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For printers and converters of labels, flexible packaging and folding

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Digital and Dynamic

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As Fort Dearborn transitions to a new level of business performance, it is using digital printing as a key tool to

maintain customer intimacy.

NEW PRINTING PROCESSES don't come along too often. It took more than six hundred years for the four major printing processes (letterpress, gravure, lithography, and flexography) to come into being. Now, however, our generation has a unique opportunity to see first hand the practical evolution of a new printing process—digital printing.

Digital printing in one form or another has been around for more than 50 years, but its real impact on commercial and package printing has been much more recent than that. Commercial printing, as usual, is leading the way for packaging, but several progressive package printers are getting involved with digital printing in its early stages.

Fort Dearborn is one such company. According to company President and CEO, Richard Adler, Jr., Fort Dearborn got into digital printing for packaging at an early stage in its development, about 10 years ago, and is now recognized in the industry as a leader in digital printing of labels. packagePRINTING talked to Adler about his company's experience and his views on digital printing in the packaging market.

Fort Dearborn – The company

Fort Dearborn is an 80-year-old, family-owned business that was started in 1925 in Chicago by Adler's grandfather. The one-press operation was named after a Midwest government outpost on the Chicago River that the city of Chicago was built around. Fort Dearborn, the company, tied its heritage to the pioneering spirit that laid the foundation for one of the great cities of the world. In its own world of package printing, the company seems to be living up to its legacy.

Very early in its formative years, the company began to find a home in label printing for food and beverage products. Except for a necessary divergence to print strategic maps to support the war effort in the 1940s, the company continued its growth and focus on label printing. This was initially focused on litho-printed, cut-and-stack labels, followed later by roll-fed paper, film pressure-sensitive, and full-body shrink labels. Over the past 15 years, the company has focused completely on prime labels for consumer products markets.

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Leadership at Fort Dearborn was passed on to a second generation in the 1960s when Adler's father and two uncles took the baton. The current third-generation leadership, Richard and his two brothers, Nick and Matt, took the reigns in the latter part of the 1990s. Adler's father and uncle are still active in the company and serve on the Board of Directors.

Fort Dearborn serves customers in markets that include food and beverage, personal care, paints and coatings, household products, and wine and spirits. It serves many customers with highly recognizable names and products, such as Unilever, DelMonte, PepsiCo, and other high-velocity consumer goods companies. Customers in these markets demand a high degree of quality and graphic consistency. In addition, Adler especially emphasizes that the label must function seamlessly in the customer's operation. "You never want the label to be a bottleneck in the customer's filling lines," he says.

Company renewal

Fort Dearborn's focus on high-quality prime labels has led to significant growth and success, with a tripling in size in the past 10 years alone. Today, the company supports sales of about \$190 million, with 810 employees operating from six U.S. facilities. It also has a joint venture in Mexico that produces full-body shrink sleeves.

To support its diverse customer needs, the company offers a range of printing solutions using offset, gravure, flexo, and digital processes. It also supplies multiple label formats using paper and film substrates, such as OPP, OPS, PETG, and PVC in cut-and-stack, roll form pressure-sensitive, and shrink sleeve configurations.

The fast pace of growth led to some growing pains, "a couple of years of settling out," says Adler. In addition, the multitude of different labels and different customers require a high degree of financial and operational discipline. To address these issues, Adler and his brothers made a strategic decision to bring in professional talent from outside the company.

Earlier this year, Mike Anderson was brought in as the company's new chief operating officer and Tim Trahey as its chief financial officer. While these new executives focus on running the business, Nick and Matt are driving lean manufacturing initiatives and new business development efforts, respectively.

Fort Dearborn performed a painstaking search to fill these positions. "It took more than six months to find the right people for these positions," Adler reports. "We were looking for performance-driven executives—winners from winning industries in mature markets. Just as important, we were looking for people who share similar values—values that form the basis of our company."

These values have driven the company's historical success. Adler lists these values as a focus on the customer, a high degree of integrity, and open communications with its associates that emphasizes that "people are our most important asset."

With the new executives onboard, Fort Dearborn has established four key initiatives for its renewal: customer intimacy, organization, operational excellence, and innovation. "Every one is important, but customer intimacy is what drives all else," says Adler.

Digital printing solution

Fort Dearborn's customer focus drives them to learn the needs of their customers so they can solve their problems. Although customers have different needs, Adler said there are continued trends of speed to market, reduced inventory, and a proliferation of SKUs. "All these lead to a need for just-in-time production," he says.

