

# Trade Show Executive

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News, Views and Tools for Trade Show and Event Executives

**Ford Bowers**  
CEO  
*PRINTING United Alliance*

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& Exhibitions  
*PRINTING United Alliance*

**FORGING  
AN**

*Alliance*

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Leaders of the PRINTING United Alliance and its annual PRINTING United Expo, CEO Ford Bowers and President of Events and Exhibitions Mark Subers discuss the evolution of the organization, fostering rapid growth and success at the Expo, and how purchasing a media company was the “secret sauce” to bringing together the entirety of the printing industry.

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Trade Show Executive's Gold 100 Awards & Summit is heading to the Fairmont Grand Del Mar in San Diego to celebrate the shining stars and largest trade shows held in 2022.

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This year's TSE Trailblazers exemplified excellence in trade show management, proved their leadership qualities, and made innovative contributions to their organizations and shows. The spotlight shines on these 11 exceptional industry professionals to highlight their careers and achievements.

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More than 200 trade show and event industry executives gathered at Lippman Connects' annual Exhibition and Convention Executives Forum to discuss the current and emerging trends in the industry, and experience event-technology demonstrations.



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**Mark Subers**  
President of Events & Exhibitions  
PRINTING United Alliance

**Ford Bowers**  
CEO  
PRINTING United Alliance



# FORGING AN *Alliance*

**T**he word alliance is key when it comes to the success of PRINTING United Alliance, which is the most comprehensive member-based printing and graphic arts association in North America. The Alliance produces the annual PRINTING United Expo, the largest printing trade show in North America.

At the helm of the PRINTING United Alliance, which comprises and serves the industry's many market segments including apparel, commercial, mailing, packaging, industrial, and wide format décor and signage, are Ford Bowers, CEO of the Alliance, and Mark Subers, President of Events and Exhibitions at the Alliance.



Marlene Goldman, Editor



Ford's history in the printing industry dates to 2004, having worked in the flexographic, screen and offset segments in various capacities. He began as a flexo plate maker assembling color keys and going on press checks. He worked as vice president and general manager of the Graphic Center at Miller Zell in Atlanta and served as the CEO of the Specialty Graphic Imaging Association (SGIA). Since 2016, he has overseen the merger of SGIA with Printing Industries of America (PIA), Idealliance, and NAPCO Media to create PRINTING United Alliance.

Mark has oversight of all events, including PRINTING United Expo, which takes place across three days each fall. The Expo's expansive display of technology and supplies, education, programming and services was named to *Trade Show Executive's* Fastest 50 and Gold 100 trade show lists for 2019. In 2022, more than 88% of attendees had purchasing authority or influence and 58% were first-time attendees to PRINTING United Expo. Its audiences encompass every printing community, reaching over 18 million annual interactions.

This year's show will take place at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta Oct.18-20, with an expected attendance



**Lounging Lakeside.** Mark Subers, President - Events (PRINTING United Alliance/NAPCO Media) and Chris Curran, Group President, PRINTING United Alliance/NAPCO Media Publications, relaxing on Lake Murray near Columbia, S.C.

of more than 30,000 and new interactions such as community hubs on the trade show floor and VIP programs.

The Alliance also produces an exclusive series of Summits, which have become the industry standard for intimate and targeted content-rich gatherings for C-level executives. Mark oversees all summits and conferences coinciding with the Impressions media brands: Printing Impressions, In-plant Impressions, Packaging Impressions and Wide-format Impressions.

The Alliance also serves its communities with training, education and certification programs, as well as government and regulatory advocacy among other benefits.

TSE spoke with Ford and Mark about the evolution of the PRINTING United Alliance and its award-winning exposition, both of which work to serve the entirety of the printing and graphic arts industries in numerous capacities.

**MARLENE:** In 2019, PRINTING United Expo jumped dozens of places in *Trade Show Executive's* Top 100 and made the Fastest 50 in both the exhibitor and attendee growth categories. What transpired at the Alliance to allow this rapid level of success?

**FORD:** The concept for PRINTING United Expo was sparked in 2017 in a first meeting between me and Mark Subers at an event in Vegas. We had a shared vision of the future

of events in the printing and packaging industry and began to develop a concept.

At that time, I was a few years into my tenure as CEO of SGIA (the Specialty Graphic Imaging Association) and Mark was leading the printing and packaging media brands at NAPCO Media. Our understanding of the industry, in short, was the need to develop a new, multi-segment model event to drive stronger ROI for both the exhibitors and the attendees.

For decades, our industry hosted various expos that covered single segments of the printing, which forced the exhibitors and attendees to attend several events at great expense to both. At the same time, there were a sea of changes taking place in digital printing technologies, allowing the printers in our industry to look outside their current product offerings and adopt new product applications that would provide a pathway to future growth and success. The concept of "convergence" was adopted and became the cornerstone of our event model.

The results have been overwhelmingly positive. In year one, we made TSE's Fastest 50 list for exhibitor and attendee growth, and we've been expanding significantly ever since. Certainly, the pandemic provided a moment of pause, having to cancel two shows over 2020 and 2021, but through that time we were able to retain 100% of our staff, which allowed us to come roaring back even larger and stronger in Vegas in 2022.



**Off to the Races.** Mark and Robin Subers, (white shirts) pose post 5k Color Run, a fundraiser. The Color Run, also known as the Happiest 5K on the Planet, celebrates healthiness, happiness and individuality.



**Print Matters.** Ford Bowers gives a presentation on the print industry in the U.S., at the recent Print Matters for the Future Conference in Riga, Latvia.

