[INTRO]

[00:00:04] DC: It takes the right skills and the right innovation to design and manage meaningful print marketing solutions. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse where we explore all facets of print and marketing that creates stellar communications and sales opportunities for business success. I'm your host, Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. Thanks for tuning in. Listen long and prosper.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:31] DC: Hey, everybody. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse. This is Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador. We are here with the Out and Proud in Print series, and I am honored to welcome Bob Stack to the program. He is the Director of Business Development at North East Rapid Distributors. NERD, as the acronym goes, offers a range of optimized business solutions to create workflow efficiency and generate marketing success. His website is nerdpa.com, but everything you need to connect with Bob is in the show notes.

Hello, Bob. Welcome to the program.

[00:01:12] BS: Thank you. Glad you asked me to be a part of this.

[00:01:15] DC: Well, you volunteered. If I remember, you -

[00:01:17] BS: Oh, yes. I did. Yes, I did.

[00:01:19] DC: Yes. You commented on my post. So I thank you for joining us. How did you end up being the Director of Business Development at North East Rapid Distributors? Then we'll get to the NERD acronym after that.

[00:01:34] BS: Okay. So we call ourselves NERD, and it was intentional to get to the firm NERD. It's cute. It's fun. How did I get to NERD? Without going – well, with going just a little bit in my background in history, Bob Stack, I grew up on a farm in Oklahoma. I moved into the big town of Shawnee, Oklahoma, five miles away. I played football, yada, yada, yada. Oh, here's

something interesting, is my senior year, I got full scholarships to Oklahoma Baptist University to be a minister.

[00:02:06] DC: Oh, wow.

[00:02:07] BS: Yes. Anyway, when summer started, my heart and mind changed, and I called up my uncle, the army recruiter, and joined the army. So I was in the army for four years, in Alaska, South Pacific. I had some interesting deals in time, lots of good stories there. After I got out of the army, my dad was working in the oil fields in Oklahoma. So I went to work with him for a few months and then ended up going to work for Halliburton, which is a big oil field supply company and worked through the boom of the Oklahoma oil fields in the early eighties. That's quite some experience there.

When that died down, I went to college in Oklahoma City, Edmond, and was working part-time. My part-time job fell apart, and a woman I worked with said or knew. He said, "Hey, Bob. I work at a mail center," kind of a mailboxes, et cetera place. She goes, "We need some part-time help." I said, "All right, I'll be down and interview." I didn't go. She called me back three days later and said, "Hey, come on down. I go, "All right, I'll be there this afternoon." I didn't show up.

Finally, she called me and said, "If you want this, show up." So I drove down there immediately. I got the job and shipping packages for Christmas, doing just all kinds of fun things like that or any mailboxes. Well, it went so well that the owners decided that I was going to be the absentee manager, and they were going to go travel the US. So that was kind of cool. As a part of that, one day, and this is how I got in the print and mail, one day a doctor called up and said, "Would you be interested in buying a tabletop folder and tabletop inserter?" They would fit on my little desks right here.

So we bought them. I learned how to operate them, and then I went knocking on doors and asking for business. Big mailing, for me, was 2,000 or 3,000 pieces. I learned how to sort mail by following the DMM and going to – taking my sacks to the post office and them shaking their head, going, "No, that's not it." So I'd literally sat on the floor there and re-sticker them, re-rubber band. Then they – so anyway, I learned it literally from the ground up.

Then, of course, somebody goes, "Well, could you get this printed for me?" So I was like, "Yes."

Then I was tired of Oklahoma City and ready to move on. My domestic partner wanted to move to the West Coast. We both ended up getting jobs in Seattle, Washington. I went to work for a letter shop there. I started out as the hand assembly supervisor and ended up as the estimator. This was a long time ago. The reason I was hired for the estimating position was the owner had gone through three estimators. We had heatset printing equipment, heatset lasers, and inserting equipment.

He had fired the previous three estimators because their approach to things is, "Why would you want to do that? Don't print it four-color. It'd be so much easier to print it two-color." I don't – it was always this, "No, let's do it the simple, the easy way." So literally, what the owner said to me, he goes, "Bob, you don't know what can be done and can't be done." So voila, and one of the first things I did for an estimating program was on one of the little first edition Macs and the floppy disk and figuring out how to set up an estimating program.

