

CRANKIER THAN EVER

BY JOSEPH HUGHES

This is the story of how two brothers battled vintage equipment, high-tech trends and each other to build a thriving letterpress shop—and to change the way you think about printing.

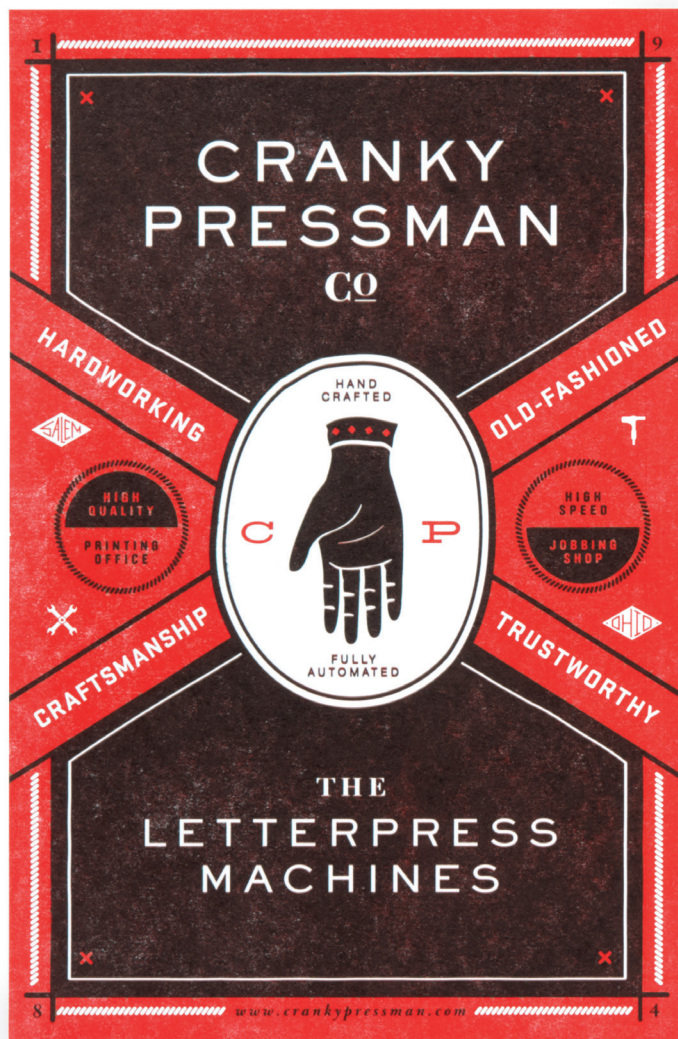
“If we live in a fast-food design economy, then letterpress is like a slow, home-cooked meal.”

The more you're around Keith Berger, who with his brother Jamie makes up the team behind the successful Salem, OH-based letterpress shop Cranky Pressman, the more you realize everything isn't what it seems. Printers and designers aren't so different. There's no such thing as an overnight success. Letterpress isn't a quaint fad. Seriously, Keith would like people to stop making melancholy, indie-rock fueled short movies about his trade. “If I see another how-to video,” he says. “I'm going to barf.”

And they say Jamie's the cranky one. These days, the Cranky Pressman shop floor is abuzz with activity. There, in a century-old former horse stable, you'll find Keith manning one of several presses, turning out work that has netted the shop a steady stream of new business, Print Regional Design Annual honors and online notoriety. Cranky Pressman's success wasn't immediate and didn't come easy, though. To appreciate how far things have come, you have to start a long time ago.

PRINTING'S PAST The lineage of Cranky Pressman dates back to 1938, when Robert Wright started a print shop in Salem, a small, Northeast Ohio town originally settled by the Quakers. Two decades later, Vince Moore took over and moved the business to its present location, where it remained in his hands until 1984. That year, 25-year-old Keith

DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATION BY MARRIETH KRADEL-WEITZEL



CRANKY CARD
This piece was created to be used as a loose insert in *Uppercase Magazine* Issue No. 8, a special letterpress edition. Designed by Daniel Blackman (www.dblackman.com) with art direction and copywriting by Jamie Berger.

