How Company Culture Drives Success with Non-Printing Products and Services

Insights from our Printing Industry Performance & Insights Survey

From October/November 2025 Survey

How Company Culture Drives Success
with Non-Printing Products and Services

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Introduction

Increasingly, printing companies are expanding beyond traditional print, offering a range of non-printing products/services (NPPS), which may include fulfillment and logistics, wide-format printing, marketing consulting, social media content design, photography, custom apparel, website design/development, and many others. (Going forward, we use the acronym "NPPS" to refer to "non-printing products/services.")

In our October 2025 *"Printing Industry Performance and Insights"* survey, we examined how printing companies are diversifying beyond traditional print offerings. In our first report from that survey, we shared results suggesting that providing NPPS enhances printing firm performance. We also share keys for choosing what NPPS to add and keys to executing the provision of NPPS.

Business culture is "the meshing of shared values, beliefs, business principles, and traditions that instill a firm's operating style, behavioral norms, ingrained attitudes, and work atmosphere," and "the complex set of ideologies, symbols, and core values shared through the firm." Culture is a business's personality, its chemistry, its DNA.

Here are quotes related to business culture:

- "The role of a creative leader is not to have all the ideas; it's to create a culture where everyone can have ideas and feel that they're valued." *(Ken Robinson)*
- "I have a foundational belief that business results start with culture and your people." *(Douglas Conant)*
- "I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't just one aspect of the game, it is the game." *(Lewis Gerstner)*

In this report, we share four organizational cultural aspects that relate to a positive relationship between providing NPPS or firm performance. Those cultural aspects include "risk-taking" (page 3), "innovative" (page 5), "proactive" (page 8), and "competitive" (page 10). Of course, there are more business cultural aspects than the four we applied. However, previous academic research of small business diversification pointed us to these four.

Our findings suggest that having each of the four cultural aspects may lead to more NPPS as a percentage of revenue. Additionally, our findings suggest a connection between three cultural aspects and EBITDA, indicating that these aspects may contribute to higher profitability (one of the relationships was flat, neither positive nor negative). Given the potential positive effects of these cultural attributes, we share "action points" on how to embed them in your firm.

Hopefully, this report will prompt you to step back and consider your firm's culture in the context of the four aspects we applied, identify a desired cultural direction, and then proactively work toward cultural improvement.

Even if your firm is not providing NPPS and does not plan to do so, you may want to consider the four cultural aspects discussed below.

We appreciate the regional printing associations that sponsor and support our research. We list those associations at the end of the report. And thank you to my

three strategy professor colleagues who helped develop our survey and contributed to writing this report.

A "Risk-Taking" Culture

What is a "risk-taking" culture?

Firms with a risk-taking culture are willing to commit resources, both tangible and intangible, to ideas with uncertain outcomes. The lack of a risk-taking culture may manifest in either inaction or delayed action. Risk aversion, the opposite of risk-taking, is reflected when a firm fails to capitalize on emerging opportunities.

Findings

Exploring if respondents' firms had a risk-taking culture, we included the three items below and asked participants to respond using a one-to-five scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree somewhat, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree somewhat, and 5 = Strongly agree. Here are the items:

- The term "risk-taker" is considered a positive attribute for people in our business.
- People in our business are encouraged to take calculated risks with new ideas.
- Our business emphasizes both exploration and experimentation for opportunities.