Then, move from Seattle to San Francisco, I went to work for a pre-sort bureau and learned some things about pre-sorting and co-mingling mail and fulfillment. Then that job ended. I go, "You know what? I think I want to work for one of them advertising agency people." Because in Seattle, a production manager would walk in to do a press check or a letter shop audit in shorts, with a torn-up t-shirt, with a cup of coffee, and just so casual. They were treated like they were the most important people in the world. So I said, "I want to do that."

I found a job in San Francisco with a small marketing agency and then moved on to another. I went to work finally for Cohn and Wells in San Francisco and ended up in New York City with Cohn and Wells. Unbeknownst to us at Cohn and Wells, the parent company was shutting down Cohn and Wells and moving it into other operations. So I started pounding.

One of the reasons I wanted to go to New York City is this was going to be my big opportunity to find the big jobs, and I expected that would be a few years. Well, since they were letting us go, I started pounding the pavement, and I got a job at Grey Direct, Grey Ink in New York City. One time, I had 30-some-odd production managers reporting to me, and it was quite cool. I learned a heck of a lot.

Then I moved to – I've been to Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago. In the past five, or six years, I've started working on the supplier site again and as a salesperson for various letter shops and printers. Then the last two weren't great pleasant experiences, but the good news is that we ended up with NERD. Me and the three primary people there at NERD really liked working with each other in past lives, and we complimented each other very well. That's the long-winded story of Bob and his professional career.

[00:07:57] DC: It's a great story. So first of all, thank you for your service. Second of all, it's interesting because I was an advertising agency print buyer for more than 25 years. So, yes, you get to wear your casual clothes. Yes, you get to walk around with your coffee. But the only time you're treated nicely is when you go on the press checks.

[00:08:17] BS: Press checks, yes.

[00:08:18] DC: It's the only time you're treated like you're anybody. But I'm sure you found out. You actually worked at HH Global, which I think is really interesting there. So in that position, were you in a client location working as their production person? Or were you sourcing from an outside seat to help other people? How did that work?

[00:08:45] BS: Kind of neither of those.

[00:08:46] DC: Oh, really?

[00:08:48] BS: Yes. Because I had been doing some consulting, and some of the suppliers I was working with had relationships with HH Global. HH Global was looking to acquire a rather large financial institution as a customer, and I was recommended as someone that could really be helpful in figuring out the direct mail aspects, sourcing suppliers, the pricing, postal optimization, and et cetera with them. So that's what I did, was help them with the assessment, establishing prices, reviewing suppliers, and it was a great experience. It was —

[00:09:30] DC: Yes, I could imagine. Okay. So I understand that. If you actually work with them, it would be different. You could have one of those other jobs like Williams Lea or whatever. Okay, but that's really cool. So you basically helped them with their RFP and all that stuff and

developing all of the requests for proposal, everybody out there. The agencies also have to give them two brands and stuff when – I don't know if everybody knows that. They need to pitch deck as well.

By the way, one of the most creative things you could do working with an advertising agency is help them create their pitch book. We used to make the most elaborate pieces of print to show off our agency. I mean, they were books. They were gorgeous. They cost a zillion dollars, and nobody cared, as long as you won an award or you got a client out of it, right? Okay. So let's specifically talk about your work at NERD.

[00:10:25] BS: At NERD, we've got four principal lines of business. We've seen the printing and the mailing world from perspectives as a client-agency and suppliers, so very well-rounded. Just in an agency, and especially in a direct mail marketing agency, as I had a lot of experience in, you see every type of package possible. Also, just as a side note, every creative director doing direct mail has to do an Iron Cross.

[BREAK]

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[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:11:40] DC: I was going to say, and we've invented formats at the post office. It just like looks at us and goes, "Well, you could put it in a giant glycine envelope, like a see-through envelope, but it can't go through any of our equipment. Nice try, though."

[00:11:55] BS: Right, yes. So it's kind of what NERD's trying to offer. We believe that we're in a world now where the conventional wisdom from the past is rarely relevant today. Before the pandemic, you could have said, "I want a mail this." I could ask you five questions, and I could tell you what the turn time would be and a tight range of what the price would be. Due to the epidemic and everything else that's happening, I wouldn't do that at all now. I can't. It's not possible.

