

ASPIRATIONS AND PROFESSIONALISM



Ranjith Fernando, President, Sri Lanka Association of Printers (SLAP) and Chairman/CEO, Sharp Print Holdings

The printing industry in Sri Lanka has the necessary technology to meet current international requirements and has evolved with technology to keep with the changing times. Ranjith Fernando, President, Sri Lanka Association of Printers (SLAP) and Chairman/CEO, Sharp Print Holdings speaks about what more needs to be done to make Sri Lanka the 'printing hub' in South Asia and his plans during his tenure at the helm of SLAP.

Words Keshini de Silva | Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

You are the newly appointed President of the Sri Lanka Association of Printers, could you tell us about the organisation?

The Sri Lanka Association of Printers (SLAP) was established in 1956. SLAP has a history of 61 years. The main objective of this Association is to help and promote the industry; principally to work for the betterment of the printing fraternity, its growth and sustainability while maintaining a network among fellow printers. Survey information shows that we have about 8,000 printers scattered Islandwide, however only 500 have registered with us as members. The members are not only printers, but also suppliers. We have General Membership and Associate Membership.

I served in the Executive Committee for the past nine years. The SLAP Executive Committee consists of 17 members. I initially joined as the Treasurer when Dinesh Kulathunga was SLAP President. Subsequently, I functioned as the Secretary and Second Vice President, First Vice President and subsequently became President. I believe we should reach the top gradually. We must be on the Executive Committee of the Association for three consecutive years to be eligible to become President.

What is the core role of the Association and what does your role as the President entail?

The role of the Association as I said earlier, is to assist the industry and to lobby with the Government if there are issues in relation to the printers or the printing industry. This year I have planned a "Seven-Point Programme" having identified industry issues. The first Point is to attempt to increase the number of skilled workers. Our main problem is attracting workers into the industry. We are running short of skilled workers. This is not only related to the printing industry, this issue affects the other industries as well. The country's printing sector is growing very fast and we find that every year

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a minimum of 300 units of machines are being installed. Hence, to operate the 300 machines we need a minimum of 600 new personnel. Thus, the main objective is to attract people to the industry and train them to create a skilled workforce for the industry. In this process, we seek assistance from the Ministry of Vocational Training and Development to collaborate with. Many Printers have agreed to absorb a part or the entire cost of 'on the job training'.

The second point focuses on increasing the membership within the Sri Lanka Association of Printers, thus strengthening our membership especially when lobbying with the Government. We seek membership not only from the offset printers, but also from digital, screen and other print entities who are meeting the growing needs of the industry thus we are expanding the landscape of the printing fraternity.

Thirdly, we will focus on issues, which may have an adverse effect, primarily in terms of positioning the industry in the International market. Currently, there are issues concerning safeguarding the industry, towards which we will be working with relevant authorities in the next few months.

Our fourth aim is to add professionalism to the industry, such as through a code of ethics and set of guidelines. The main objective is to safeguard the industry to ensure sustainability.

Our fifth objective will be on maintaining relationships with national and international bodies, such as the Export Development Board, Ceylon National Chamber of Industries (CNCI), Sri Lanka Institute of Printing and the National Chamber of Commerce. We already maintain a good relationship with these institutions. SLAP has also tied up with overseas Associations such as the FESPA (Federation of Screen Printers Associations) a European based International Association. We are in the process of expanding the premises of our own training centre. FESPA has come forward to assist this process.

The ASGA (Australian Sign and Graphics Association), and Asia Print are a few other overseas Associations that have indicated a willingness to jointly working with SLAP for training and education. It is great privilege that the FESPA has also selected Sri Lanka to host its Annual General Assembly on September 29, 2017. It is expected to see the attendance of members from at least 60 countries.

Finally, we have a few plans to raise funds for the Association's from various initiatives. We are also planning on introducing a 'Print Directory' covering all print related products and services.

These are the seven points, on which the Executive Committee of SLAP will focus during my two-year tenure.

Could you elaborate on the challenges faced by the industry?

Finding skilled workers is a major problem. It is a problem faced across many industries in Sri Lanka. When I participate in various forums, owners of many industries raise concerns on a shortage of skilled workers due to a tendency of youth to drive three wheeler or engage in an odd job that is leisurely. The industry is losing many skilled workers as they obtain overseas employment, particularly in the Middle East and Korea. We have raised the issue at the print and packaging sector meetings with relevant authorities, and in constant meetings with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in finding solution in this regard. I am happy with the suggestion to impose a minimum age limit for drivers of three wheelers to discourage youth from opting for this avenue. Even our machine operators want to purchase a three wheeler, after which they resign from their jobs. They only focus on temporary benefits, rather than going forward with career advancement and for better prospects in life. Thus, we lose people in the industry. I further believe that we need to revitalise the industry. We are also planning to meet with the Government on providing media coverage to attract employees to the industry. Machine Operators in the printing industry earn over 50,000 rupees as salary. Yet, Sri Lankans are not aware of this. They assume this is an odd job. Printing is an area with many career prospects. Therefore, in addition to organising several awareness and outreach programmes for school leavers in Sri Lanka, SLAP is offering

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scholarships for skills training, especially at the Sri Lanka Print Media Academy formed the Association in 2011.