Berger, already a veteran printer with an itch to own his own business, bought the shop. While his brother Jamie moved to New York City to work on the other side of the printer/designer divide as an advertising agency creative, Keith was opening the renamed Graphic Touch. Offset lithography, not letterpress, was responsible for the bulk of Keith's business. He had sold Moore's old Heidelberg Windmill (a press named for its distinctive mechanism for gripping sheets of paper) to help finance the purchase of an offset press. Though the letterpress was gone, it wasn't forgotten. "In the early days," he says, "letterpress was mostly used for numbering, die-cutting, perforating, tickets. It was looked on as an afterthought, an add-on. I dabbled with it. It was always my fun thing. I didn't make any money off of it. I was just doing things with it."

As the 1980s became the 1990s, it proved increasingly difficult to run a small-town commercial printer. Keeping up with technology was challenging, as was generating consistent business in an economically depressed region. Keith, gritty Midwesterner to the core, held on. Even with offset dominating, he continued to feed his passion. When he wasn't training in bookbinding or stamp making, he was re-acquiring letterpress equipment. There were a couple of Chandler & Price platen presses, a second Vandercook proofing press and, fittingly, a replacement Windmill. Turning letterpress into a commercial success remained difficult given the shop's small-town location and the limitations of a nascent internet.

Later, when the brothers got together to celebrate the new millennium, Keith seemed disillusioned. "It was starting to dawn on him that maybe a traditional letterpress business—in what would be the 21st century in a matter of hours—was not the greatest of ideas," Jamie says, recalling that New Year's Eve. "I wasn't going to have it. I knew it was possible and there was a way to save all these cool things and the dream. The internet was the answer. Anyone could reach endless new markets in major cities. Location didn't matter."



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- 1. FUN BOYS**
These Fun-Boy posters are two of a series of three designed and illustrated by Ralph Cosentino (www.ralphcosentino.com), who is a senior designer at Hallmark Cards, among other things.
- 2. CRAFTY CARD**
This business card for Product Superior, a Brooklyn-based design duo who produce eco-friendly greeting cards, features two-color printing with a gorgeous die-cut.
- 3. CRANKY COASTERS**
This series of self-promotional coasters, designed by Parliament of Owls (www.parliamentofowlsdesign.com), promotes Cranky's 12 standard coaster die shapes. Art direction and copywriting by Jamie Berger.

A NEW BEGINNING

While Keith began to divest the shop, then known as The Graphic Touch Letterpress Company, of its non-letterpress equipment, Jamie, now in Chicago, was building the shop's brand behind the tagline "Leaders in Yesterday's Technology." By 2003, it was a dedicated letterpress printer and bindery. "Converting to an old-school operation did not mean that The Graphic Touch suddenly had a totally dedicated letterpress customer base," Jamie says. "Existing customers were a mix of local businesses, graphic designers and agencies. If it wasn't a good fit for letterpress, it was outsourced to our many printer friends and suppliers." This worked both ways, with other printers sending Keith letterpress work.

The Graphic Touch had found its specialty, but it hadn't yet found its groove. The search for a unified brand was challenging. For instance, the company's name didn't match its early web address, www.hell-box.com, named after the box printers would keep near the lead type to collect damaged pieces that could be melted and reused. It was time for a new brand.

As they do on a variety of issues, Keith and Jamie disagreed over strategy. Inspiration struck in 2007 when their patience in the process (and each other) frayed. Why not just call it Cranky Pressman? The decision was inspired: Start with the humor of a curmudgeonly pressman angrily hunting-and-pecking on a keyboard. Add to that the growing interest in letterpress. As the brothers planned a revamped website and matching collateral, they met designer/illustrator



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Mikey Burton. Burton, a Northeast Ohio native and Kent State University graduate, was a perfect partner—someone whose increasing profile and talent were matched only by his letterpress acumen.

Burton has worked early and often with Cranky Pressman. Their frequent collaborations (prints, posters, business cards, calendars, coasters) brought attention to both Burton and the shop. “I give Mikey all the credit for helping us get there,” Keith says. “He’s a great designer who really latched onto letterpress. I think it’s in his blood. His openness to it, to the process, has been amazing. He was the first partner who came along and used letterpress like it should be used. He’s a natural.”

