

THE SEYBOLD

REPORT

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FIRST PERSON

Sustainable Public Printing and Beyond: The Hon. Robert Tapella

By John Parsons

The US Government Printing Office (GPO) is one of the country's oldest agencies, whose mission, including "gathering, cataloging, producing, providing and preserving published information in all its forms," dates back to 1813. The GPO has not been above controversy and complaints common to any bureaucracy. However, its new head, The Hon. Robert Tapella (the 25th to hold the title of Public Printer of the United States) is projecting a more progressive image, including a leadership role in print's environmental sustainability.

Tapella, a 2007 Bush appointee, oversees a vast print procurement and digital information publishing enterprise—one whose energy and resource consumption has significant impact throughout the publishing supply chain. Following his keynote address at this year's Business of Green Media Conference, we asked him to talk about the agency's role and influence in the publishing world.

THE SEYBOLD REPORT: The GPO is unique in many ways; it's a publicly funded combination of publisher, print buyer and print producer. How is comparable to private companies in those market segments?

Robert Tapella: The GPO is similar to our private counterparts in many ways. We're not really a publisher, as we do not have any editorial control over what we print, but we are facing the same digital revolution that many private publishers are facing. We are trying to stay ahead of the ever-changing needs of the American public as they move from print, to the web, to cell phones, e-books, and beyond. We are con-

stantly looking for ways to better communicate with a new generation used to instant information on a 24/7 basis, continually on the go, but also continually connected. Like our counterparts we are frequently publishing products online, in print, and on other media such as CD/DVD at the same time. We are always searching to find ways to get information that is vital to the public out in a quicker and more effective manner. The GPO is providing tools to address the issue of authenticating documents on the web. As are our private counterparts, we are investigating ways of preserving documents and information in formats that will always be accessible. We are placing products in commercial supply chains and bookstores along side those of private publishers.

As a print buyer, the GPO has many similarities to those in private industry. Our goal is to provide a quality product delivered on time in a cost effective manner. We are satisfying a wide range of customers with vastly differing needs. Clear effective communications with our printers and our customers are the key to our success. We deal with the evolving proofing environment and the need to match customer expectations on final products. We have similar issues with educating our customers on the capabilities of the industry and staying current with technology. We are always looking at ways to improve the submission of electronic files or provide increasingly accurate estimates. As is the case with private print buyers we are confronting ever-shorter delivery timeframes. We keep detailed records on our supplier base and are always trying



to provide our customers with the highest quality contractors. Although publicly funded, the GPO operates on a revolving fund basis, which requires us to recover our costs based on fees.

As a print producer, the GPO faces many of the same issues a private printer would. We are always attempting to stay ahead of the changing technology and demands of our customers. We have the same need to make intelligent decisions on our purchase of equipment to make sure that we meet our return on investment goals. Like any printer we are always looking at ways to streamline production and better meet our customer needs. We confront many of the same environmental and safety issues. Keeping our employees trained in the latest advances is critical to us as it is throughout the industry. Making the proper decisions on keeping our equipment filled and scheduled is important to our financial success.

ISK: Why should private sector publishers take notice of the GPO?

Tapella: Historically the GPO has led in many areas including offset presses, electronic type, recycled stocks, and vegetable

inks. We are currently at the forefront of changes in secure documents with its e-Passports and advanced smart cards. We are leading the way in authenticating online documents and the preservation of digital information with GPO's Federal Digital System (FDsys) initiative. FDsys will also put us at the forefront of providing easy, immediate access to online information. We are also planning to lead in environmental issues.

TSR: Let's talk about that. You were the keynote speaker at the Green Media Conference in January. How does the GPO figure into the broader sustainability issue?

Tapella: As the largest industrial manufacturer in the District of Columbia and producer of government documents, the GPO has an obligation to be as environmentally sensitive as possible. We hope to set the standard on sustainable printing by continuing to utilize recycled paper, vegetable oil-based inks and improving our efficiency. In order to meet the highest level of sustainability we hope to move into the first LEED Platinum Printing Plant in America. Practicing sustainability in our facility and providing sustainable products to our customers will promote best practices in our industry and further strengthen sustainable efforts across the Federal government.

TSR: Publishers and printers are talking a lot about using recycled or FSC-certified paper. Is this enough? Should there be a "sustainability information" label on papers and inks or toners?

Tapella: Currently, GPO provides Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative certified paper to our customers upon request. Can we do more? Absolutely. Virtually every step of the printing process can be improved by using sustainable inks and toners, renewable power and recycled materials. Additional labeling to educate the customer is an option for vendors to help guide the customer. We may see these types of labels in the near future if the market demands it.¹

TSR: Will the GPO be changing its environmental requirements for its paper suppliers? What will that mean for the paper market in general?

Tapella: We will continue to meet the demand of our customers and work to pro-

vide a variety of sustainable, cost effective alternatives. GPO anticipates adding additional paper grades and types to our approved JCP list as demand for higher recycled content increases and more sustainable paper products enter the market.

TSR: Besides paper, what other sustainability concerns are you focusing on?

Tapella: The GPO has implemented several initiatives over the years regarding paper consumption, petroleum products utilization, energy expenditures, emissions, and other areas that have reduced our footprint on the environment, and we are developing additional plans to continue this direction well into the future. I have appointed an Associate Chief of Staff for GPO's Strategic Environmental Programs. This officer will develop and expand programs that include recycling, reducing energy consumption, reducing GPO's carbon footprint, and providing Federal customers with environmental printing alternatives.

We are implementing Virtualization Technology that offers us the ability to share a single physical server to house application images and multiple operating systems. This will further reduce our IT energy consumption and footprint by 65% upon complete installation. The GPO is also researching a Solvent Recovery System to regenerate cleaning solvents in order to re-use them on our presses. Implementation of a solvent recovery system would reduce our purchases of the cleaning solvent by about 90% and our waste hauling by about the same amount.

TSR: How can publishers and print buyers tell if sustainability claims are real—as opposed to just being promotional?

Tapella: The GPO faces this challenge everyday. Unfortunately, 'green washing' or false claims of product sustainability, is common. It is important to educate yourself about any product that claims to be 'green' and know your distributor. There is no one way to determine if such claims are true. However, if a vendor's product is truly green they should have no problem producing information supporting that claim.

TSR

Editor's note: During his Green Media Conference keynote address, Mr. Tapella was decidedly more emphatic about the GPO's future intent to require standardized sustainability labeling on all papers purchased by the agency, and told the paper manufacturers' representatives in the audience to take note.