On-Demand Coding Helps Manufacturer Maximize Uptime

Paul Schildhouse, Secondary Packaging Product Manager, Videojet Technologies, Inc.

By using variable data printing systems for case coding, a food manufacturer has ensured its cases always include clear, accurate printing.

Kettle Foods is passionate about making the best-tasting all-natural chips in the world. Since its beginning in 1982, the company has perfected the kettle-cooked style of potato chips, and today, Kettle Brand® potato chips are available in supermarkets and natural foods stores in all 50 states, as well as in Canada, Asia, and Western Europe. Working at full capacity, the Kettle Foods production facility in Beloit, Wis., supplies both Midwestern and East-coast customers, areas where demand is increasing at a record pace.

When the Beloit facility opened in March 2007, the company installed five Videojet® 2330 large character printers on its production lines to code variable data on-demand on shipping cases. The printers provide Kettle Foods the reliability and uptime it needs to focus on its product and processes instead of worrying about printing codes. In addition, the printers help Kettle Foods reduce the amount of preprinted corrugated cases that must be stored for shipping the finished product and have aided the company in meeting sustainability goals.

Limiting downtime

Kettle Foods' chips are shipped from Beloit to distributors and retailers in kraft-faced corrugated boxes. The company prints 14-digit bar codes and human-readable information about the product to help with lot traceability during distribution. Human-readable information includes an item number, the product name, various plant codes, and a best-before date.

"In our industry, labeling is key and there is zero tolerance for mislabeling. Especially with regard to food safety, accuracy, and good, clear codes for traceability are paramount. We get a nice contrast with the Videojet printers and an extremely clear code on every case," says Bob Manzer, plant manager for Kettle Foods. "It is important that we can read or scan the information every time, or else we can't send out the box and would be forced to take additional time to re-code it."

Limited downtime is one of the biggest benefits the Videojet printers have offered Kettle Foods. A Videojet technician provides scheduled preventive maintenance, but the printers require very little attention otherwise.
"Our maintenance manager estimates 99.99 percent uptime from the printers," Manzer says. "We have not had to perform our own maintenance or call Videojet for anything unplanned. We can count on the printers to help maximize our production, and when I ask the operators for feedback on the printers, the first word that comes up is 'reliable.'"

On-demand printing reduces need for preprinted boxes

"Right now, we have more than 17 flavors of potato chips and 10 different bag sizes," Manzer says. "Because of this variety, the number of bags within a case can change and the information to be coded on each case varies. The Videojet printers allow us to minimize the number of preprinted corrugated boxes we have to keep on-hand in storage because we can customize information printed on each box for the product packed inside. Now we can use a single case size for as many as eight different flavors of chips."

On the production line, the compact printheads for the Videojet 2330 printers are mounted inside a machine that tapes the boxes closed to ensure the printers do not take up extra space and create efficiency by enabling two processes to be performed at one time. Operators pack filled bags of chips into the cases, and then the cases are taped closed and coded simultaneously. Once the cases are closed, they are manually palletized and shipped to distribution centers or retailers.

"The Beloit plant is automated and has a lot of electronic equipment, data collection, and process control," Manzer says. "The Videojet printers easily integrate with our processes because they are durable, reliable, and easy to use, even when we run them 24 hours per day, up to six days per week."

Manzer also notes that changing code information takes a minute or less. Operators simply select the product SKU from a preprogrammed menu that is accessible via the printer's interface. All information to be coded is automatically set up, making it easy for operators to change information when a new product is packaged on the

production line.

Printers aid in sustainability goals

Another of the company's major initiatives is to promote sustainability by continually reviewing packaging options to be more environmentally friendly. The Videojet printers help contribute to this goal by enabling Kettle Foods to print variable data directly on boxes, minimizing the need for multiple types of preprinted boxes and avoiding the use of labels.

"For us, labeling means storing, printing and applying labels to each case," Manzer says. "We like to print right on the box because we can avoid wasted labels, waste from label backings, and unnecessary time to apply labels."

By using variable data printing systems from Videojet for case coding, Kettle Foods has ensured its cases always include clear, accurate printing. For Kettle Foods, the printers provide peace of mind so the company can continue to concentrate on its passion for creating the perfect potato chip.
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