Sixty-four respondents answered these questions and provided their NPPS percentage of revenue. The graph below shows the relationship between a respondent's average response for the three risk-taking items above and the respondent's NPPS percentage of revenue, suggesting that a more risk-taking culture may lead to a higher NPPS as a percentage of revenue (selling more NPPS).
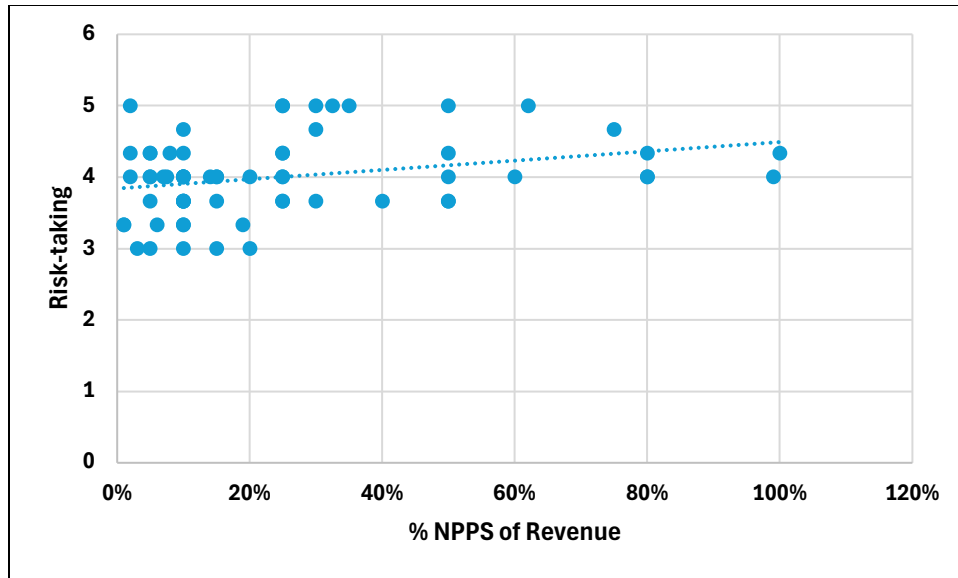
Forty-three respondents answered the three risk-taking items above and provided their percentage of EBITDA. We deleted two responses because the EBITDA percentages exceeded seventy percent. The graph below illustrates the relationship between a respondent's average response for the three risk-taking items and the respondent's EBITDA percentage, with a trendline suggesting a positive relationship – a risk-taking culture may relate to higher EBITDA.
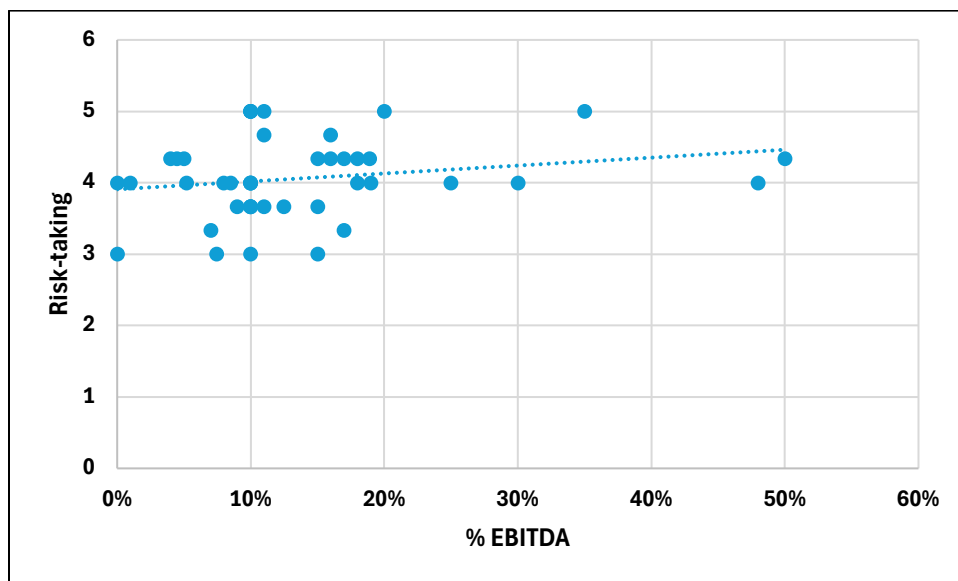
Action Points:

How to embed an effective, risk-taking culture in your firm.

