

Color Sells—Doesn't It!

Direct print color on corrugated has come a long way and it's still trending upward.

By John Bird, JB Machinery

We've come a long way from Kraft with black cert stamps and "this end up". In the early 80's, two or three colors on some type of white top was more of the exception than the standard and only a few color pioneers ran multi-color direct print with any regularity.

Today, there's still a requirement for one-color on Kraft and there's no denying that there are plants which are very profitable producing this type of work. However, direct multi-color printing is now closer to the standard rather than the exception. Its "sex-appeal" immediately catches the attention of consumers, which, combined with its "cost-appeal", quickly catches the attention of our customers and continues to drive the trend for more, brighter and exotic color capabilities.

Ink suppliers confirm that the sales of their products show a definite trend towards more color and higher-graphics. The sales of opaques and standard blacks have declined by as much as 15% over the last five years, while color and process ink sales have grown in excess of 10% in the same time period. The sale of UV curable varnishes have also increased significantly during this time period as more brand owners desire the visual and physical characteristics the process provides. Also, the fact that Pantone® has recently doubled its color scale certainly confirms that the use of color will continue on an upward trend.

It can be argued whether or not four-color is a near universal standard - if not, it will be in the not too distant future - but the capability for a plant to produce four-color work is expected by virtually every customer a



salesman talks to. Then there are the "mega-color" presses with 6, 7, 8 and today as many as 9 color stations with anilox rolls and drying systems that can be quickly changed to meet the specific requirements of each job. While they're the exception... today... the number of these installations in North America and around the world continues to grow.

COLOR AND APPEARANCE

When we think of high-end graphics perhaps the first thought that comes to the minds of many are more colors. However, we know it goes far beyond that. Customers want sharper, life like images and bolder colors. They're looking for specialty inks like metallics, higher gloss, greater rub resistance, custom textures and even fire-proof and non-skid coatings. They want a cost effective, efficient way to differentiate their product from the competition on the shelf and win the battle of the retail aisle. Litho-lam has long been the process of choice when it came to high-end graphic applications and is still widely used today. However, many brand owners are moving more of their packaging from pre-print into direct printing. At first the quicker turnaround and minimum order requirements outweighed the "less than litho quality graphics". Then as materials, equipment and processes improved, direct print began to make sense for more and more products. Today, with the latest technologies in place, many plants are running multi-color direct print, with water based and UV varnishes (often combined on the same piece and in a single pass) which only a very skilled eye can discern from a pre-printed label. We also must not forget that today all of this is being done at maximized production speeds.

Research and development continues on innovative technologies that promise to take the direct print process to new levels of quality and efficiency, creating greater manufacturing versatility and product offerings.



John Bird

CONTROL THE PROCESS

Controlling the variables of the process is the key to success in the quest for advanced graphics. The best inks, substrates, designs, machinery and of course, drying and curing systems, are definitely necessary to achieve outstanding graphics, but without the knowledge to control the process, it can prove to be a painful and expensive exercise.



Enhancements in materials and equipment have come a long way in the past ten years. This in a large part has been driven by converters seeking ways to create and provide enhanced value solutions for their customers. Industry suppliers in turn listened to the converters and partnered and worked diligently to elevate direct printing on corrugated to the level it has achieved today. Through the expertise and knowledge shared in these partnerships, the direct printing process will continue to improve and grow.

Yes, Virginia, color does sell. As certainly as the future of color is as bright as the face of an eight year-old on Christmas morning, it remains a driving force for moving product from the shelves to the shopping carts. Alas! How dreary would BJ's, Costco, Sam's and Walmart be if there were no color, only Kraft and black? Probably about as dull as the inside of an empty bulk bin. ■