The feeling is mutual. “Keith is just very passionate about what he’s doing,” says Burton, whose own work led him to be named one of Print’s New Visual Artists in 2010 and Art Directors Club’s Young Guns 8. (Also find him in the Seen profile in HOW’s March issue.) “He practices a high level of craft. He’s not just after a buck and isn’t just after any job. We share the goal to do the best work we can, even if we have to sacrifice what we get in return to get good work out there. Everyone who comes in contact with Keith says he’s one of the nicest people they’ve ever talked to, despite the Cranky name.”

Their first joint project was three promotional postcards designed to showcase Cranky’s house paper stocks, which include an array of recycled content, recovered cotton and heavier boards, all intended to

save customers money. The shop’s branded swatchbook, which has itself become a sought-after promotion, includes their Xx!#! logo and unofficial, yet recognizable mascot, Hank the Cranky Bastard, a gruff-looking old man.

On the heels of Burton’s postcards, which Print magazine featured in its Regional Design Annual, Cranky Pressman produced a series of well-crafted self-promotions. Debuting in 2009, their annual calendars became hot commodities. The Society of Illustrators included their “Old Creative Juices” trade card, done with illustrator David Flaherty, in their 52nd Annual Exhibition last year. It’s not unusual to see Cranky’s self-promotions featured in design annuals or discussed on creative blogs.

Attention aside, the process has been organic. “I don’t remember saying, ‘Oh, this is pretty cool,’” Keith says. “It just kind of evolved. It was one sample at a time. Getting it out there, refining it as we go. I think that’s where we are now. We’re still learning. We’re by no means mastering the craft. I think anyone that says they have is lying.”

As Jamie had told Keith years earlier, getting good work noticed is far easier in the internet age than it was in the past. Beyond the main website, Cranky Pressman (and Hank’s scowling face) can be found on all corners of the online world, from Flickr to Facebook to Twitter to Tumblr and beyond. Wherever creatives are talking, Cranky Pressman is part of the conversation.

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1. CRANKY MAILER

Cranky worked with New York City-based illustrator David Flaherty (www.artarea.com) to create this promotional mailer that was accepted into the Society of Illustrators annual exhibition in 2009. Art direction and copywriting by Jamie Berger.

2. WEDDING INVITATION

This two-color wedding invitation set, designed by bride Randi Anderson, includes a coordinating RSVP card and envelope.

“From the start, the idea was to keep the brand communications as grumpy as possible.”

THE PRESENT OF PRINTING.....

Jamie, now handling Cranky’s marketing, sales and customer relations from Chicago, works hard to hone the shop’s online personality. “From the start, the idea was to keep the brand communications as grumpy as possible,” he says. “It’s easier said than done. Even though relief printing is a fairly simple process, trying to explain it to potential customers who are unfamiliar with the techniques, takes patience. Shouting about their lack of knowledge, although intriguing and possibly fun, is a tricky message to get right.”

Though Jamie’s always tinkering, he’s got it right more often than not. The shop fosters an informative online give-and-take, a welcome alternative to a steady stream of press release corporate speak. Designers like Burton are noticing. “If you think about it, it’s such a perfect persona,” he says. “A crotchety, old printer who’s online. Cranky is as much a person as he is a mascot. He individualizes it.”

Even though they have taken every opportunity to leverage online tools to communicate, the brothers were, at first, wary of Twitter. “Being of a certain age, when we first heard about it, we scoffed and dismissed it as a total waste of time,” Jamie says. “Now, we’re both happily tweeting, sharing information, observing what is going on, which is useful if you can’t be hanging with the hipsters every night. Twitter is one of the easiest, most efficient and fun ways to reach the design community.”

Keith also appreciates new ways of doing business. “If we were counting on local business, we would have been out a long time ago,” he says. “There’s no doubt in my mind we would have been gone. Letterpress and the internet saved the farm. In the old days, you couldn’t talk to a bunch of designers at once. Now you can. Designers like good design. They’re a passionate lot. They live, breathe, are design. Plumbers don’t go around looking at other plumbing. That’s been the most exciting part about it. The passion designers bring to it: They embrace it in their off time as well as at work. They don’t leave it at the shop.”

