Thermal Transfer Overprinting
Utz Quality Foods Case Study

Thermal transfer overprinting from Videojet creates savings for Utz Quality Foods

After decades of using hot stamp machines for primary package coding, salty snacks manufacturer Utz Quality Foods has realized the benefits of thermal transfer overprinting. That includes 33 percent savings on maintenance and less downtime for changing codes, not to mention the time it takes to change a code.

For machine operators at Utz, based in Hanover, PA, a code block change on a hot stamper used to be a minimum 5-minute job – costly downtime for a line marking 100 packages per minute. Changing a code also used to require tweezers and seven-sixteenth- and nine-sixteenth-inch wrenches, increasing the tediousness of the task. If a code was printed incorrectly, the misprinted bags had to be torn open to remove the product and the bags were destroyed.

But times have changed at Utz, thanks to the introduction of Videojet DataFlex® thermal transfer overprinters from Videojet Technologies Inc. at three of Utz's four Hanover plants.

“The Videojet DataFlex hit the ground running at 120 bags a minute. That sold me, along with the fact that I could use it on intermittent packaging lines.”

Bob Epley, Packaging Maintenance Manager
Utz Quality Foods

In addition to consistently crisp codes at even the highest line speeds, code changes are a simple matter of a few taps of a touch screen to create the new price and expiration date. That means downtime for code changes and lost production has virtually disappeared on the lines with thermal transfer overprinters.

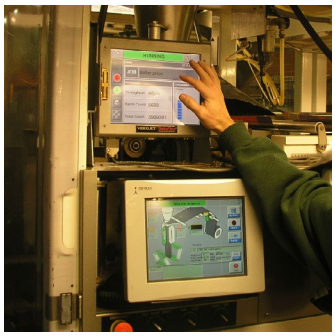
Utz Quality Foods got its start in 1921, when William and Salie Utz began producing Hanover Home Brand potato chips in their summer kitchen, at a speed of 50 pounds per hour. Since the mid-1970s, Utz has expanded its offerings to include pretzels, corn chips, popcorn, cheese curls and other tasty treats. At various times of the year, like holidays, the company is renowned for its snack and party mixes.

The company’s four plants are located within a two-mile radius of Hanover, and in a day’s time, packaging maintenance manager Bob Epley will visit all four, sometimes more than once. The High Street location manufactures potato chips and some corn and tortilla chips; that’s also where company headquarters resides. The Broadway facility hosts the pretzel bakery, while the Kindig Lane location produces most of the corn products, such as cheese curls, popcorn and corn/tortilla chips. The Carlisle Street facility handles all hand kettle operations and batch frying. In all, the company has 50 form-fill-seal packaging machines, all of which utilize either a hot stamper or a Videojet DataFlex thermal transfer printer for primary product coding.

Epley, who joined Utz’s maintenance department in 1976 as an electrician, says the company produces more than a million packages per day of all products. Perhaps not surprisingly, that includes plenty of flexible packaging, primarily plastic bags. Additionally, Utz also manufactures canisters of pretzels, cheese balls and snack/party mixes. The biggest product coding challenge for Epley and his crew is line speed.

“Using Videojet thermal transfer printing means operators have one less thing to be concerned about,” says Epley.

Flexible packages are directly marked with typically two lines of code – price, expiration date and Utz-specific information such as lot and manufacturer codes. For canisters, three to four lines of information are printed on a pressure-sensitive label, including an internal customer number along with price, expiration date and lot and manufacturer codes. The label is then affixed to the canister. Some canisters are covered in a plastic stretch sleeve, with the code marked directly on it by the thermal transfer printer, which can’t be done with a hot stamper because it will fuse the plastic stretch sleeve to itself.



Thermal transfer overprinters feature a printhead and ribbon that make contact with a flexible substrate and create real-time images, including clean, high-resolution bar codes, text and graphics. For Utz, any product coding machine has to be robust enough to handle high line speeds while producing consistently readable codes. That was not the case with Utz's hot stampers, and also one of the reasons Epley first brought in thermal transfer printers.

Epley investigated further and ran across information in an industry trade publication about Videojet's DataFlex printer. It caught his eye because it could do both continuous and intermittent printing. Utz uses both formats for flexible packaging, while intermittent printing is typically used for canister coding.

At the time, Epley was conducting a trial involving a bag maker, and decided to include the Videojet DataFlex printer in the trial. Once it was installed, it didn't take him long to realize he had found the solution to his coding issues.

A few months later, Utz purchased three more Videojet DataFlex printers, then two more shortly after that, replacing all six of its previous thermal transfer overprinters. Today, the company has 16 Videojet DataFlex printers, utilizing longer ribbon lengths, translating to even more time between ribbon changes.

Machine operator Steve Sneeringer is a busy man running his packaging line, and time efficiency is critical. That's why things like a nonintuitive graphical user interface can waste time and increase frustration when there are more pressing things to do.

"The screen on the previous thermal transfer printers we were using wasn't easy to work with," Sneeringer says. "Now all I have to do to change the code is tap the touch screen, create the price and then the expiration date. It takes only a minute."

The other thing that saves both time and money compared to hot stamping is more efficient ribbon usage. "With the Videojet DataFlex printers, we can mark 250,000 bags with one roll of ribbon," Sneeringer says. "With a hot stamper, we can mark 6,000 to 15,000 bags on one ink roll, depending on the size of the code. Plus, the Videojet DataFlex printer notifies me when ribbon is getting low, and then will shut off when it runs out so we can make the ribbon change."

"It doesn't take long to code a million packages a day when you're coding 140 bags a minute," Epley says. "In the past, we've hit 150 bags a minute when continuously coding."

Downtime due to product coding has virtually disappeared on the lines where the Videojet DataFlex printers are stationed. "The occasional thermal printhead itself needs to be replaced eventually, but that's a consumable part that's expected to wear," Epley says. "We just ran 22 million bags on a printhead. We have a good handle on when a printhead needs replacement, and we replace it quickly and easily. Our maintenance staff does most of the repairs. Videojet has a good service department, and they respond to us well, but we don't call on them that much, because we don't have to."

Epley says it will take some time to replace all the hot stampers at Utz's various facilities with thermal transfer printers. The Videojet DataFlex printers have been so successful that purchases of new units aren't even debated anymore. "As soon as there is a need, it's a given," he says. "I put in a purchase order and there is no discussion about it."

That's a fact that makes machine operators like Sneeringer happy, because it means that cumbersome code changes involving tweezers are becoming another part of Utz's rich history.

"Using Videojet thermal transfer printing means operators have one less thing to be concerned about," Epley adds. "You set it up, forget about it and concentrate on other things. It's low on their list of things to monitor."

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