In order to prosper and even survive, we've got to look to make everything different. Or not maybe everything but a lot of things are different. New approaches, new views, et cetera. There are marketing dollars out there. They're still out there, and the budgets are there. But our costs are increasing dramatically all over the place. Then on top of that, you've got staffing issues. People aren't qualified and/or you don't get them. So we have to look at different things. It kind of comes down to, we have to innovate or die, or the business is going to die. So we like to look at things and try and figure out an interesting angle.

I was talking to the team the other day because I was frustrated that I'd spent a number of hours working on a project, and the customer ended up not being interested in the majority of it. Well, they go, "Yes, that happens. But you got to spend the time to find the right one that does work." So it's good.

Anyway, so at NERD, we've got four lines of business. One is data processing, and it's a staff augmentation for direct mailers. So we can take their customers' files, do the postal sort, do the programming for the variables, and prepare it for their printing equipment or personalization equipment. That can be for one-color laser Inkjet, the four-color variable, to four-color Inkjet, so the whole gamut there.

We've also got all the software. So it's potential that some smaller organizations wouldn't need to purchase the software that's needed for this. We propose it as an augmentation to existing staff. So maybe you've got enough work for one or two people, and there's times you need work for three. Well, we can be there for that.

So then the other line of business, probably our largest revenue, is kitting fulfillment and sourcing of those kitting materials. So we've – and kind of found a niche of working with

educational companies and homeschooling companies. Those have been quite interesting because, in the sourcing, we've purchased everything from test tubes to rubber bands to rocks and dirt. Then taking it in and packaging it so that there are six rocks for all these things. It's really kind of cool.

Then also, where my passion kind of lies, it won't surprise you, is we've been also managing the print production of their catalogs; saddle stitch, perfect bound, and then other printing collateral, and have ended up providing some pretty good prices and service that they really didn't know how to approach on that stuff.

Then a third area, which Ron Snyder and myself really enjoy, is data security and compliance consulting. Where at my previous employment where Ron was at, we got to know each other because he was the IT data security person, and we needed to respond to a large customer's data security assessment, 190-plus questions. I've done a number of these types of questions over the years. In truth, working with the IT and data security people has always been something that just like felt like I was pounding my head against the wall.

Well, working with Ron, he'd write up the technical responses and et cetera. Then I'd be able to go in and look at them going, "No, no, no, no. Let's do this, this." We just collaborated just exceptionally well. So anyway, we've done some compliance consulting with letter shops. Set them up for policies and procedures, ISO alignment, and helping them respond to the questionnaires and assessments.

Then the final one here, we're not ready to launch this one yet, but -

[00:16:48] DC: Well, I just know you're about to tell everybody about it.

[00:16:50] BS: Well, I know. Gotcha. This is something that I've been working on in one way or another for going on for probably 10 years now. It's a print and direct mail platform to facilitate sourcing, purchasing, and management. But it's not for, I guess, the professional buyer. It's not for them. You guys know what you're doing. You got your resources, and the last thing you want is somebody coming in going and saying, "Do it this way."

So, no, I'm not looking at that. It's for small to medium-sized organizations. Somebody that you know maybe it's the creative director in the organization that has to also buy the print and maybe launch a direct mail. It could even be the receptionist or a salesperson or something. I think when you and I were talking, you called them the "civilians." So our platform —

[00:17:42] DC: Yes, that's what I call like just the people who own small businesses, civilian print customers.

[00:17:47] BS: Yes. So the platform is designed to help them with getting what they need, and we're approaching it with the 80-20 rule, is we're not going to have formats on there that's for everything underneath the sun. There will be what are the most common formats, sizes, et cetera from marketing materials to direct mail, envelopes, and postcards. So that way, we can control it. We'll end up with multiple suppliers' prices that'll be accessible. I think it's probably going to be three months before we're ready to really go, "This is it" type thing. This is my passion.

[00:18:28] DC: Yes. I mean, amazing. I mean, how comprehensive. I'm not sure I'm clear. So just in case, you work with printers, and you work with companies who need this help that don't have the help internally as well. Do you work with both those groups of people?