To position the company to better address these needs, Fort Dearborn added digital printing capabilities to its arsenal. It first got into digital printing using an Indigo print engine to help customers launch new products. Speed-to-market is critical in new product introductions—companies want, and need, to get on the store shelf first, before their competition.

Shrink sleeve labeling is a good example of how digitally printed prototype labels can add significant value to product development cycle. Shrink sleeves are one of the fastest growing label segments in packaging and Fort Dearborn has been producing shrink sleeves since 1998. However, shrink sleeve design and production provide many technical challenges. There are many factors that come in to play to get the graphics just right on the contour of a particular container.

Fort Dearborn has been able to use its digital printing capability to quickly provide press-proof-quality shrink sleeve labels prior to production. As a result, Fort Dearborn's customers can see how their labels look on the container, and make adjustments as necessary—easily and quickly.

In addition to a significant amount of prototyping, Fort Dearborn is also using digital printing for low-volume production runs. "We have worked with HP the last couple of years to apply this technology to actual label production," says Adler. "Digital printing has now advanced well enough to effectively handle lower volume SKUs."

Adler points out another great benefit of digital printing: "It's the ultimate in just-in-time. You go right from the file to the press. This is crucial for same-day or next-day delivery requirements," he states.

Evidently, Fort Dearborn has a robust demand for its digital printing solutions. Earlier this year, it added a new HP Indigo 4050 press to go along with its three existing HP Indigo 4000 series presses. In addition, Adler noted that the company had broken an HP record for the number of impressions from one press in one month. The record didn't last long as Fort Dearborn surpassed it in following months.

Operational factors

Color management is critical for digital printing and was highlighted by Adler several times. In prototyping applications, Fort Dearborn must work very closely with its customers' graphic designers, and color matching is under close scrutiny. For short-run, low-volume SKUs, it is absolutely necessary that the digital labels provide a perfect color match with the graphics printed on the other printing processes.

Consumer products companies also have a tendency to specify different spot colors that can pose complicating factors and increase makeready and turnaround times. To avoid the need to run spot colors, Fort Dearborn developed a 7-color system called HiColour, which consists of CMYK plus orange, green, and violet. With HiColour, there are very few colors they can't

match, covering 90 percent of the color gamut, says Adler.

In addition to the close attention to color, the up-front workflow has to be done correctly. There are no intermediate steps where errors or discrepancies can be picked up. "With digital printing, you go right from the file to the end product," says Adler.

Because of these factors, Adler points out that operators of digital presses need to be computer-savvy. They also need to have a good combination of printing and prepress skills and knowledge.

For typical finishing processes such as diecutting and sheeting, Fort Dearborn does them off line. Currently, digital presses are relatively slow and restrict the ability to economically perform inline-finishing operations.

What's the future hold?

As with any cutting-edge technology, digital printing is in a state of flux and does have its limitations. Run speed is the first barrier listed by Adler, followed by image size, and the cost of consumables.

These issues will be addressed over time and its development will be fun to watch. A digital press is like a big computer and although it won't keep up with Moore's Law (computing power doubling every 18 months), it will evolve much faster than Gutenberg's contribution to printing.

Adler believes digital printing will advance, not linearly, but in a series of step improvements. He doesn't see any significant changes being introduced for another year or two.

In the meantime, other players—both suppliers and printers—will get involved and you will see more digital printing being used inline with conventional printing. While this takes place, digital printing will not have a free reign on short-run printing. Adler believes that conventional printing processes will continue to make enhancements that improve the economic production of short-run jobs.

For Fort Dearborn, Adler has seen tremendous change at the company as it comes out of its transition stage. "Fort Dearborn is poised for significant growth," he says. "All our people know what's expected of them. We will remain focused on our customers' needs."

He jokingly refers to what customers are asking for as "Free, Perfect, Now." Maybe this is asking a little too much, but Fort Dearborn is continually looking to leverage technologies that will reduce costs, improve quality, and shorten delivery times. To help accomplish these goals, digital printing will continue to get a lot of emphasis at the company.

"Digital printing capability is a good differentiator for us," says Adler. "With digital printing, we are involved with more people and more functions at our customers' locations. It opens up new opportunities."

In Adler's assessment, blending the old with the new is what makes Fort Dearborn distinctive. "We are known as a high-quality printer that provides superior service. What is also appealing is the stability of our company, with core values that have not changed over the years. We are a company they [customers] can count on. We believe we have to earn their business every

day."

by Tom Polischuk

Editor-In-Chief

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