

MARCH 2026

npsoaTM Magazine



Paying It Forward with Print:

The Ken Hopkins Legacy

Page 11

National Print & Sign Owners Association
An Association for Owners By Owners
P.O. Box 36, Sterling, VA 20167

THE PRINT & SIGN OWNERS' MAGAZINE OF
INDUSTRY NEWS & UPDATES



Paying It Forward with Print: *The Ken Hopkins Legacy*

by Michael Makin, MBA

A Leap Without a Safety Net

There are moments in life when the safest choice feels wrong—and the riskiest choice feels inevitable. For Ken Hopkins, that moment arrived not with fireworks or fanfare, but with a pit in his stomach and a quiet, terrifying realization: everything he had built inside Corporate America could vanish with a single decision.

After nearly three decades with Xerox, a company that once represented stability, innovation, and a clearly marked career path, Ken stood at a crossroads few people ever truly prepare for. One road offered predictability, the comfort of familiarity, and the illusion of security. The other offered uncertainty, debt, responsibility, and the very real possibility of failure.

At the time, Ken believed he had made the worst decision of his life.

What he couldn't yet see was that his decision— one that would test his faith, his finances, and his fortitude— would ultimately become the most meaningful, transformative, and rewarding chapter of his story. Not because it made him wealthy. Not because it made him powerful. But because it forced him to become something far more important: a servant leader, a builder of people, and a steward of community who would leave a proud legacy.

From Iowa Roots to Corporate Ranks

Ken grew up in Iowa, part of the last wave of the Baby Boomers—a generation known for grit, loyalty, and an unshakable belief in hard work. The youngest of five children, he attended Nebraska Christian College and studied electronics technology at Northeast Community College in Norfolk, Nebraska, a path that seemed to naturally lead him toward the booming tech world of the time.

Xerox recruited him straight out of school, and what followed was a 26-year career many would envy. He became a color analyst, helping clients build volume and efficiency, mastering both the technical and relational sides of the business. Beneath the surface, Ken was learning something far more valuable than how machines worked—he was learning how people did.

But the Xerox Ken joined was not the Xerox he left. Layoffs became routine. Departments disappeared. The lesson was painful but unmistakable: loyalty does not guarantee longevity.

Still, Ken never planned to become an entrepreneur.

(continued on page 12)



Paying It Forward with Print: The Ken Hopkins Legacy (continued from page 11)

Entrepreneurship by Fire

Like many NPSOA owners, Ken's path to print ownership was circuitous. It started when one of his clients—a land developer with more ambition than printing knowledge—recruited him to help run a digital print operation in Denver.

Ken initially resisted. He considered himself a “lifer” at Xerox. Stability mattered. Predictability mattered. But the developer was persistent, and eventually, Ken capitulated. What followed was a cascade of events that would upend his life.

Less than a year and a half at his new job, the company was abruptly moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Ken dismantled two massive Xerox iGen3 presses himself—machines Xerox wanted to charge \$100,000 to relocate—and rebuilt them by hand. In doing so, he unknowingly burned every bridge he had with his former employer.

It would only get worse. Less than a year later, he was cornered and confronted with an imposing ultimatum. “Buy the business, or I am shutting it down,” said the developer.

Ken had already sold his house in Denver and moved his family to Wyoming. He had uprooted his life for the company. All the bridges were burned behind him. There was no retreat, no safety net, no corporate lifeline waiting to catch him.

He signed the owner-financed deal and just like that

became a print owner. Not through careful planning or due diligence, but rather baptism by fire.

The Years That Nearly Broke Him

Ken does not romanticize the early years of ownership. When he talks about that period, his voice softens—not with nostalgia, but with the quiet weight of someone who survived something that could have easily ended differently.

“There were times I honestly didn't think we were going to make it,” he says. “I mean that. Not metaphorically. Literally.”

He had leveraged nearly everything—his retirement savings, his home, his credit cards. At one point, he was carrying more than \$60,000 in personal credit card debt just to keep the doors open. When one lender abruptly reduced his credit line and demanded immediate repayment, he remembers sitting alone, staring at the letter, wondering how much more he could absorb.

“With the bridges burned, I couldn't go back. So, I kept asking myself, “What did I do? Why did I do this?”

There were months when the numbers simply did not work. Jobs fell through. Large clients disappeared without warning. Competitors pivoted. Long nights became routine. And more than once, Ken and his team gathered around a table and asked the question most owners never say out loud: “Is it time to quit?”



But they didn't.

Not because it made financial sense—but because Ken believed there was still a reason they were there.

“I kept telling myself, ‘God didn't bring me this far just to drop me,’ he says. “That was the only thing I could hold onto some days.”

Independence, Finally

The turning point did not arrive with fireworks. It came quietly, through exhaustion.

After years of paying to use someone else's equipment, Ken finally decided to break away completely. The move was risky. It was expensive. And it meant starting—again—without a safety net.

But this time, it was his.

“I realized I wasn't going to survive if I kept trying to carry other people's mistakes,” he says. “I had to take responsibility for everything—good and bad—and make it mine.”

That decision would eventually become the foundation of his success.

Within a few years, he had stabilized the business by diversifying into wide-format printing and corporate portals. In 2016, he made what some owners would have considered reckless, given his tenuous finances: he bought a building.

“I told myself I'd never own a building,” he laughs. “I said, ‘No way. That's too risky.’”

But when an employee brought the opportunity to him, something told him to at least look. Within days, the deal was done. And against every instinct he had, it worked.

“That was probably the first time I thought, “Okay... maybe this thing actually has legs.”

