white ink capability.

It's not all about equipment, though. SpeedPro also recently partnered with CoreBridge for its workflow and MIS system, and the company revamped its website to take fuller advantage of search engine marketing, pay-per-click advertising, and private ecommerce sites. As for this latter feature, SpeedPro is currently beta-testing a program with several of its studio owners that will allow them to log onto a private estore and build a library of products. "We're working on something right now with a 30-unit chain," said Katsnelson. "It's a parent company with all these subsidiaries, and all the subsidiaries can go in and buy the approved product that's uploaded by the company's ad agency. Our local SpeedPro can deliver that and do the installation work."

Katsnelson and SpeedPro see the sign and graphic market expanding, and in terms of its own system, is growing from a same-store sales perspective. He admits that some items like banners have succumbed to commoditization, but what's not growing strongly is at least holding steady. "A lot of people will try to be very price conscious and that's really not us," said Katsnelson. "When someone calls our studios, we ask questions first. If they ask, 'What's a coroplast sign cost?' we don't just quote them X dollars a square foot. We ask, 'What's the application for?' It's really getting to people that value what we offer."

"We want to be the go-to source for retailers, marketing firms, and other businesses that really want to maximize their brand impact," added Katsnelson. "It's the owners that do that for us, so we want to arm them with more tools. At the end of the day, we're partners with them."