



■ Miller's Professional Imaging Shifts the Course of Its Industry

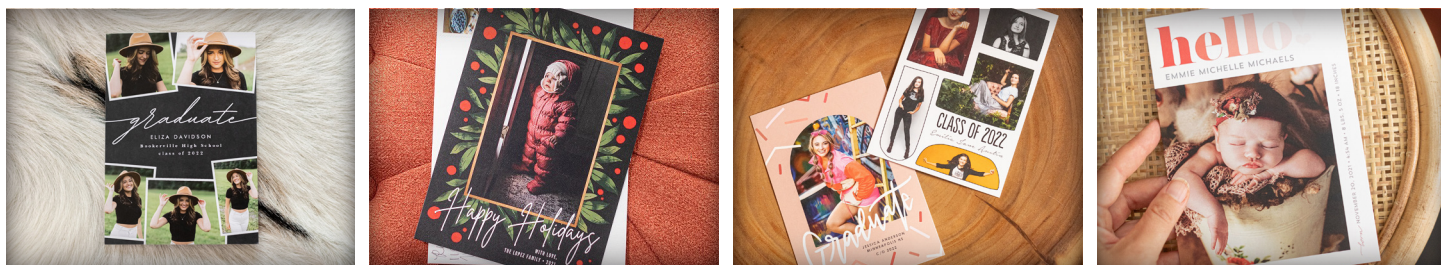
■ In 1939, Bill Miller opened a small photography studio in downtown Pittsburg, Kansas. From shooting weddings and portraiture in his studio to serving as a cinematographer on the front lines of World War II, Bill recognized the potential for a full-service photo lab and began developing prints for other professional photographers above his studio in 1964. Today, Kansas-based Miller's Professional Imaging (Miller's) is still a family-owned business with Bill's son, Richard, now the CEO and President. Bill's passion for photography grew into something larger than he could have imagined. Today, Miller's is the largest professional lab organization in the United States, providing professional prints and press products for professional photographers in all 50 states and Canada.

"In the beginning, Bill would drive around and meet with other photographers in neighboring towns and states. That's how Miller's started to grow as a lab," shared Paul Rotter, Marketing Coordinator for Miller's. "Bill's son, Richard, is also an accomplished photographer and when Richard joined the business, company growth accelerated. He dove into the business with an extraordinary focus on streamlining our workflows, reducing waste, elevating our quality and raising the bar for in-house production times. It completely revolutionized not only our business, but the industry."

Responding to digital disruption

It was Richard Miller's vision that led the company to keep pace with the fast-changing photography industry, always making sure the products delivered were as high-quality as they could possibly be, doing it as fast as possible and getting it out the door to the customer as quickly as possible. This involved investing in the proper equipment to continually improve the workflow, as well as anticipating and responding quickly to changes in the industry. One of the biggest changes being the transition from film to digital.

The introduction of the digital camera disrupted things very quickly, resulting in the near disappearance of film ordering and film processing. Miller, always alert to fast-changing business trends, anticipated the emergence of digital and ensured the business was well-equipped to face that transition by preparing it to accept, process and print orders digitally. In 2003, Miller's launched Mpix, a fully web-based digital imaging lab to service both emerging professionals and photo enthusiasts. Mpix is now considered a leading brand in the consumer photo printing space.



Keeping photography close to home

For everyone, including Miller's, the pandemic changed many of our routines. As people began working, learning and spending more time at home, more attention was paid to the home environment. While Miller's closed for a brief time as everyone around the nation sheltered in place, when the company reopened, Mpix, the company's online consumer end of the business, experienced exponential growth.

"The pandemic caused a major shift across most every retail industry, moving quickly from in-person shopping to online shopping. Fortunately, Mpix was already positioned as an online-only business," said Rotter. "Instead of going to a local photo kiosk or frame shop, people started ordering online and they haven't really looked back."

On the professional imaging side of things, business was quite a bit different. The social events that drive the professional photography industry did not bounce back immediately. At first, people weren't doing many event-based activities that typically require professional photography, such as weddings, sports photographs or school pictures. However, in the last year, that, too, has changed and is now quickly returning to pre-pandemic demand, according to Rotter.