PRINTING’S FUTURE.....

Leaders in yesterday’s technology? Been there. Using today’s technology to get their name out there? Done that. So what’s next for Cranky Pressman? Changing the way creatives think about printing—and about their place in the process. Today, printers and designers appear to have two vastly different specialties. But in the beginning, Keith says, the printers *were* designers. And the disciplines aren’t quite as different now as their practitioners would think.

“Look at the old shops,” he says. “They had their fonts, their inventory, their set engravings, their certain amounts of ink and paper. And they made it work. Like a designer does. That’s what designers are doing now. They have to take that information and organize it in a meaningful way. That’s exactly what the old-time printers did.”

Think about it: Yesterday’s printers and today’s designers working with the tools at their disposal to communicate information. Both developing visual

10 LETTERPRESS LESSONS

LETTERPRESS IS BEST WHEN ITS QUIRKY, UNPREDICTABLE NATURE IS TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION. REMEMBER ITS STRENGTHS AND USE THEM TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.

1. Come one, come all. Unlike other printing mediums, letterpress can handle gritty workhorses like chipboard and cover stock. More refined papers also work well. Plus, the mix of recycled stocks and vegetable-based inks will make for brilliant printed work and a clean environmental conscience.

2. Forget CMYK and RGB. Letterpress is built on spot colors and, quite often, the very best pieces rely on as little as two. Inks are translucent, so when you layer two colors, you get the look of three for the same price. Time to dust off your art class color-mixing skills.

3. Think beyond ink. Try using a colored paper stock. Printing with light ink over darker paper can produce beautiful results. The stock color will interact with the ink, so take that into consideration when you're planning projects.

4. Go blind. Why not skip the ink? One of the advantages of letterpress printing is the ability to employ inkless blind impressions to bite a design into the final product. You want to see cranky? Try asking a digital printer to do this.

5. Give it a kiss. Images break up and mottle when "kissed" with a light impression, producing a weathered look. The medium's mix of inks, stocks and less sophisticated inking methods causes solid blocks to appear differently than through digital and offset printing, so plan accordingly.

6. Biting's good, too. The kiss's more aggressive sibling is the "bite," whose deeper impressions give pieces the indented feel so many love. Kisses and bites, as you'd imagine, go together well. The thinner the paper, the more a heavy bite shows through to the back. If you don't mind it, your printer won't, either.

7. Bring type to life. Initials, drop caps and hand-drawn lettering look amazing in letterpress. Potential pitfalls to avoid include reversed type on solid blocks of color, which can become overly distressed. Small type works well, but try not to go below 6 points. The same goes for fine line work; keep your rules above .25 points.

8. Pull out the stops. Go above and beyond with special techniques like custom die-cutting, pin-perforation, foil-stamping, embossing, split fountains, color washes, tinted edges and duplexed paper, among many others.

9. Put your best foot forward. "Letterpressing your own promotional materials is a good way to start," say Parliament of Owls partners Meg Paradise and Lauren Sheldon. "As for clients, advise that the investment in letterpress, while often not the cheapest option, can make the difference between someone keeping something for a really long time or tossing it right in the trash."

10. Get people talking. "Make something memorable," says designer Jennifer Daniel, who added "unicorn groomer" to her title when Cranky Pressman produced her much talked-about business cards. "If your card is something that gets people chatting, it's likely they'll remember it. I haven't gotten any new unicorn grooming business from them, but the art directors seem to like them."



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1. DROP CAP CARD

Cranky printed this card for designer Jessica Hische's ongoing Daily Drop Cap project (www.dailydropcap.com), where she posts a new decorative initial cap every work day, on Crane's Lettra 220 lb. cotton stock with edge tinting.

2. HOLIDAY GREETINGS

These postcards were designed by and for design firm Parliament of Owls (www.parliamentofowlsdesign.com), a frequent Cranky collaborator.

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3. FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Mikey Burton (www.mikeyburton.com) designed this four-color letterpress interpretation of Jen Bekman's slogan "Live with art, It's good for you!" to celebrate the first anniversary of her affordable art project 20x200 (www.20x200.com).

styles based on available technology and acquired skills. And both, via the traveling printer tramps of the past or through websites like Dribbble, the Behance Network and FFFFOUND! today, sharing great work and techniques.

