

In-line case printing is a snap at SMAP

First-of-their-kind, in-line digital case printers at SMAP Mfg., Inc., a contract manufacturer and packager of personal care products, smooth productivity wrinkles and reduce per-case coding costs by 90 percent.

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At SMAP Mfg., Inc. (Specialty Manufacturing and Packaging), Harvey, IL, it's a rare personal care product that cannot be tubed, bottled, pouched or otherwise packaged to meet customer requirements. Since it was established in 1989 by owner Stu Paves' father in the family garage, SMAP has grown almost exponentially in both manufacturing and packaging capabilities.



"I think you'd be hard-pressed to find another personal care contract packager as diversified as we are," says Paves. "We do tubes, powder packs, liquid pouches, hot-fills, cold-fills and more."

An iconotech off-line digital case printer enables auto- and boat-care products manufacturer kinpak to print cases just-in-time for more than 400 stockkeeping units. Read more at www.packagingdigest.com/info/kinpak

With an estimated 42 new items launched this year alone at SMAP, Paves says it's difficult to even estimate the number of stockkeeping units that move annually through the company's 60,000-sq-ft facility. Products—filled and packed on 15 different lines—include everything from haircare formulations such as styling gels, shampoos and conditioners to body lotions, soaps and petroleum jelly. Customers include beauty

and barber shops, as well as specialty and general merchandisers such as Sally Beauty Supply, Walgreen's and Wal-Mart.

Given the array of product types and packaging formats used by SMAP, finding a one-size-fits-all case-coding solution with the required printability and cost features was a challenge. In January 2004, the company became a beta test site for the new Sidewinder in-line digital case printer from **Iconotech** (www.iconotech.com). When the machine became commercially available early this year, SMAP signed on for five more.

Key to SMAP's success, especially in recent years, claims Paves, is its equipment flexibility, which he credits in large part to SMAP's director of maintenance and engineering, Philip DeYoung. "We are blessed with Phil and his staff," he says. "They can take machines, and rather than just run one item on them, they can adjust them to run a number of products."



Measuring just 19 in. wide and 24 in. deep and weighing only 43 lb, the compact, in-line digital case-printing system can be attached to most conveyors without modification.

to print-and-apply," says Paves. "With the thermal printers, glue and labels would build up on the printheads, and they would have to be replaced several times a year. At \$400 to \$500 apiece, this became a big expense. In addition, we had to purchase the thermal-transfer ribbons."

Designed for minimal maintenance and the lowest possible operating cost, the Sidewinder is based on Iconotech's digital case-printing technology. Like its off-line predecessor, the Sidewinder uses computer-generated imaging film that allows precise placement of 203-dpi-resolution print—including text in any Windows font, fine-line graphics and logos, and bar codes in a variety of symbologies—anywhere within a 2 x 23-in. print area.



SMAP's in-line case printers are used to add lot-shift numbers, as well as bar codes and other information, when required.

The Sidewinder can accommodate a minimum case size of 6 in. wide by 8 in. long, and a maximum case size of up to 24 in. long. Additional printers can be added adjacent to and elevated higher than an existing printer to accommodate a larger case size. Units can also be placed on the other side of the conveyor for printing on both sides of a case. For SMAP, a single printer's capacity handles all of its current case sizes.

Measuring just 19 in. wide and 24 in. deep and weighing only 43 lb, the compact Sidewinder system can be attached to most conveyors without modification. For SMAP, the printer's small size was another benefit for the rapidly growing company, whose facility, DeYoung says, is "packed to the gills."

At present, four Sidewinder units have been installed at the end of four lines on rolled conveyors. DeYoung says that in the future, he would like to experiment with moving the printers from line-to-line, depending upon which lines are in operation. "We still have print-and-apply here, especially for small

Also serving SMAP well has been its ability to run both short- and long-run jobs, ranging anywhere from 6,000 to 50,000 items on a line. For short-run jobs, DeYoung says SMAP uses semi-automated lines; high-volume jobs are run on automated lines equipped with rotary fillers. For the latter group, flexibility and cost per case are vital. Therefore, when the company was offered the opportunity to replace one of its print-and-apply case labelers with the Iconotech Sidewinder, it eagerly accepted. "We had been looking for an alternative

runs," he explains. "Once we get all six [Sidewinder] units in, we will probably be utilizing the digital case printers even more. Even though we have fifteen lines, there are rarely more than seven to nine on average running at any one time. I'd like to see if the Sidewinder could be used on other lines."

As for changeover time, DeYoung says the only factor is how long it takes to create a new stencil for a job. At the beginning of each job or shift, the operator creates the lot-shift number and any other data, such as a bar code, on a Windows-based PC, and then outputs plates, or stencils, using a thermal printer. Loaded on the Sidewinder in a matter of minutes, the plates can be used for up to 5,000 impressions. And, as the registration is set during the image-creation process, no machine adjustments are required.

With the print-and-apply labelers, Paves relates, operators had to bring a laptop to each line to change lot-shift information after every shift change. SMAP runs two eight-hour shifts per day. "We don't have as much downtime now as a result," he says.

An ongoing effort of SMAP's, says Paves, is to eliminate the use of preprinted cases in order to reduce its case-blank inventory. In addition, because every case has to have a lot-shift number printed on it by SMAP, preprinted cartons can also be a problem in terms of trying to add the lot number. "We try to use the same corrugated for as much as we can," Paves says.

In terms of quality, given that the corrugated most used by the contract packer is recycled, Paves and DeYoung say they are extremely satisfied with the clarity and readability of the print generated by the Sidewinder. "For several months we double-checked the UPC codes and scanned them here," relates DeYoung, "and we never had a failure."

Ultimately, however, the greatest benefit of installing the Sidewinders has been finding a print solution at one-tenth the cost of print-and-apply that provides the quality benefits on which SMAP rests its reputation.