Flexibility: The Key to Efficient, Cost-Effective Enterprise Label Printing

WHITE PAPER

INTRODUCTION

The unsung hero of most manufacturing facilities is found at the end of the production line — the product labeling process. Without labels, goods cannot be shipped, sales will not be booked, and profits will not be earned.

While large, multi-site manufacturers understand the necessity of accurately labeling their products, they don't always recognize that the process can be a large generator of inefficiency and waste. When companies rely on third-party printers to produce their labels, the results are internal storerooms with racks full of labels that must be managed and delivered to the production lines. Because outside suppliers require minimum order quantities, many of these inventoried labels go out of date, resulting in thousands of dollars of wasted material.

There is a solution to label waste and inefficiency — flexible enterprise label printing. The process is the key to streamlining and greater value creation at the end of the production line. This brief reviews how flexible, in-house, on-demand label printing can provide companies with the labels they need, when they need them, plus reduce lead times and eliminate expensive inventory. Now, enterprise manufacturers can cost-effectively print labels and ship products the same day without waiting for weeks for third-party suppliers.
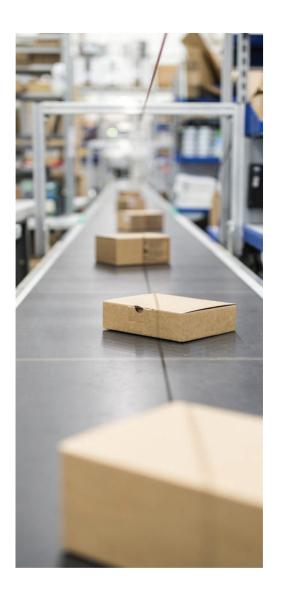
Enterprise Label Printers: Who Should Buy Them?

Companies that must print variable information in label batches are ideal candidates for flexible in-house label printing. These firms have production runs where information changes from label to label.

Examples include food and beverage lot codes and expiration dates or Unique Device Identifier numbers for medical devices. In addition, cosmetic, chemical, cannabis, nutraceutical, packaging, building material, and electrical product companies are faced with variable label printing requirements. For these businesses, it is difficult and costly to get their short-run labels printed by third-party suppliers. The flexibility of in-house enterprise printing solves this problem by permitting organizations to create variable information labels only when needed.

Businesses that are experiencing the following issues will also benefit from enterprise label printing:

- Companies that want to improve the look and feel of their labels or want to print the exact same labels at different company locations.

- Manufacturers experiencing extended lead times or the exceptionally high cost of short-run label batches from third-party printers.

- Organizations managing thousands of product SKUs that continually change.

- Purchasing departments that do not want to manage the complex, out-of-house printing of thousands of different label types.

- Companies that want to streamline their production process and free up space in their buildings.

- Businesses that are replacing existing printers due to poor print quality, service, or support from a reseller.

Fast, Functional, and Affordable Label Printing

Today's small, compact label printers offer exceptional print quality and ease of use. They are fast, reliable, and easily installable in any factory or office area. These label printers are highly cost-effective for short, medium, and even long runs without the waste and inventory management costs of third-party printing.

Enterprises are turning to these highly flexible printing solutions for a variety of attractive business benefits:

- Companies can process on-demand, just-in-time printing requirements that enable the immediate labeling of products for same-day shipping.

- They eliminate the cost and complexity of label obsolescence since materials are created only when needed.

- The printers can economically produce short runs of labels for test marketing, new product sample campaigns, seasonal items, plus private labeling initiatives.

- They ensure all company locations print the same labels for consistent brand image quality.

- Labels designed at the corporate level do not have to be recreated at local company facilities.

With an enterprise printing solution, oversight is easy since all locations can pull label formats and information from one shared server.

Global Electrical Products Company Prints Variable Label Formats on Production Line

A worldwide electrical products manufacturer has been labeling their circuit breaker panels and circuit breaker products with an enterprise solution since 2006. QuickLabel QL-120X label printers are incorporated in production lines across their global production system. They are used to print a different label format for each product that comes down the line. The label printers are robust and rugged enough to operate in a factory environment. The company embraced the vendor's one-stop-shopping concept and has consumables delivered as they are needed on the line. In addition, the company has eliminated downtime with the vendor's technical support. The result has been label production as needed, elimination of third-party printing, and greatly reduced waste.

It's What's Outside the Box that Counts

The contents of a superior enterprise label printing solution go well beyond the product. The entire printer solution must be aimed at making the investment successful for the purchaser. Enterprises will benefit from vendors that can offer comprehensive services and one-stop-shopping to ensure successful implementation and operation.

When evaluating label printer suppliers for enterprise applications, make sure the following issues are considered:

• **Process optimization:** at project inception, the printer supplier should understand the manufacturer's objectives – from printing the labels to applying the labels to the software and networking infrastructure. This Initial qualification work should reveal the user's label printing pain points and inefficiencies. From this information, the vendor can determine the appropriate printers and consumables for their application. This up-front work will provide the customer with an optimized solution that will achieve the lowest cost and highest productivity.

• **Pre-installation testing:** the printer should be inspected and tested with the customer-specified consumables before they are installed at the workplace. The machines should be demonstrated and samples printed for customer inspection.

