

So, there's another email about PIPI...
What's this all about??

That's a reasonable question many printing company leaders may ask when they receive another email about a Printing Industry Performance and Insights (PIPI) study. Before addressing that question, let me share a little personal history related to what motivates me to conduct these studies. My connection to our industry started when I took a printing course in a vocational high school. And through high school and college, I worked "hands-on" in printing. Over about 30 years, I served as president of three printing firms, holding major ownership in two. Two of those businesses had around 60 employees, and the other had about 120. Then I was drawn to academia and taught college classes while consulting printing firms. After about five years of teaching and consulting, I went back to school to earn my Doctorate. I am now an Associate Professor of Management at Middle Tennessee State University, where I earned my bachelors and MBA degrees.

As an Associate Professor, I focus on teaching, research, and engaging my industry. I genuinely enjoy those three facets of my vocation. Most of my research has focused on small business strategy and management. From my experience, I know that small business leaders wear many hats, which makes strategic thinking and leadership a challenge. In addition, our industry is very dynamic now, which makes strategic thinking and leading even more tricky (However, in that context, effective strategic thinking and strong leadership can provide a competitive advantage). I have observed that academic researchers rarely connect their work to practitioners, which I want to do. Given I have "ink in my veins" and I desire to make my academic research applicable to the "real world," I want to provide printing company leaders helpful knowledge.

I conducted research with Dr. Ron Davis at PIA, a great friend and mentor, for about five years. When Covid landed, we set our research aside – we felt addressing current issues was more important than participating in our research. During that industry research pause, I pondered how to best produce and disperse actionable knowledge to printing company leaders, and my membership in a regional printing industry association came to mind. As a PIAS (Printing Industry Association of the South) member for over 40 years, and still a member, I reflected on the significant contributions an industry association made to my business leadership – providing valuable and timely information, networking opportunities, and relevant seminars. After considering PIAS's contributions to the businesses I led (which I see in all the 15 associations I connect with now), I wanted my research to contribute to the value printing industry associations provide their members. As the 15 associations engaged in PIPI are so helpful in conducting the studies and are an excellent conduit for the knowledge we garner, going down that path was a good decision.

All that said, here's the PIPI Mission: *To provide printing company leaders data related to our industry's outlook and performance. To provide printing company leaders with helpful and actionable knowledge. And to contribute to the value regional printing industry associations provide their members.*

So, how do we do that? What's our strategy? We conduct surveys quarterly. We keep the surveys open for about two weeks, and we strive to produce reports a couple of weeks after a survey closes. Every quarter, we ask questions exploring printing company leaders' outlook for the near future. Similarly, every other quarter we will explore industry performance. We explore outlook and performance both regionally and nationally, and we compare those findings to other economic reports. As the PIPI studies

develop, hopefully, we will uncover both outlook and performance trends. These industry outlook and performance insights may assist leaders in their strategic planning and provide comparison points for their expectations and their firm's performance trends.

Furthermore, we study relevant topics in our surveys, seeking to provide printing company leaders insights applicable to the current environment. For instance, in our October 2021 survey we explored workforce shortages and supply chain issues. In our January 2020 survey we are trying to form "strategic groups" and provide related benchmarks and strategic insights. Future topics under consideration include effective marketing and sales management approaches, the strategic planning processes, budgeting, and others. Following association leaders' advice, I pull other professors into our studies, seeking their guidance in studying topics related to our industry and analyzing the data we draw. For instance, I engaged multiple human resource and supply-chain professors in developing our October study.

Developing the PIPI studies is a work-in-process, and we continually seek to improve the value we deliver printing company leaders. Therefore, we welcome any suggestions or comments. Feel free to email Dr. Ralph Williams (ralph.williams@mtsu.edu) with thoughts, ideas, suggestions, anything! Now that we have answered the question "...PIPI - What's this all about??", please consider participating in our surveys. The more participation we get, the more helpful you will find our results! The PIPI tree can produce much fruit!