[00:18:44] BS: Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

[00:18:46] DC: Okay.

[00:18:46] BS: For the printer or the letter shop/mailer or the end user company. Or I don't know if they're end user but yes.

[00:18:54] DC: Yes. That makes sense. So you can either act as a partner to a printer or a vendor to a printer, correct?

[00:19:00] BS: Correct. White label our services from the data processing and et cetera.

[00:19:06] DC: Okay, awesome. So what's it like having printers as customers, now that you know? You were a print customer, and you had printers as vendors. What's it like having printers as customers?

[00:19:18] BS: I think it wasn't a big switch for me. It wasn't a big challenge because when I was at the agencies as responsible for purchasing and production planning and et cetera, I think how I was successful was I really truly worked with the suppliers in like I need to know what your real capabilities are, what works for you, and what doesn't. One of the things that I would do when I first come into an agency, and they've got these pricing structures, what I would do is tear them apart and go back out to the printers and go, "Here's what I asked you to bid on, these three – these exact specifications. If anybody – I don't want you to add any fluff or buffer for anything else. You price it exactly what I asked for."

One, you end up getting some pretty decent prices and especially if they're current suppliers of the agency. So then you have to convince and educate the production managers. It's like that third set of proofs you want, oh, yes, you're paying for the third set of proofs. We only ask for two. So establishing and really working with suppliers, I don't want to say I know everything about them because I don't. But I appreciate the pain.

It's all kind of – one of my philosophies is kind of what I call the philosophy of mutuality. If it's really going to be successful in our world, it's got to be good for our customers. It's got to be good for the agency. It's got to be good for the printer.

[BREAK]

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air by visiting projectpeacock.tv and request your partnership proposal today. Peacock long and prosper.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:21:43] DC: Yes. I mean, everything you're describing is creating and cultivating, and maintaining a strong collaborative relationship no matter what side you are on it. I just know as being a print customer that when I am, let's just say, taking on those other roles as a salesperson if I'm trying to sell an Initiative for my company or something like that, I just call upon all my experience of all the things I hated as being a customer and try to not do those things.

For example, the thing that you pointed out that I think every professional print customer would agree with, do not change my specs. I understand that this might be an efficient and better way for me to do it, but you're messing up my triple bidding by doing that. So what you have to do is just give me what I asked for. Then side note, by the way, here's another estimate that is the way we would recommend that you do this.

Then sometimes, I would hire those vendors because, yes, they gave me exactly what they wanted, but then they came back and said, "Girl, no. Do it this way. It's better for you." If none of the other printers came back with at least telling me something, then I would be like, "Well, why would I want to work with them? At least this person is trying to help me be more efficient." Efficiency is everything that you are really about.

You made a great point in the beginning that everything has changed and I think since the pandemic. One of the biggest changes is the fact that quality has kind of moved down the list. Pricing has kind of gone medium speed to market, has become one of the top priorities. Force speed to market, are you willing to pay for the speed to market? Which goes back to the supply chain, workforce, and all that stuff that might need to be incorporated to get it out into the marketplace.

But while printers and customers are going through this, the only thing they can do, especially the post office, is raising postage again, right, which we'll get into in a minute. The only thing

really that businesses can do is make each job that comes through their print shop the most profitable it can possibly be. So address that and anything you want to say about the postal increase that was just announced.

[00:24:21] BS: Supplier-printer relationships, customer relationships, to me, honestly and straightforward is the only policy and the only way to work with things. I learned my negotiating skills and relationships in that world from my father, growing up on the farm when he'd be selling hogs or cows. They'd have this guy come out and buy them. I'd sit there and listen to them negotiate and stuff.

Then years later, when I got out of the army, I was buying my first brand-new pickup. So my dad went with me to negotiate the deal. So we're setting across from the salesperson, and he's going back and forth. My dad's kicked me several times because I'm like, "I just want to buy it. Can we just go?" He'd kick me and tell me to shut up.

Well, finally got to the end, getting ready to sign the contract, and this salesperson goes, "Oh, do you want a bumper on your pickup?" You and I would have assumed the bumper was included in the pickup. But anyway, it was –

[00:25:18] DC: Yes. Like doors, right?