**MARLENE:** An association purchasing a media company is a unique move. Can you explain the premise and talk about some of the benefits for the Alliance, as an association, to own a media company?

**FORD:** The secret sauce to our success was the combined SGIA and NAPCO Media communities covering the entirety of the industry, which allowed us to create a show for all segments to come and explore all application technologies and solutions — a “one roof” approach. That empowered the OEMs to focus on a single event for an optimized ROI and allowed the printers in the industry to spend less time out of the office and reduce their T&E expense.

Based on this, we were able to significantly grow the scope and value of our first PRINTING United Expo in Dallas in 2019. We were pleased to be the stewards of a platform in which the full industry, exhibitors, attendees, analysts, other associations and media companies were able to gather and benefit from this new model. We are a non-profit organization whose mission is to serve the printing market. So, building this new and dynamic marketplace is really what we exist to do.

The model worked so well, in fact, that SGIA purchased NAPCO Media to solidify the ongoing strategy. Additionally, the association attracted the attention of others in the association world to include PIA (Printing Industries of America) and Idealliance, two of the most influential associations in the industry. The combined organization rebranded as PRINTING United Alliance.



**Post It.** Ford Bowers discusses printing matters with Postmaster General Louis DeJoy.

As you can imagine, this represented a significant alteration to the landscape of our industry. One thing I am most grateful for is the way our Board of Directors embraced the opportunity. These were very complex decisions with very calculated risks, but our Board of Directors understood the need to evolve and voted unanimously to support each of the areas of change. A great amount of credit is due to this group of industry professionals.

**MARK:** There are multiple areas that have been significantly impacted with the Alliance purchasing NAPCO Media. In addition to the “one-roof” approach that Ford mentioned, the media company serves as a true and robust marketing engine. We have several hundred thousand subscribers to our B2B media brands in printed and electronic formats delivered on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

Additionally, the clients (advertisers) of the various brands are also the new exhibitors of the expansion segments. In large part, it was many the OEMs and printers who really had been driving this need and narrative for decades. As the Alliance, we were simply listening to the market and providing what they preferred.

Finally, the media company also found success in the acquisition. We were able to launch two new media brands based on SGIA’s historical roots — Wide-format Impressions and the Apparelist — to increase our coverage of the industry.

**MARLENE:** This has been quite a journey for you both. During this process, what surprised you the most and what are you most proud of?

**FORD:** That the Board of Directors embraced all these efforts still both surprises me and is a source of pride. These are not decisions that boards make every day, so these are truly adventurous people. Not to mention we wound up with four organizations that all had to come together very quickly, and sometimes with little understanding of what will work and what will not; and yet, though we didn’t do everything perfectly, we wound up providing an excellent experience and forging a new path for all involved and the industry.

**MARK:** That’s a great question. I guess the most surprising thing was how quickly the new segment exhibitors joined the PRINTING United platform. I suppose it should not have been a surprise since they had been asking for this exact event for years. However, in one of our first meetings with one of the top global digital equipment manufacturers, we only got to the first slide and about three minutes into our presentation before we got the “we’re in!” confirmation. Certainly, we were offering the right solution at the right time!

There have been some very personal and reflective moments in the past years. My father owned a publishing company which he started in 1966. I worked closely with him for decades in running this business. He passed away before we launched PRINTING United Expo, but I think often about how pleased he would be to see how we had built a platform to advance the success of the printers and exhibitors.

Also, we launched the new brand of PRINTING United Expo at an opening night party of the final SGIA Expo in Vegas, 2018. We threw a party at TAO nightclub in the Venetian Hotel that year. Stepping back and watching how much excitement there was and everyone having fun was just a wonderful moment for me as well. It was a great way to kick off the start of such a successful story.



**MARLENE:** Sustainability is key for PRINTING United Alliance. What are some of the sustainability efforts you are undertaking at the Expo?

**MARK:** I had the pleasure of attending the last MATSO (Major American Trade Show Organizers) meeting in Anaheim, Calif., back in the spring and was able to participate in a group discussion around sustainability. It was a nice opportunity to hear what the other Expo executives are doing around sustainability. It got me thinking that as the printing and packaging industry, we have a unique ability to be very proactive around sustainability. I'm pleased to say we've created a partnership with Domtar, one of the world's leading paper companies, where we will be planting two trees for each person who registers for the Expo in 2023. That will be an estimated 60,000-plus CO2 scrubbers being planted on behalf of our attendees and exhibitors. It's a very exciting program.

**MARLENE:** The Alliance runs the largest and most diverse event in the printing and packaging industry. What else does the Alliance



**Family Football.** Mark Subers and his youngest son, Jake, taking in a Philadelphia Eagles game at "The Linc" (Lincoln Financial Field).

offer to support the success of the industry?

**FORD:** Well, as an association we are trying to do multiple things on two levels.

First, we want to put printers in touch with the data, expertise, information, services, programs, products, training and education that will help them solve problems, improve their operations, improve their bottom line, and make decisions to grow their businesses in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible. Secondly, we want to create an ecosystem conducive to creating a good business climate, to include legislative and regulatory influence to ensure a healthy environment for business success; workforce development to recruit, train and retain talent; and educate the various verticals that benefit from our work about the value and possibilities of print, made possible especially through the launch of our popular iLEARNING+ education platform, which provides unparalleled training and courses developed specifically for our industry.

These efforts are, of course, what trade associations do. What makes it exciting is that now we represent the fullness of the printing industry, are attracting hundreds of new members each year, and are developing capabilities on a scale previously unknown in printing. Size is not always a benefit, but it does create possibilities.



**Philly Fever.** Mark Subers and his family are diehard Philadelphia Eagles fans and proudly sport their colors.

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