

CREATE BRILLIANT PRINT



The Smartpress team in South Carolina includes (L to R) David Jones, Dakota Phillips, Michael Dossantos, Christina Philemond, Ben Kletzien, Russ Castleman, Buddy Krumbert, Katelynn Morales, Brandon Miller, and Alex Perez

Smartpress partners with Standard and Horizon to drive continued success and innovation

Smartpress is the premium online commercial printing division of The Bernard Group, a 100% employee-owned company with headquarters in Chanhassen, Minnesota, that specializes in creating immersive brand experiences through high-quality printing, fabrication, and logistics. Smartpress operates across two production facilities in Minnesota and South Carolina with a team of 250 employees, and the company focuses on high-quality commercial print, signage, and marketing solutions with customized, sustainable printing options ranging from booklets and perfect bound books to brochures, direct mail, promotional materials, and more.

"In 2009, The Bernard Group purchased the URL Smartpress.com and decided to become an e-commerce printer," says Russ Castleman, Director of Print Production at Smartpress. "We grew up on a web-to-print platform, all digital back then and we still produce much of our work today on that digital platform, primarily HP Indigo High Definition presses. At our core, we are a premium quality custom print manufacturer; our digital foundation has taught us to use technology and innovation to achieve the unthinkable, like an average turnaround time of two days."

Smartpress's relationship with Standard dates back to its early days, when they began outfitting their print operation in Minnesota with a full suite of Horizon solutions. Since that time, Smartpress has owned several generations of Horizon equipment. According to Castleman, that fact plus continuous conversations about future equipment development speak to the quality and adaptiveness of the Horizon platform. Says Castleman, "As we talk about 2009 up to today, that's what keeps building the relationship – finding the right equipment, making sure we can create redundancy in that equipment. Buying a second or third unit or buying the next generation of a piece of equipment because it's easier to use or can produce more pieces per hour or has more functionality, these are things we see from the Horizon brand."



Running a 24-up business card application on the Horizon RD-N4055 Die Cutter in SC, operator Rhonda Clugston holds up the waste sheet that is automatically removed by the separator unit and delivered to the waste bin – no manual separation required.



Operator Ethan Von Bergen sets up the Horizon SmartStacker in MN, which can convert a B2 size sheet into up to 28 individual cut sheets.

Satisfied with the quality of their Horizon solutions in Minnesota, Smartpress turned to Standard for their expansion into South Carolina where they opened a new facility in the third quarter of 2024. In the ever-important spirit of redundancy, binderies in both the Minnesota and South Carolina facilities now include bookmaking with Horizon Stitch Lines, Horizon CRF-362s for creasing/folding, Horizon BQ-500 Perfect Binders, the Horizon SmartStacker, Horizon RD-N4055 Rotary Die Cutters, Horizon AFV-566/TV-564 Folders, and Horizon CRA-36 Creasers.

"The Horizon equipment allows us the flexibility to offer our customers more based on what the machines can do," says Castleman. "If we work with a customer to produce a new die-cut piece on our Horizon RD-N4055, for example, then we can offer that item as a templated product on our e-commerce site. These systems definitely help us 'Wow' our customers by producing print at the highest quality in the shortest amount of time."

To deliver on their promise to their customers, Smartpress relies on the ease of use of Horizon equipment. Horizon's common interface across different pieces of equipment enables operators to easily move from one operation to another, a key advantage for Smartpress. "We can take someone who can operate a stitcher and bring them to the perfect binder, and they don't get stuck trying to figure out how the machine works," Castleman noted. "The Horizon user interface experience is a big advantage for training and cross-training our bindery employees."

The ease of training also allowed Smartpress to focus more on attracting the right people for the culture of their company instead of looking for only a narrow, specialized set of skills. "That's part of the labor market today," Castleman stated. "We know that if we could find people that stood up to our values and what we were trying to do – quality customer service and all that – we could teach them to become printers. The technology itself makes that easier. Having strategic partners like Standard and Horizon and the consistent equipment interfaces they provide allows us to show an operator two or three different pieces of equipment and ramp up the training more quickly."

To further develop their operators, Smartpress takes advantage of the Horizon product training offered by Standard by sending equipment specialists to Standard's Training Center in Andover, MA, to become factory-certified. While this certification allows Smartpress to support their own equipment in some cases, in other cases, Smartpress depends on support from qualified Standard Horizon dealers, including EO Johnson in Minnesota and Atlantic Graphic Systems in South Carolina. "That helps minimize any downtime by having this local support," Castleman commented.

Castleman concludes, "As a premium quality company with the mantra to create brilliant print, we look for premium quality in the vendors we partner with. We want quality equipment that stands the test of time and excels at doing what we do well, especially processing shorter runs with faster setups and changeovers, and offering the highest quality output to our customers. We have no place or time for transactional relationships where a vendor is selling us a piece of equipment to put on the floor, and we have to figure out how to run it or how it increases our business. We want relationships that are not only going to look at what we're doing today, but also what we could be doing in the future, presenting ideas and solutions. And that's a key component of our strategic partnership with Standard Finishing."



The common user interface across Horizon equipment helps Brandon Miller operate multiple Horizon machines in the SC facility, including the CRA-36 Creaser shown here.



The touchscreen on the Horizon HF-300 Trimmer, which runs inline with the BQ-500 Perfect Binder in SC, helps make setup and changeover easy for operator Moises Birruet.



Operator Juan Diaz checks the quality of a finished booklet coming off the Horizon Stitch-Line Mark IV Saddlestitcher in MN. The system performs collating, scoring, folding, stitching, and trimming in one pass.



The Horizon C6F-362 Creaser/Folder, operated here by Nathaly Sarmiento, produces a wide variety of applications in the SC facility, saving valuable time and effort by creasing and folding in a single pass.