[00:25:22] BS: Right. But he threw that in and was able to renegotiate. Well, it was kind of – I call this cutesy. But that type of negotiating doesn't stand well and ends up dissolving relationships. You plainly state whether there's production overs included and what your assumptions are and et cetera on those. Relationship is the biggest key, being able to know people, trust them, and learn from them. You learn their strengths and their weaknesses, and you adapt. If they're a good supplier, they adapt to yours as well on there.

Postal increase, there's all kinds of fun politics around that. But I'm not going to talk or worry about that. It's a disappointing situation because, with the increase in postage, that means we end up mailing less because the ROI no longer works out for some of the projects. So its mail volume is just not going to be there. So it's kind of like postal increases or a self-defeating thing.

[00:26:29] DC: They are. But if you invest in efficiencies, if you can get things in and out of print shops with the least amount of human touches, you have a fighting chance, right?

[00:26:39] BS: That's what NERD and myself is all about is that let's look at this differently because there are different ways of operating.

[00:26:47] DC: Yes, I completely agree. So you've said it in different ways throughout this discussion. But just to put it in one encapsulated little chunk, what are the types of companies that you're looking to work with?

[00:27:03] BS: Letter shops, printers, and like I said, the small to medium-sized. They've got one data programmer or something on there.

[00:27:14] DC: Small and medium-sized print shops you're talking about.

[00:27:16] BS: Yes, and letter shops, anybody that's handling, producing direct mail. So that's for our data processing service, okay? Then for the data security and compliance, that's probably going to be to the small to medium-sized organization as well because they're going to end up going against the wall with a customer that's going to go, "What's your data policy and procedures?" It's going to be like, "Uh, yes sure. Yes." With those types of folks, with really for just a few thousand dollars, we can get them set up and looking and operating to be in compliance with that.

Then this print and direct mail platform, that's – I don't know how to describe that audience. But it's the non-professional print buyers.

[00:27:59] DC: I would say consumers, anybody out there. I mean, if you were going to go to VistaPrint and order a business card, you can go to your site and get a direct mail piece. I'm very excited that that is coming, and please keep us all posted on it.

Okay, let's get to the Out and Proud in Printing part of this podcast. So you're from Oklahoma. You work in the printing industry. You were in the military. You lived all over the place. Share your story with the Printerverse.

[00:28:33] BS: All right. Let's see. I don't know where to start as such. I didn't figure out I was gay until I was 25 years old, okay? That was in Oklahoma City. Oklahoma, Midwest like that, not a great comfortable place to be different in any way, shape, form, or manner, much less gay. So I met my first partner in Oklahoma City, and he was from Michigan, and he wanted to get the heck out of Oklahoma City. So we started looking in the Western United States, and we both ended up jobs in Seattle, Washington. So off we go.

That was my first experience outside of Oklahoma City. I mean, yes, I'd been in the army, but that's kind of different. I'd just grown up with a certain viewpoint on things. Then when I got to Seattle and started looking and watching people, it's like, "Oh, my gosh. There's a whole different world out here." It's more expansive, and it's more open and interesting.

Seattle, when I first got there, there were signs on telephone poles about Saturday afternoon, come to the socialist and communist meeting at two o'clock at such and such. I go, "Oh, my God." In Oklahoma City, there have been guns going down the street to do whatever. Luckily, for me, I've lived in these big metropolitan cities. I worked for agencies for a lot of the time. So me being gay was a non-issue, and it was like, "So you're also white and have reddish hair."

[BREAK]

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[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:30:47] DC: Did you have to address that in some manner? I mean, were you concerned about the pronouns you were using? I mean, let's not get stereotypical here. But I mean, if you were walking down the street, I don't think my gaydar would go off on you very quickly.

[00:31:03] BS: Yes. So initially, my younger years, there was definitely watching out for the pronouns. Also, within the agency itself, typically, I didn't have to worry about what I said, how I said. But I was interfacing with a lot of clients. So there, when I was with clients, I did watch my pronouns and et cetera on that.