- View failure as a valuable learning opportunity.
- Develop and open a communication environment where everyone can share ideas, admit mistakes, and challenge the status quo.
- Celebrate the great ideas that didn't produce what was expected but provided valuable insights.
- Don't completely ignore risks. Evaluate risks explicitly – compare plausible downsides to plausible upsides before acting
- Pull ideas from everywhere (your entire team): production, CSR, sales, prepress, press operators, digital operators, binders, or drivers…everyone sees different problems.
- Leaders, "walk the talk!" Take the same risk-taking approach you promote with your team.[1]
- Make risk-taking small and manageable: Run 30-60 day pilots with a budget cap, a named pilot owner, and a stop rule. Conduct a quick review after each pilot: expected vs. actual, what we learned, and what changes we will make next time. Don't run too many pilots at once: it creates distraction, overtime, and unfinished offerings.
- Protect core operations: Allocate fixed "pilot capacity" (hours/week) so experiments don't hijack delivery or quality of core business activities.

An "Innovative" Culture

What is an innovative culture?

If your firm has an innovative culture, it is adept at developing creative products and services that address customer problems and needs. Innovative firms develop unique customer solutions, which differentiate them from their competitors. Effective innovation is driven by market (customer) knowledge.

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[1] For each culture aspect, we sought ideas from Hughes and Morgain's (2008) solid entrepreneurial orientation research article (Deconstructing the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and business performance at the embryonic stage of firm growth) and AI.

Findings

Exploring if respondents' firms had an innovative culture, we included the three items below and asked participants to respond using a one-to-five scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree somewhat, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree somewhat, and 5= Strongly agree. Here are the items:

- We actively introduce improvements and innovations in our business.
- Our business is creative in its methods of operation.
- Our business seeks out new ways to do things.