• **Comprehensive training and support:** a salesperson should be available for demonstrating the label printing solution and to train the customer's employees. In-person support and installation will ensure the printers operate correctly. The vendor's representative should guide the users through start-up, answer questions, and solve any problems. The user should have access to factory-trained technicians, plus ongoing technical support provided remotely, by phone, or on-site. Make sure the printer's spare parts are readily available to eliminate production downtime.

• **Large selection of consumables:** the printer vendor should offer a wide variety of inks; materials, substrates, and adhesives for label stock; plus the capability to convert the label stock to any size or shape desired by the user. All of the consumable materials must be engineered to work flawlessly with the printer.

• **Easy-to-use software:** The printer should come with simple, easy-to-use label creation software, such as AstroNova's Custom QuickLabel Pro or NiceLabel, either of which can reside on a network or server. This functionality allows the software's use at multiple locations and permits local facilities to poll data from a shared server.
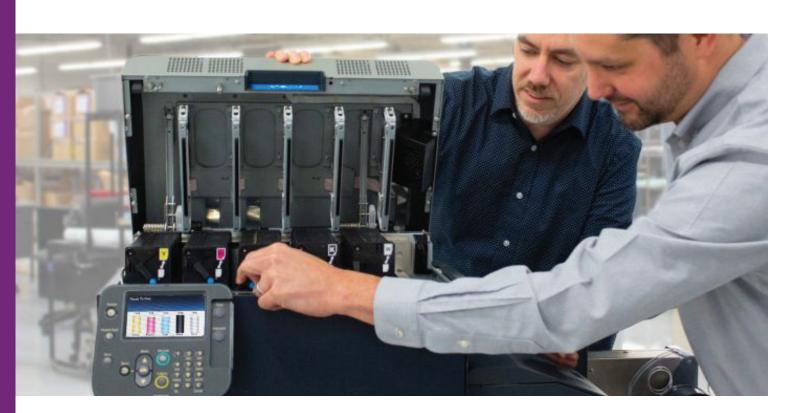
Organizational Impact: Panic or Productivity

Like any new process introduced to the factory floor, there can be issues and concerns when the user's team transitions to an enterprise, in-house, on-demand label printing strategy.

The vendor should carefully guide the customer through the selection and installation processes to ensure a successful project execution. Since in-house, on-demand label printing will be a new way of working, the company should get buy-in from their production employees before the printing equipment is installed. This is accomplished by having affected employees attend product demonstrations and meetings to provide input on process optimization. While there is a small learning curve for those who will operate the printers, much of their concern will be alleviated when they witness the equipment's ease of use. It is essential for a factory representative to be on hand when the printers are introduced and demonstrated to employees.

Typically, the installation of a flexible enterprise label printing system in the workstations may change some employees' responsibilities. For example, at one company, a person was reassigned to a higher-value job who previously did nothing but go back and forth to the label inventory room to select and deliver labels to the line.

Buying from a Reseller: Plug and Pray

It is common in the industry for label printers to be sold through resellers. These vendors sell on price, which will typically be lower than those from a full-service printer manufacturer.

Buyers must understand the risks of dealing with a reseller. These companies are usually small operations with few employees. They carry large commercial and industrial product portfolios and probably don't know much about label printing and software. While a reseller may sell a label printer on occasion, they do not know the intricacies of the product beyond its specifications. Plus, they may not be able to demonstrate the product.

This lack of knowledge can adversely affect the customer experience. The reseller will not provide the expertise or service that generates the optimal efficiencies, cost/time savings, and post-sale support that can be achieved by buying directly from the manufacturer.

One more note: resellers will claim that purchasing directly from the manufacturer will lock them into buying the manufacturer's consumables. However, if they purchase from the reseller, they will have to buy consumables and label stock that are not designed for their equipment or specifications. Resellers' customers risk experiencing the disadvantages of multiple suppliers. If there is a problem, the label vendor will point to the ink vendor, and the ink vendor will point to the printer vendor — and the customer will be stuck in the middle with a printer that doesn't work.

Stanley Black & Decker Creates Retail Labels with Flexible, Enterprise Printers

Hardware and tool maker Stanley Black & Decker creates professional labels using flexible enterprise label printers. The labels include the product-specific text, barcodes, color codes, and photo images required to meet stringent retail regulations. They are applied directly to saw blades and product carton labels and visually stand out on shelves at The Home Depot, Lowe's, and Ace Hardware. According to Sean Wylie, team leader, Paint/Print/Pack Department, "I believe product packaging is very important here. We have blades that are for metal cutting, wood cutting, and blades that cut different thicknesses of metal – all of that needs to be represented on our labels." The QuickLabel printers seamlessly integrated with Stanley Black & Decker's SAP system through a custom-developed manufacturing floor application, enabling the easy updating of labels as needed, in the quantities they required.

CONCLUSION

Small, flexible, high-quality label printers give manufacturing enterprises an attractive opportunity to eliminate waste and generate greater value at the end of their production lines. Companies that must print short runs of labels with variable information are particularly well suited for a flexible, in-house printing solution. These organizations can easily process on-demand, just-in-time labels required for rapid or same-day shipping. Flexible printing also eliminates the cost and complexity of label obsolescence since materials are created only when needed. Companies that purchase directly from the printer manufacturer also gain a portfolio of value-added services that include process optimization and testing, installation and setup, and 24-hour service and support, plus one-stop shopping for consumables.

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