One of the letter shops I worked at that was like my first really coming out as such is I was managing a number of people in the hand assembly area. They're part-time workers and full-time. I'd noticed that when I started, when I'd walk up to a table where they were working, conversation would seize. This was over just a couple-day period. Then as I was kind of noticing that, I'm going, "What the heck's going on?" My boss approached me and goes, "Bob, we need to have a conversation. You know we have no issue with you being gay, but the staff is beginning to gossip and just go on about you being gay." I go, "Why?" He goes, "I don't know why." He goes, "How do you want to handle this?"

So we had a department meeting, and I got up and said, "Yes, I'm gay. I'm in a long-term relationship. I also – on the weekends, I'm working with the Gay Pride march committee." So, yes, I just try and was trying to not bring it – make it a big deal. So after that, one of the things I learned – well, I want to go back. I had such great support because after I did my spiel and et cetera, the boss said, "Hey, all the staff, anybody that's got a serious issue with working for a gay man needs to go to HR, and we will work out a severance package with you." So I was like, "Wow, cool." That was Seattle. But that's still 30 years ago.

[00:33:00] DC: No. I mean, absolutely amazing. I had this conversation yesterday about the true advantages when people live in bigger cities that there is diversity. There's public transportation. I mean, there's every type of diversity in a city. I always say public transportation is the great equalizer in so many ways. But not everybody can leave where they are from. What do you say to those gay people out there who maybe are still not feeling supported and what they maybe can do about that?

[00:33:46] BS: That's interesting. I mean, it kind of goes – it's an interesting question. I hadn't really thought of that in a while. But I'd say before the pandemic or about that time period, I

thought was feeling that for myself at least, and people I knew. That being gay was no longer hardly a deal at all. I know that's not the case for a lot of people. But for me, it was.

Even to the degree, my partner played basketball in a gay basketball league five years ago in Chicago. Well, the basketball league dissolved. Why did it dissolve? Because it is no longer needed to have a gay league. Gay players were welcome on everybody's team and stuff. Anyway, back to the – but the past few years, it seems like things have become more divisive, more challenging, and concerning. A lot of degrees, I'm lost.

I guess I'm grateful that there is online resources. I mean, like Zoom. You can actually have a conversation, see people, have a – get engaged. A person does have to protect themselves because they need to be cautious. Sometimes, it's just not worth being out in those circumstances, et cetera.

One of the things that I have thought about, and I actually reached out to my little brother the other day to ask him, I go, "Hey, I'm going to be on this podcast, and what do I say about me being gay?" Now, I have to back this up. Him and I didn't speak for 10 years, and that's because he was a right-wing Christian fundamentalist, and I'm all over here on the far left going, "Support me or die" type scenario. Well, thank God, his daughter, my niece, got involved about six years ago, and she put us back together. We've both modified our viewpoints to such. It's really cool having a brother. Who would have thought?

But anyway, so I asked him, and he goes, "Well, my opinion is how you approach things, and what I think most people would be comfortable with is looking at people as just humans, not looking at them as you're gay, you're six-foot tall. Just like you're a human and interacting that way." He gave a good story on that. He goes, "You're going to go have a drink and play a game of pool in a bar. And you drive up, and there's a whole bunch of Harley-Davidsons sitting out front. You may be going, 'Oh, do I want to go in here,' a little skeptical. So you got that thought."

Well, let's switch that around. Let's say you're in that very bar, and you're having a drink, and six guys come in, and they start playing pool and interacting a little bit. Then you walk outside, and you see their motorcycles, and you go, "Huh, I wouldn't have thought." That's kind of – that's what I try to do. I don't think I'm always successful. But treat others as a human.

Out and Proud in Print with Bob Stack

Transcript

[00:36:59] DC: I love it, and I'm so glad that you and your brother found you a way to have

some common ground, and both of you learned to accept each other for who you are, which is

the whole point here. Thank you so much for your time, for sharing your story. Everything you

need to connect with Bob and NERD is in the show notes. Until next time, everybody. Print long,

have pride long, and prosper.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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time, thanks for joining us. Print long and prosper.

[END]

Mentioned in This Episode:

Bob Stack: https://www.linkedin.com/in/rstack/

North East Rapid Distributors: https://nerdpa.com/

Deborah Corn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborahcorn/

Print Media Centr: https://printmediacentr.com

Project Peacock: https://ProjectPeacock.TV

Girls Who Print: https://girlswhoprint.net