Another challenge is the taxes on imported material. If printers pay more tax on papers and boards we are loosing the competitive edge. A special mention must be made of the Ceylon Tea industry as although we contribute a substantial amount as packaging as value addition, it is not highlighted in terms of industry contribution. As far as value addition is concerned, packaging is a substantial element. We also noticed that printed cartons, printed notebooks are imported with no duty or less duty. This will adversely affect the industry. While we seek corrective measures for duty on the material and printed materials to safe guard the industry, we hope suggesting some measures to discourage of import of old machinery.

What are your thoughts on the Sri Lankan print industry? The standards and technology?

We must together maintain the industry's technological advancement to move with the trends and enter into the global market to stake our claim in the competitive international print and production landscape.

SLAP is expanding the landscape of the print industry while focussing on its growing needs. The printing industry is developing rapidly. Print production is shifting from offset to digital. Even screen printing technology is developed to facilitate the printing of different surfaces. Our Association consists of offset printers, digital and screen printers. Our scope is widening. We are happy with the technology used in Sri Lanka, which is very advanced. Many printers in Sri Lanka are using state-of-the-art technology to meet the growing demand of print production.

Our focus is to enhance the Sri Lanka print quality to complete in the global market. There are Sri Lankan printers, who export large orders for world renowned companies. Our vision, as the Sri Lanka Association of Printers, is to make Sri Lanka the printing hub of South Asia.

Could you tell us about the establishment and journey of your company Sharp Print Holdings Group?

I started my career as a banker, and later moved towards printing. I am a graduate of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. I was first



employed at People's Bank and worked for 12 years. I am happy to say that I was instrumental in setting up the leasing division at Peoples Bank. Later I joined Seylan Bank. I always had a dream of starting a business during my time in the financing of Small and Medium Enterprises. I selected the printing Industry as I identified it was a growing industry, which is needed for any industry or service. For example, paper has a value if printed, if not it has no value. For any type of service printing is involved. This is the reason, after having calculated risk the factors, I decided that printing is a sustainable industry. Originally my wife, who I met in University, managed the business. After 25 years of service in the banking industry I decided to focus on our family business. My wife is still completely engaged in the business. Though we started in a small way in 1998, 19 years later, today we are quite proud to have state-of-the-art machines. Everything is done in-house as we have all the required facilities, such as pre-press, press, and post-press procedures.

Sharp Print Holdings has won many awards for excellence in the printing sector including the Gold Award for Printing Excellence for six

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years from the Sri Lanka Association of Printers. We have created our very own stationary brand 'IDEA'. Idea was developed to cater the demand of stationery items and high quality Notebooks.

The company has two lines of production. One is producing cartons for packaging for both the local and export industries. The other line is printing books and magazines. We are proud to be the printer of Business Today magazine for the past 10 years. Needless to say, our quality levels have increased in line with the quality expectations of BT Options.

We also concentrate on exports in addition to being an indirect exporter. We exported packaging material and Notebooks to Canada, Dubai and the Maldives.

How does Sharp Print Holdings remain competitive and technologically relevant in the current market?

Since inception, we focussed on providing a service of high quality. As such we acquired machinery, and constantly strived to implement brand new machines as much as possible.

We have set up a 'well-equipped print production press' offering many services under one roof including a complete range of post-press facilities to meet the requirements of any type of printing work. We maintain ISO standards in our print production. I further suggest to all printers in Sri Lanka that they too should maintain good standards of quality.

Message to entrepreneurs and businesses in Sri Lanka, especially fellow printers?

Printing is a proud industry. We are proud to be a printer as many industries require our support as they either produce a product or offer services. While providing our service we must maintain professionalism.

We should also maintain ethical practices to ensure the sustainability of the industry. We must retain customers by providing them a better service, which will go a long way. We must all meet the standards expected to align our processes according to customer needs.

I appeal to all my colleagues to join the Sri Lanka Association of Printers. As printers we must all emphasize on working together as one industry rather than simply working on an individual basis. Together we must take the industry to the next level and thereby make the Sri Lanka the printing hub of South Asia. ☐