This isn't to say the transition from printer/designer to designer/printer is complete, and people like Keith will soon become obsolete. Far from it. Apart from operating a thriving printing business, Keith sees a future role that's as much about educating and collaborating as it is muscling the Heidelberg.

"I've had great experiences with designers coming up here, young designers especially," he says, "using letterpress and actually seeing how to design with their hands, saying, 'Oh, that's what lead is.' Or, 'I actually have to move that around.' It puts a different element to it that I don't think you learn anymore."

Take last year's Cranky Camp, where the shop partnered with Cleveland's AIGA chapter to give a dozen creatives the run of the shop. Working with Keith, they learned about letterpress and, using his vast collection of type and art, individually produced 20 posters using a proofing press. Jeff Finley, a partner at a Cleveland creative agency, was there.

"I had never used letterpress myself," says Finley, who crafted a gig poster for his band. "But after drooling over pressed business cards and posters, I was dying to try it. We were free to plunder drawers full of type and ornaments. We took turns using the press and experimenting with different inks and paper

weights. We were encouraged to experiment and try different things."

Katie Major was also part of Cranky Camp. "People learned to think in more three-dimensional terms," she says. "This typically isn't the way designers think anymore. You have so many options with computer design, but letterpress really takes you to a different level of design thinking, especially in terms of how colors lay and react to each other. This makes you more sensitive to their interactions and, if you're lucky, can produce something that could never be done in any way other than letterpress."

Finley was hooked. "If we live in a fast-food design economy with 5,000 business cards for only \$20," he says, "then letterpress is like a slow, home-cooked meal from Grandma."

This is what Keith loved about Cranky Camp, and where he hopes to take Cranky Pressman. He'd like to further encourage these interactions and teach students and other creatives about letterpress while working on projects in a collaborative environment. This could take the form of a bricks-and-mortar cooperative of designer-printers, perhaps, with everyone learning from each other and producing original pieces.

"It's our relationship with designers that's the important thing," Keith says. "It's not the equipment. It's not the skill set. It's the relationship. It's the collaboration. It's given us a good, positive energy."

This energy has fed momentum into the business. Since the launch of the Cranky Pressman brand, sales



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have more than doubled. With increased sales came new equipment, including a second Windmill press and rubber stamp-making capabilities. With the new website came dedicated printing packages for customers, including stationery, calendars and coasters, which the shop launched by collaborating with the New York City-based design collective Parliament of Owls.

The Owls, who worked with Cranky Pressman on their own self-promotional collateral (holiday-themed postcards and business cards), found the shop through social networking. With a desire to showcase thick stocks, color overlay and tight registration, the decision to choose letterpress—and Cranky Pressman—was easy. “People are falling in love with letterpress again as a reaction to the slick, shiny stuff we get piles of in the mail every day,” says Owl Meg Paradise.

“Letterpress is a reminder that people make things one-at-a-time with their hands,” Paradise continues. “It’s imperfect and personal and kind of romantic. I don’t think people will ever get over the feeling of ink on paper.”

Burton, no stranger to the idiosyncrasies of letterpress or the quirks of his frequent partners at Cranky Pressman, sees a bright future. “Even if 90% of printed work goes away,” he says, “the 10% that’s left will be driven by letterpress, by screenprinting, by artisan-led means. Print will never go away, but the more digital it gets, the more analog people want.”

What Keith wants is for creatives to continue to realize that *their* skills, as much as his, are what make

for great partnerships and finished products. “This is the designer’s shop. It’s not my shop or Cranky’s shop. It’s the designer’s.” **HOW**

Joseph Hughes is one-half of the Kent, OH-based husband-and-wife creative collaborative Northcoast Zeitgeist. www.northcoastzeitgeist.com

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>> WEB EXTRA

Design collective Parliament of Owls collaborated with Cranky Pressman on this issue’s cover. Enter by May 15 for a chance to win one of 10 limited-edition, letterpress posters of the design.

HOWdesign.com/CrankyGiveaway