



# The future of printing

## – a retail packaging manufacturer's perspective



**Brian Pankratz, sales representative at Display Pack, US-based designer and manufacturer of cartons, sleeves and other packaging for a global client base, shares his thoughts on the future for package printing.**

If you are a printer in the packaging industry, you have been witness to a constantly changing landscape fueled by new equipment and elevated customer demands.

Many economists are predicting steady growth for the future of printing, but what do companies need to do to stay competitive?

Can we continue to do what we are doing today, or will our organizations need to adapt to be more competitive with the ever-changing market?

Some printers are already experiencing the need for additional equipment to match increased customer demands; demands that will only amplify as time goes on.

But the big question for all printers around the world is what does the future of printing look like?

### The beginning of the trend

If we take a look at recent trends in the printing industry, we see that equipment has helped us become more efficient but also created an expectation by the customer that they will get their printed product soon after placing their order.

Who is responsible for this increased expectation? Contrary to where you might think the responsibility may fall, the printers are the driving force behind this change in expectation.

Equipment is faster and more adaptable, so printers want to become more competitive and offer shorter lead times to customers and give them the expectation that they will get their printed product quicker than previously quoted. This becomes the new standard.

We are training our customers to want more from us in a shorter period of time. In addition, the introduction of digital printing has led sales teams across the globe to start using language during conversations with customers that would suggest they can have their product printed instantaneously.

### We're all in this together

Now that we have ourselves to thank for this, printers need to answer the question on how they prepare for the future in order to accommodate the new expectations of customers.

Economists have indicated that the package printing industry will see growth at a rate on average of two percent per year over



*Display Pack provides additional services to printing, such as collating, assembling and packaging multi-part products*

the next five years.

The question of how do we prepare for the future needs to be answered in relation to controlling growth with equipment purchases and upgrades, increasing through-put efficiencies of existing processes, establishing online systems for submission and approval of artwork with real-time data to the customer, and getting the right team in place that is focused on quality and meeting the demands of the customer and changing industry.

#### **From the customer**

The trends in the industry also suggest that customers have been targeted to carry less on-hand inventory. This is forcing most printers to have shorter and more frequent print runs.

Thankfully, equipment manufacturers have picked up this trend and are creating equipment that is specifically designed for this new demand. Digital printing has helped printers to react quickly, but does have its limitations.

When digital printing can't get the job done, we can now turn to new equipment that is designed for quick changeovers and also smaller printing platforms.

The need to possess this equipment will be crucial if today's printers want to continue in the future.

Flexibility will be the key ingredient for success to maintain the high demands and expectations from our printing customers. This does not mean you need to liquidate your current equipment, as there will always be a need for large format offset printers. The point is one of diversification, and to have options for different size products and size print runs.

#### **A matter of sustainability**

Like every industry, the print industry is shifting away from methods that are environmentally harmful.

Equipment manufacturers are forcing the industry to be more sustainable. New equipment is being manufactured that rejects the use of solvent-based coatings. New board types are being created that focus on sustainability while maintaining quality appearance.

We can only expect this trend to continue as sustainability efforts receive more and more attention. Some customers have gone so far as to require either Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) certified boards for their products.

Although most consumers don't understand the FSC or

SFI labels on the printed package, there is still a desire for companies to move in this direction to show their care for the environment as an organization.

#### **Paper or plastic?**

The paper printing industry today has a slight advantage over plastic packaging for its sustainability. This should continue for the following 3-5 years. But, as additional plant-based plastics get introduced into the market, the printing industry should take note that a shift could take place in the coming years.

Plant-based plastics will drive down the costs of the plastics as well as score great marks for sustainability. These two improvements will gain attention and could cause a shift away from some products being in printed cartons. It is hard to determine the next big trend five years from now, but this could certainly be one possibility that needs to be noted.

#### **The extinction of the combination run**

Many companies offer combo runs, which are basically sheets filled with many different SKU's from different customers.

New technology will soon challenge the need for this type of print run.

Digital and offset press manufacturers are in a race for the top to create new technology that will eliminate the need to print several different SKU's from different customers together on a sheet to later sort through after being die cut.

The trend of the future is to accommodate printers with equipment that assists them to react better to the growing demands of their customers. Expect to see equipment with quick changeovers and smaller sheet sizes to accommodate this trend.

It is tough to predict the future of anything, especially in an unstable economy that has its uncertainties.

For printers to stay competitive we cannot look for a thermometer to tell us what need to do; instead, we need to be a thermostat setting the direction for the future of printing.

We have to match our customer's needs and expectations with our capabilities. We have to provide excellent customer service and excellent quality so that we continue to be recognized for great things printing can do.

The future of printing has a positive outlook, for those who are prepared and diversified at least.