The graph below shows the relationship between 62 respondents' average response for the three innovation items above and the respondents' NPPS percentage of revenue, suggesting that a more innovative culture may lead to a higher NPPS as a percentage of revenue (selling more NPPS).
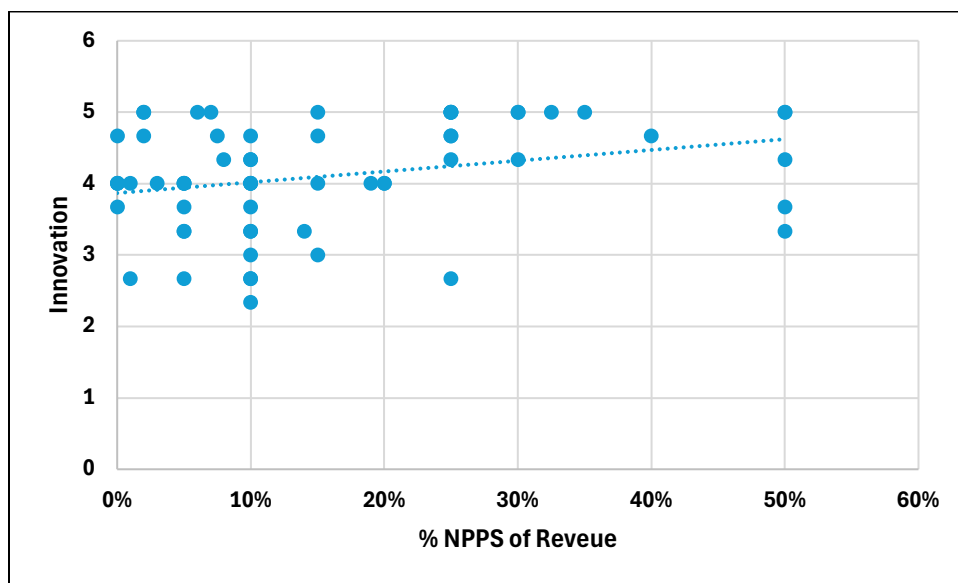
Forty-three respondents answered the three innovative items above and provided their percentage of EBITDA. Again, we deleted the two responses reporting EBITDA exceeding 70%. The graph below illustrates the relationship between a respondent's average response for the three innovative items and the respondent's percentage of EBITDA. Surprisingly, the trendline does not suggest a positive relationship between innovation and EBITDA, but it does not suggest a negative relationship either.
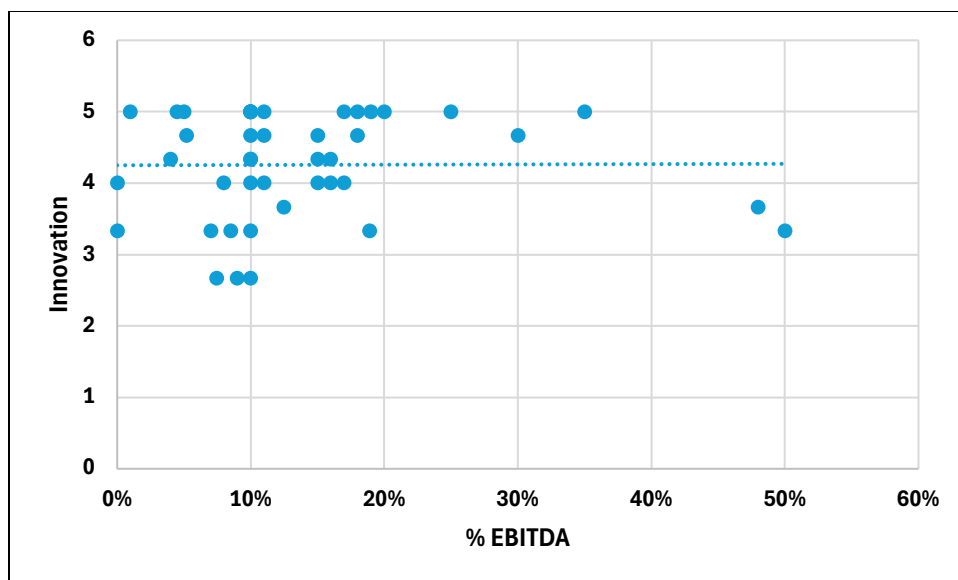
In our sample, innovation wasn't clearly related to EBITDA. However, innovation still appears to be related to NPPS intensity. Therefore, here are some practical tips to promote an innovative culture.

Action Points:

How to embed an effective, innovative culture in your firm.

- Promote intellectual bravery. Encourage teammates to think beyond their role in the firm and its norms.
- Create regular spaces where teammates can share and discuss their ideas.
- Assign questions to groups and provide them with the time and place to discuss ideas to address those questions.
- Use guided prompts, not always open-ended brainstorming:
    - "What customer problem are we solving?"
    - "Where are we losing time or margin?"
    - "What would make it easier for customers to buy from us?"
- Use AI to generate options and ideas. Then, validate options and ideas with customers.
- Avoid "thinking silos" – involve teammates from multiple functional departments to work together in generating ideas.
- Publicly recognize creative ideas.

- Assign an owner for a new "idea." Hold the owner accountable for delivery steps, handoffs, and updates. Avoid orphan ideas: if nobody takes ownership, it won't work.
- For each new product or service idea, require 3-5 related customer conversations.

## A "Proactive" Culture

What is a proactive culture?

Firms with a proactive culture are forward-looking, seeking opportunities to develop or introduce new products or services. Acting on information gathered, proactive firms seek a first-mover advantage. Proactive firms are not complacent. They are not stuck in inertia.

Findings

We included the three items below to assess the firm's proactive culture and asked participants to respond using a one-to-five scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree somewhat, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree somewhat, and 5= Strongly agree. Here are the items:

- We try to take the initiative in every situation.
- We excel at identifying opportunities.
- We initiate actions to which other organizations respond.

