

How a Commercial Printing Business Went From \$91K to \$431K in Net Profit in Four Months

The Situation

A commercial printing business came to us generating \$910,000 in annual revenue. On paper the business looked healthy. A loyal base of repeat clients, a reputation built on quality work, a small team that had been together for years.

Jason loved the business. That was never the issue. He had built something he was genuinely proud of and a team he respected. But he had carried a different ambition alongside it for years. Missionary work. A calling he had been postponing because the business needed him and the numbers did not give him a way out.

Gross margin was 35%. Net profit was 10%, \$91,000 on \$910K in revenue. For a business that demanded his full attention, that was not a number that gave him options. A business generating \$91,000 in annual profit cannot support a general manager and an owner living separately from it. The math did not work. He could not do both. Something had to give, and for years it had been the missionary work.

The first thing we told him was that selling was not the answer yet. The business was worth considerably less than he expected, and adding a sale process to an owner-dependent operation with thin margins would not get him where he needed to go. What would get him there was fixing the fundamentals first. Better profit. Less dependency on him. A business that could run and grow without him at the centre of everything.

We installed five systems over four months. It was not a straight line.

System 1: Profit Recovery

We start every engagement by looking for profit that is already inside the business but leaking out. In commercial printing, that leakage is structural and largely invisible to owners who are focused on production and delivery.

Job costing was the first place we looked. Work was being priced on experience and historical rates rather than true cost build-ups. Materials, press time, setup costs, finishing, delivery, and staff hours. When we mapped actual job costs against what had been quoted, the margins on certain job types were almost nothing once everything was in the picture. Jason knew some jobs felt thin. He did not know how thin, and he had never had the time to sit down and quantify it properly because there was always another job to run.

Materials purchasing had not been reviewed in years. Supplier relationships were comfortable rather than competitive. A purchasing audit identified consolidation opportunities and renegotiated terms on the top supplier relationships based on volume commitment.

Billing accuracy was another leak. Rush jobs, reprints caused by client-supplied file errors, and last-minute specification changes were regularly absorbed rather than billed. Not because Jason had made a conscious decision to absorb them. Because there was no process to capture them, so they disappeared into the cost of doing business. A formal process for documenting and billing non-standard work was implemented. Clients accepted it without complaint because it was presented as professional clarity, not an attempt to squeeze them.

Combined, the profit recovery work added \$62,000 in annualized profit before a single thing changed on the revenue side.

System 2: Market Dominance

Commercial printing is a commoditized market. Most operators compete on price, turnaround, and some version of quality. Clients shop around. Decisions come down to who quotes lowest on the day.

The insight from Jason's existing client base was that his most valuable clients were not the ones who shopped on price. They were political campaigns and government agencies. County clerks, city departments, state legislators, local ballot initiatives. Clients running regular print programs with predictable volume, strict specifications, and a genuine operational need for a supplier they could trust completely.

Political and government print operates under a different set of pressures than general commercial work. Deadlines are not preferences. A campaign that misses its mail drop date before a weekend of door knocking does not get a second chance. A county clerk whose ballot materials contain an error does not have the option of a reprint and a delay. The stakes for these clients are existential in a way that corporate marketing work rarely is. A cheaper supplier who gets something wrong does not just cost money. It can cost an election or a public official their credibility.

What those clients valued above everything else was certainty. They needed to know the job would be right, it would arrive when promised, and they would not have to actively manage the relationship to make that happen. Most of them had a story about a supplier who had failed them at exactly the wrong moment. That experience made certainty worth paying a premium for.

We repositioned Vivid Press around a specific promise to political and government clients: guaranteed turnaround times and zero-defect proofing accuracy. Not as a marketing claim but as an operational commitment backed by a documented process.

A dedicated contract client program was built around the specific demands of this sector. Named account management with a single point of contact who understood the political print environment. Priority scheduling on press during election periods when volume spikes and

timelines compress. A structured proofing protocol with client approval at defined stages and documented sign-off before any job went to press. A turnaround guarantee with a clear remedy if it was missed. For campaign managers and procurement contacts who had been burned by suppliers before, this was exactly what they had been looking for and rarely found.

Political and government clients refer within their networks. A campaign manager who finds a reliable print supplier tells the next campaign. A county clerk who trusts a vendor recommends them to the neighboring county. The repositioning created a referral dynamic that general commercial print work does not produce because the community is tight and the shared experience of supplier failure is universal.

The conversation in new business meetings changed. Clients who had been managing multiple print suppliers reactively started consolidating their program work with a single trusted partner. The positioning made that decision easy to justify because the operational commitment was specific and verifiable, not a promise about quality that every printer makes.

Vivid Press had not changed their marketing spend. What changed was the message. Existing channels that had been producing inconsistent inquiries from price-sensitive transactional clients started attracting political and government contacts who were actively looking for exactly what the contract program offered. The website, the proposals, the way Jason described the business in conversation, all of it was updated to reflect the new positioning. The repositioning did not require more marketing. It required better marketing. The volume followed naturally.

System 3: Pricing Power

Pricing had not been seriously reviewed in years. Rates had been held where they were to keep clients comfortable. Cost increases had been absorbed rather than passed through. The instinct was understandable. In a commoditized market, raising prices feels like handing clients a reason to shop around.

We rebuilt the pricing model from scratch.

First we established true job costs across every product type in the portfolio. Materials at current supplier rates, press time at fully loaded equipment cost, finishing, and a realistic allocation of management and client service time. When the numbers were laid out properly Jason was quiet for a moment. Several job types that felt like bread and butter work were generating almost no margin once the real costs were visible.

