

Outlook for Flexography

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The flexo industry touches a wide variety of end products and continues to make new and innovative advancements yearly. To recognize the future of the flexo industry, we have to understand what is important to the major market segments: tag and label; flexible packaging; folding carton; multi-wall bag and corrugated.

There are three primary areas that are important in all of these market segments:

- Shelf Appeal (to the end user)
- Product Protection (to the end user & the brand owner)
- Manufacturing efficiency (for cost savings to everyone)

Shelf Appeal:

Shelf appeal to the consumer starts at the design stage, and throughout the process, works to draw the customer's focus to the package. Whether it is due to bright colors, interesting effects, package shape or brand identity, the goal is to get the consumer to reach for that item. Specialty inks, hot stamping, and other visual elements offer added appeal and will continue to expand in the marketplace. Other areas where this will continue to grow are the prototyping space. Whether the prototype is a visual aid that can be shown on screen – 3D animation with the click of a mouse, or a tangible folding carton or sealable stand-up pouch, prototyping is an easy and inexpensive way for the brand owner to approve a design concept.

Product Protection:

Most consumers will never have to think about how their products are kept safe within their package. Throughout the years, the available inks and substrates in both the tag and label, and flexible packaging industry have been improving for both safety and appearance.

Flexible packaging acts as both the point-of-sale attention grabber, as well as the safety seal; keeping the product safe inside and the inks and coatings on the outside. Since one layer now must perform the job of the folding carton and inner sealed pouch, the importance of low migration substrates are extremely high. Look for this area of the market to grow.

For those who produce shrink films and labels, substrates that can be processed or reclaimed when the consumer tosses their bottle in the recycle bin are extremely important. A focus on landfill contribution and “cradle to cradle” business practices are being adopted more than ever before.

Manufacturing Efficiency:

Continually improving efficiency is essential in any manufacturing environment, although often printers consider their business printing, and not specifically manufacturing. It is important to embrace processes and best practices in other production environments and apply that knowledge to our industry.

Run length is another interesting point in discussing efficiency. The length of the print run is often important to determining which press, what time slot, and storage of material. End users often ask for shorter print runs, which makes the end-user more efficient in storage of materials, but that doesn't necessarily make the printer more effective.

How is a printer going to improve on efficiency, yet receive more short-orders? Short orders require press setup time, material change-over and more processing in the front end of the cycle. This takes time, especially when jobs are anywhere from 6-10 colors.

Changing a press to run strictly one ink-set may help. If a printer runs expanded gamut, or a predefined set of stationary inks, (generally CMYK + orange, green, violet) they can eliminate the time for clean up and ink change-over. Advancements in software for properly separating files into 6-7 colors has helped many printers reduce their setup times and improve efficiency on job change-overs. Expanded gamut requires a commitment – a true partnership, from both the printer and the brand-owner. Significant strides have been made over the last few years, and this is one area that will continue to grow.

For small runs, the development of digital printing and ink-jet technologies is an area that is rapidly growing. The ability to cure UV-ink with low-heat LED lamps has quickly thrust this technology to market. While still more expensive than standard print, and with some manufacturing limitations, the ability to incorporate the strengths of this technology into a well-rounded business plan is essential for future growth.

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