Sixty-three respondents answered these questions and provided their NPPS percentage of revenue. The graph below shows the relationship between a respondent's average proactive response and the respondent's NPPS percentage of revenue, suggesting that a more proactive culture may lead to a higher NPPS as a percentage of revenue (selling more NPPS).
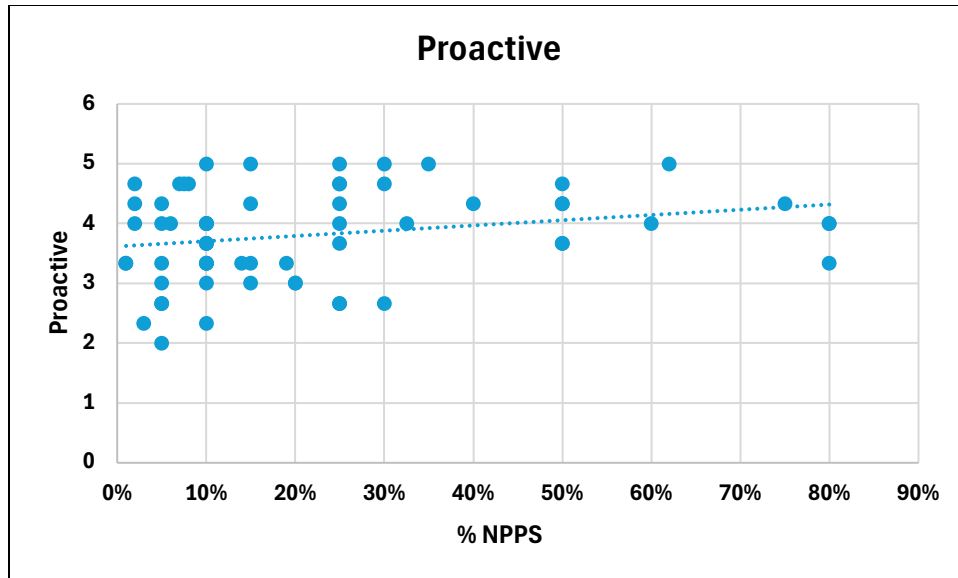
Forty-two respondents answered the three proactive items above and provided their percentage of EBITDA. Again, we deleted those reporting EBITDA exceeding 70%. The graph below illustrates the relationship between a respondent's average response for the proactive items and the respondent's percentage of EBITDA. The trendline suggests a positive relationship between proactive and EBITDA.
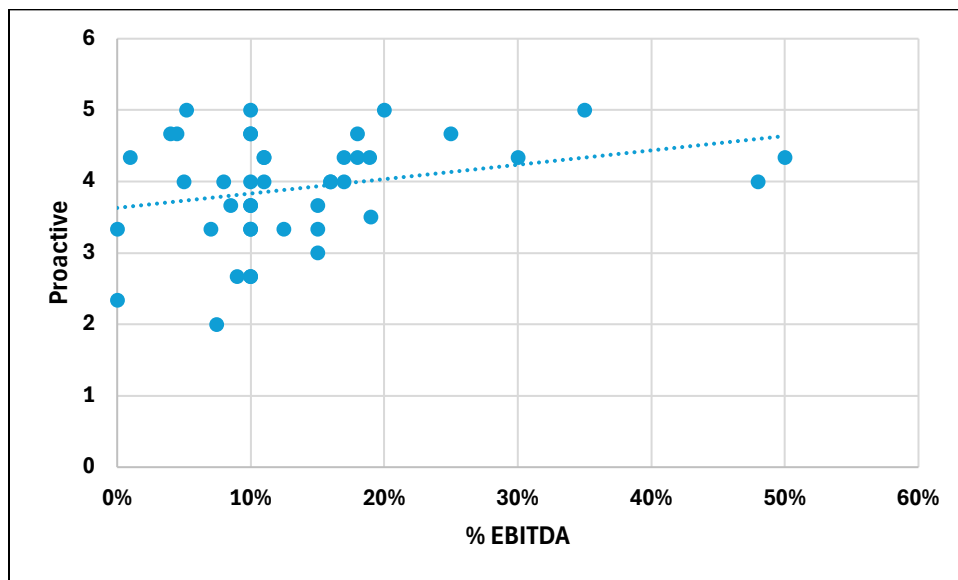
Action Points:

How to embed an effective, proactive culture in your firm.