A shift in demand spurs new technology

Pre-pandemic, Miller's was printing on HP Indigo 7600 presses using the B3 sheet size (12"x18"), making it possible to use smaller format die cutters to produce the photos and cards. However, in 2020, after Miller's re-opened for business, the company faced two challenges: its volume was growing and it was facing a labor shortage. Adding more B3 processes to handle the additional volume was not the answer. The company needed to increase productivity and keep labor to a minimum. Upgrading to a B2 size process was the logical solution. They decided to invest in the HP Indigo 12000 that prints on 20"x29", B2, sheets, making it possible to increase productivity nearly 3:1 with more images up on the sheet and a higher press speed. To complement the productivity of the new press, they also needed to upgrade their die cutting. "We actually bought a die cutter from another manufacturer first, but that equipment wasn't working well. It continually had feeding issues and, with the increase in volume, it just couldn't keep up. We just kept getting further and further behind. We knew we needed different equipment, so we reached out to MBO America," said Keith Berry, a member of Miller's technical support.

MBO America had expanded its portfolio over a decade ago to include B2 size rotary die cutting from Bograma and became the exclusive distributor of Bograma products in North America. MBO America conducted successful demonstrations on Miller's stock to prove the process. Then, Berry and others from Miller's had an opportunity to visit Shutterfly to see one of their many Bograma BSR 550 Servo Rotary die cutters in action. "We like to buy the best and the Bograma name kept coming up as one of the leaders of the industry," said Berry.

The BSR 550 Servo Rotary die cutter was the perfect solution for cutting the eight different types of flat cards the company produces that include square cut, round corners and other contoured shapes for wedding invitations, Christmas cards, graduation announcements and more. Unlike flatbed die cutters, the rotary process does not require nicks for the production process, so the edges come out clean. Furthermore, waste can be stripped out automatically, requiring no additional offline stripping and blanking labor. The flexible magnetic dies are quick to changeover, which is important when it comes to meeting Miller's stringent deadlines. Additionally, as with nearly all MBO America products, the modular nature of the machine allows for integration directly with other finishing modules, such as folders or gluers, preserving the opportunity to grow and make customized products without large investments.

"In the past, when we talked about equipment that was better built, we called it the Cadillac. I consider this the Cadillac of die cutters," said Berry. "There's nothing technically wrong with the other brand we have, but if you look closely, you can see a big difference in quality, the way it's built and its ease of use. Typically, we can have an operator trained within a day and the BSR is up and running. You can pretty much load the paper up and hit start and go. It's that quick. The dies are also quick to change out and have long life, making the BSR die cutter both productive and labor saving."

Looking ahead

Miller's reports it had its best year ever in 2021, exceeding its pre-pandemic volume. Recently, it reorganized the business between two state-of-the-art facilities, the Pittsburg lab that supports prints, wall art and film, among other products, and the Columbia, Missouri lab that primarily supports albums and books, as well as various presentation and specialty products. To keep up with increased demand, the company recently added another HP 12000 and BSR die cutter, again finding that the switch to the larger sheet size eliminated the need for excess equipment and additional labor.

"Moving forward this year, we are excited we can continue to grow without having concerns about labor force, backlogs or things that might prevent us from being able to meet the fast turnaround demands of this expanding market," said Rotter. "As the orders kept pouring in, we were able to keep up with them better than ever before. The workflow and efficiency improvements that we've made have paid major dividends."

Staying agile and nimble in its approach to business has added to the reputation of a company that delivers on its promises; so has the focus on the customer experience that Bill Miller initiated so many years ago and has led this business for decades.

"We want to provide the highest quality products as fast as we can, knowing that customers, whether they're a professional photographer with Miller's or someone looking to print personal photos with Mpix, are depending on us. A lot of times, the orders are special gifts, not only during the holidays, but also during regular times of year, and we're able to turn those orders around incredibly fast and deliver something that's very personalized. This type of customer service not only brings smiles to our customers' faces, but it also brings smiles to our faces, too, because we know as a company, we are continuing to be true to our roots."



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