The contract client positioning created something that had not previously existed: a legitimate basis for premium pricing. Clients paying for certainty, guaranteed turnaround, dedicated account management, and a proofing process that eliminated their risk are not buying print. They are buying operational peace of mind. That commands a premium over a commodity print supplier, and the clients who value it expect to pay one.

A tiered model was built. Standard production pricing for transactional clients, a contract program rate for clients committing to regular volume, and a premium managed program tier for

clients running four or more campaigns per year that included priority scheduling, dedicated account management, and proactive reorder notifications.

Standard rates moved up to reflect actual costs. One transactional client who had been buying purely on price moved on. Jason called us when they left. He was not happy. We asked him to hold the line for thirty days. By the end of that month the revenue impact of the contract program had replaced that client and then some, at significantly better margin. He did not bring it up again.

The repricing added \$41,000 to annualized net profit.

System 4: Strategic Partnerships

Jason had supplier relationships and some informal referral connections. But there was no system behind any of it. Work came in through reputation and repeat business. Nothing was being actively built.

We identified three referral partner categories that served the same client base.

Marketing agencies and freelance designers. These are the people specifying print on behalf of the same marketing managers Vivid Press was targeting. A structured partner program was built with named contacts at the top ten local agencies and a network of independent designers. Priority turnaround for partner-referred work, clear communication back to the referring party on job status, and a co-referral arrangement for print clients who needed design support. Partners referred more because working with Vivid Press made them look reliable to their own clients.

Print brokers. A segment of the market buys print through brokers who manage supplier relationships on behalf of clients. Formal trade pricing and a dedicated broker contact were established. Brokers who had been placing work with larger regional operators started consolidating program work with Vivid Press based on the contract program commitment and the turnaround guarantee.

Complementary suppliers. Mailing houses, promotional product suppliers, and large format operators all work with the same corporate client base. Formal mutual referral agreements with the top operator in each category.

Referral volume from structured partnerships increased 40% over the first 90 days compared to the prior period. Not from working harder on relationships. From working them differently.

System 5: Systemization

The profit improvements, the contract program, the pricing restructure, the partnership program. None of it was sustainable if Jason remained the person every client called, every proof went through, and every problem landed on.

That was the core issue. Not just for the business performance, but for his goal. You cannot hand a business to a general manager if the business is you. The systemization work was not just operational housekeeping. It was the thing that made his exit, in whatever form it took, actually possible.

We documented every core process. Job intake, specification review, file preparation, proofing, press approval, finishing, delivery, and billing. Each process assigned to a role with clear accountability and a defined output. The proofing protocol that underpinned the contract client promise was documented in enough detail that any team member could execute it consistently without Jason in the room.

He pushed back on the documentation work. It felt slow when there were jobs to run. We understood the instinct and pushed back harder. The documentation was the work. Without it everything else we had built would eventually revert to depending on him.

A simple operating dashboard was built. Eight numbers. Jobs in production, jobs in proofing, on-time delivery rate, reprint rate, average job value by client tier, contract client revenue as a percentage of total, outstanding receivables, and gross margin per job type. Visible weekly without anyone having to compile it.

Ten weeks into systemization Jason was present on major accounts but no longer running them. A production manager was handling day to day execution. Jason used the recovered time to focus on the contract client relationships and the partner program that were driving the highest quality new business. For the first time in years he could see what the business looked like from the outside.

The Result

Four months in, annualized revenue had moved from \$910,000 to \$1,383,758. Driven by the contract program revenue, the political and government niche repositioning, the 40% lift in referral volume from the partnership program, and the sharper positioning producing better results from existing marketing channels.

Net profit moved from \$91,000 to \$431,000. Net margin moved from 10% to 31%. That improvement did not apply only to the new revenue. The pricing discipline, the change order process, and the supplier renegotiations from the profit recovery work changed the margin profile across the entire existing revenue base. Modest price increases were also applied more broadly across the wider client base beyond the contract tier, reflecting the improved positioning and the genuine value being delivered. Every job that had been running thin got repriced or restructured. The margin improvement compounded across both old and new volume simultaneously.

Jason had come to us believing he needed to sell. At \$91,000 in annual profit the exit he had planned was not financially viable. The business could not support a general manager and an absent owner simultaneously. The multiple a buyer would offer did not reflect what he had built, and would not have given him what he needed to step away cleanly.

At \$431,000 in annual profit the picture changed completely. The business could support a GM. The value had moved significantly. But something Jason had not anticipated also happened. With systems running and a production manager handling execution, he did not need to sell to get what he had been looking for. He stepped back. Went and did his missionary work. The business continued to grow under management. He kept the asset and got his freedom.

The exit he had planned turned out not to be necessary. The preparation for it gave him everything he had been trying to exit to find.

The Numbers at a Glance

	Before	After
Annual Revenue	\$910,000	\$1,383,758
Net Profit	\$91,000	\$431,000
Net Margin	10%	31%
Contract Client Revenue	Minimal	Core of business
Referral Volume	Baseline	+40%
On-Time Delivery Rate	Untracked	Guaranteed
Owner Involvement	Every job, every client	GM handling execution
Timeline		4 months

Is This Relevant to Your Business?

Jason did not come to us because the business had failed. He came because it had succeeded in a way that left no room for anything else he wanted to do with his life.

What he discovered was that preparing a business for exit and building a business that runs without you are the same work. The systems that make a business sellable at a fair multiple are the same systems that give an owner their life back without selling at all.

He still owns Vivid Press. He just does not run it anymore.

If you have built something real and are starting to think about what comes next, whether that is a sale, a step back, or simply more time for the things that matter outside the business, the conversation worth having is about what the business needs to get there. Not whether to sell.

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