- Encourage teammates to "sense the market" – customer feedback and needs, emerging trends, potential disruptions. And listen to your teammates' thoughts.
- When considering alternatives, avoid over-focusing on the risks. Be sure to see and discuss the potential rewards and positive outcomes.
- Make "intellectual bravery" your company's norm, where challenging the status quo and suggesting bold ideas is the standard.
- When not acting, ask, "Why are we not moving forward with this?"
- Consider "decentralized decision-making" – provide front-line teammates the autonomy to act on real-time knowledge.
- Build a simple market-sensing system. Maintain a running log of customer requests and problems (including sales, customer service, and production). Review the log monthly and consider actions.
- Don't assume first-mover advantage is automatic. "Move first" only helps if you can deliver repeatably and profitably.

A "Competitive" Culture

*What is a competitive culture?*

Firms with a competitive culture seek to outperform industry rivals. Highly competitive firms may see competitors as enemies they must conquer. They may strive offensively to overwhelm competitors' efforts and competitive strengths. They may also target rivals' weaknesses.

Findings

To measure respondents' firms' competitive culture, we included the three items below and asked participants to respond using a one-to-five scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree somewhat, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree somewhat, and 5= Strongly agree. Here are the items:

- Our business is intensely competitive.
- In general, our business takes a bold or aggressive approach when competing.
- We try to undo and outmaneuver the competition as best we can.

Sixty-three respondents answered these questions and provided their NPPS percentage of revenue. The graph below shows the relationship between a respondent's average competitive response and the respondent's NPPS percentage of revenue, suggesting that a more competitive culture may lead to a higher NPPS as a percentage of revenue (selling more NPPS).
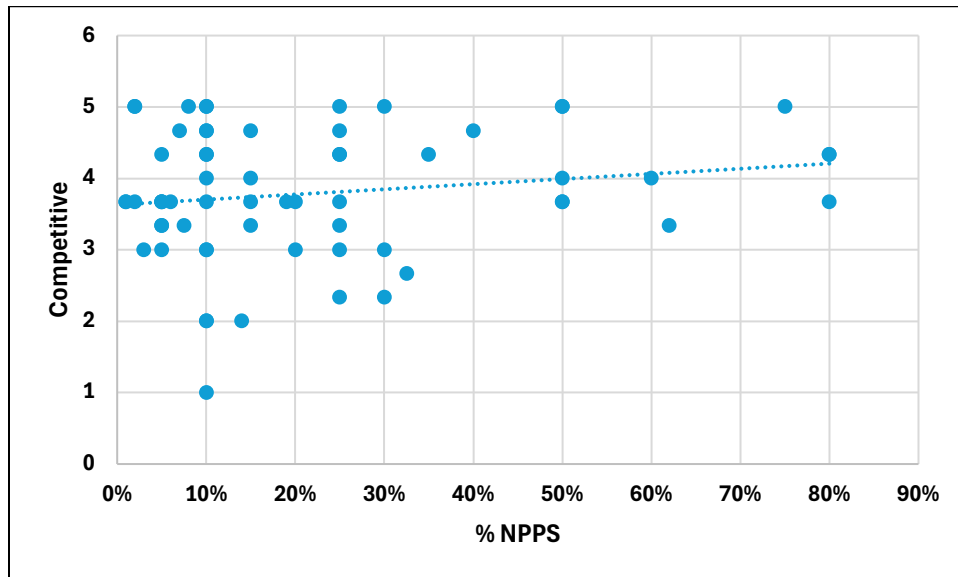
Forty-two respondents answered the three competitive items above and provided their percentage of EBITDA. Again, we deleted the responses reporting EBITDA exceeding 70%. The graph below illustrates the relationship between a respondent's average response for the three competitive items and the respondent's percentage of EBITDA. The trendline suggests a positive relationship between competitive and EBITDA.
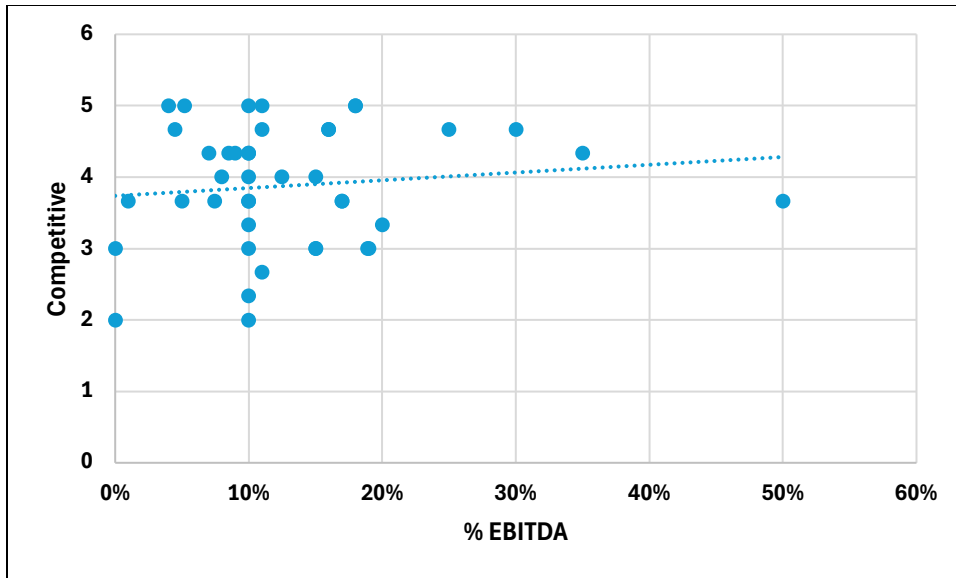
Action Points:

How to embed an effective, competitive culture in your firm.

- Identify competitors, their strengths, and their weaknesses.
- Brainstorm for ways to outperform competitors in the market.
- Identify 3-5 key industry KPIs and work to outperform leaders on those measures.
- Run a quarterly competitive scan. Review competitor offers and promises, and then make one improvement decision and move forward.
- Build a "steal list." Target accounts where your competitive advantage is clear.
- Celebrate as a team when your firm draws a major client or a major project from a competitor.
- Compete hard, but not on everything. Choose "where we want to win" – such as response speed, personal customer relationships, service reliability, one-stop bundle, niche quality, prospecting, or consistency.
- When competing, avoid racing to the bottom on price, discounting. "Competitive" should include differentiation.
- Avoid toxic "enemy" culture: competitiveness that burns out employees.
- Avoid competitor obsession: don't spend more time watching rivals than listening to customers.

Closing Thoughts

When teaching a strategy course, I ask students, "Do most business leaders consider their business's culture?" Most of my students reply, "No." (BTW – most of my students are employed.) Considering the four cultural aspects discussed above, as well as others, may lead to a competitive advantage.

We hope you find the knowledge provided above helpful. If you have any suggestions or questions related to this report or any of the *"Printing Industry Performance & Insights"* studies, please email Ralph Williams at ralph.williams@mtsu.edu

Participating Regional Printing Associations
FGA – Florida Graphic Alliance
GLGA – Great Lakes Graphics Association
GMA – Graphic Media Alliance
PGCA - Print & Graphic Communications Association
PIA – Printing Industry Association
PIAG – Printing & Imaging Association of Georgia
PIAMA – Printing and Imaging Association MidAmerica
PIAS – Printing Industry Association of the South
PIASD – Printing Industry Association of San Diego
PICA – Printing Industry of the Carolinas
PIMW – Printing Industry MidWest
PINE – Printing Industries of New England
VMA – Visual Media Alliance