The Power of a Positive Review

PBR was an early adopter of promoting its positive customer reviews online, and Ken is convinced it has made a difference in his company's bottom line. “We are so grateful to our customers who have taken the time to share their positive experiences, noting how we routinely exceed expectations with exceptional customer service.”

“One of our great finds from a technology perspective was Loyalty Loop, which has professionalized our relational experience with customers,” he says.

The proverbial proof is in the pudding as PBR has an enviable 4.9 rating on Google, with more than 1,000 reviews.

Built on People, Not Pitches

Ken didn't build PBR with sales scripts or cold calls. He built it with conversations.

That philosophy became the company's identity. PBR would stand for Print by Referral—a name that reflected not just how business came in, but why it stayed.

Ken believes printing is not a commodity. It is a relationship.

(continued on page 15)

“I don’t care how cheap you are,” he says. “If that’s all you’re selling, someone will always be cheaper.”

Instead, he invested in listening. In remembering names. In fixing mistakes without excuses. In telling customers the truth—even when it cost him money.

That approach paid off.

By 2025, PBR was doing nearly \$2 million annually—ten times what it had done just a decade earlier. Even more impressive, the company is completely debt-free.

PBR offers a full suite of printing, marketing, and promotional products. Its customers span a wide range of industries, though Ken has a fondness for nonprofits. He is even known in his community as “The King of Non-Profits!”

Thirty percent of his business comes from out of state.

The People Who Carried the Weight

Ken will tell you plainly: he did not survive those years alone.

His wife, LeAnn, became the emotional anchor of the business. She stepped in within the first year, taking on the weight of accounts payable, receivables, payroll, and more. She attended events and groups promoting the company. She organized and ran HR and staff meetings and stepped into production, learning most of the machines. She worked full-time off and on over the years as the business’s growing pains dictated.

Most importantly, LeAnn protected their family and provided calm when Ken carried the chaos. Together, they shouldered the weight of all that was PBR.



“There were days I’d come home completely empty,” he says. “And she’d still be standing there.”

His sister, Julie, drove nearly 90 miles each way—every day—for a year and a half to help him. She worked for little pay. She never complained.

“She didn’t have to do that,” Ken says. “But she did. And I will never forget it.”

And then there was the team. Many employees have come and gone over the years, but Ken views his current team as truly the best:

Steve—his right hand. Elia, Shannon, Valeria, Felicia, and Valerie.

Ken knows them not as job titles, but as people.

“I run this like a family,” he says. “With all our ups and downs, it’s still a family.”

That philosophy shaped the culture: birthdays

(continued on page 17)



celebrated, crises handled quietly, mistakes treated as lessons—not weapons. “I care about our people, their lives, and their work.”

“I don’t fire fast,” Ken admits. “I probably give people too many chances. But I’d rather be THAT guy,” he emphasizes.

Faith as a Daily Practice

A lifelong Christian, faith has always played a role in Ken’s decisions and how he runs his business.

“When things were falling apart, I didn’t have answers,” he says. “But I had to trust that God did and He would reveal these answers when I needed to know. That trust has proven to be the very heart of PBR.”

It has also guided him through moments when the math did not work, when the fear felt physical, when quitting would have been easier.

Every week, his building hosts a men’s Bible study before work. The business donates thousands of dollars in free printing annually to nonprofits and churches.

“I don’t see that as charity,” he says. “I see it as a responsibility.”

The Role of NPSOA: Not a Membership—A Lifeline

During the hardest years, Ken often felt alone. Ownership can be isolating, especially when you’re carrying risk no one else can see.

That changed when he found NPSOA.

“At first, I didn’t even know what I was missing,” he admits. “I thought it was just another association.”

Then he discovered the Owner’s Listserv.

“Suddenly, I wasn’t alone anymore.”

When Ken faced a problem—technical, operational, or emotional—he could ask real owners who had lived through it. Not consultants. Not salespeople. Peers.

“I can’t tell you how many times someone saved me from making a bad decision,” he says. “Or just reminded me I wasn’t crazy.”

NPSOA’s conferences became something else entirely: a community.

“It’s not about the sessions,” Ken says. “It’s the conversations after. It’s sitting with people who get it.”

For him, the association wasn’t a benefit. It was a true safety net.

A Legacy, Not an Exit

Turning 66 this year, Ken is now planning for succession. His son, Jason, a successful software engineer who lives with his wife, Nicole, in Denver, has chosen a career outside the print industry.

Retirement is on the horizon, possibly within five years. It is not because Ken is tired – but because he believes legacy requires intention.

“I don’t want this place to disappear,” he says. “This town needs a print shop, and I want it to continue to provide livelihoods to my team and their families.”

A younger successor is already being groomed. The team knows the plan. The culture will remain. Because that, to Ken, is the real asset.

“Machines can be replaced,” he says. “People can’t.”

The Best Decision of His Life

Ken Hopkins still remembers thinking he had ruined everything. Now he knows he didn’t. That terrifying leap didn’t break him. It revealed him. It taught him what he valued when nothing was guaranteed. It taught him who he was when no one else was responsible. And it showed him that the worst decision of his life became the best—not because it was easy, but because it made him useful.

More than that, his faith and obedience to God would shape PBR into something worth fighting for.

“I didn’t build this for money,” he says. “I built it so people could depend on it.”

That is his legacy. Not revenue. Not equipment. Not buildings. But people.

Michael Makin, MBA is NPSOA’s Vice President of Communications and Development. His 30 years of print experience have included serving as President of the Canadian Printing Industries Association, President and CEO of Printing Industries of America, and Chairman of the World Print and Communications Forum.

