

## ON-DEMAND PRINTING SIMPLIFIES PRIMARY, SECONDARY PACKAGING PROCESSES FOR TOP TOBACCO



The roll-your-own cigarette and pipe tobacco industry is a small segment of the overall tobacco industry, but it has established itself as a growing trend, and sales have increased over the last five years, according to the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Since 1987, Top Tobacco, with headquarters in Lake Waccamaw, N.C., has manufactured roll-your-own cigarette and pipe tobacco products for individuals who prefer to make their own cigarettes or smoke a pipe instead of purchasing machine-made products.

Because Top Tobacco offers a variety of products, package sizes and package types to meet its customers' preferences, the company uses variable data printing solutions that allow it to customize both primary and secondary packaging and avoid storing preprinted materials. Top Tobacco utilizes small character continuous ink jet printers, laser printers and large character marking systems from Videojet Technologies Inc.

Richard Hopkins, plant engineer for Top Tobacco, says the decision to use variable data printing systems is a huge advantage for Top Tobacco. Hopkins estimates the ability to print variable data on demand has increased uptime compared with previously used printing methods, and has allowed Top Tobacco to purchase generic films, foils and shipping cases. Information required on each product is preprinted onto the packaging, but Top Tobacco no longer needs to store preprinted packages or cases for each product brand and size.



### Advantages of on-demand printing

Before installing continuous ink jet printers for primary packaging, Top Tobacco used a variety of printing methods for coding on polypropylene or foil pouches, including inked embossed rollers and hot inked embossed rollers. The rollers required line operators to remove the typeset and change it for each new product on a production line. In addition, Top Tobacco had to devote warehouse space to storing preprinted corrugated cases in a variety of sizes to ship its products to retail outlets throughout the United States.



"Having generic packaging requires less management of preprinted packaging to ensure the right packages are used every time," Hopkins says. "Plus, we now use considerably less floor space to store a few case sizes instead of dozens of cases with different sizes and different information."

Requiring fewer preprinted cases and packaging has made it easier for Top Tobacco to forecast its packaging needs, so suppliers can be placed on a set schedule to regularly deliver more materials. This enables Top Tobacco to avoid unplanned orders for packaging materials.

### Expiration dates, bar codes ensure fresh product

Prior to distribution for retail sale, Top Tobacco packages cigarette and pipe tobacco into cans, polyethylene pouches or foil pouches, with product sizes ranging from 0.35 ounce to 1 pound. The cans and

pouches are then packed into cardboard shipping cases, palletized and shipped to Top Tobacco's distribution center in Glenview, Ill.

Cans and pouches containing Top Tobacco's products are imprinted with production date codes using Videojet® 43s ink jet printers and Videojet 3320 laser coders. With the Videojet printers, dates can be automatically changed and Top Tobacco can print production dates that include hours and minutes, which was not previously possible with the rollers.

The cartons used for shipping the cans and pouches of tobacco are coded by Videojet 2300 Series large character printers. The cartons require printing on two adjacent sides, so one side of the box is printed first, and then the box is bump-turned to allow for printing on the adjacent side. The boxes are marked with product-specific alphanumeric codes and bar codes for tracking and production dates.



"The date codes printed on each pouch or can are referenced by our sales force to ensure customers are getting the freshest product available," Hopkins says. "Warehouse personnel check the date codes regularly to make certain that product is properly rotated through the warehouse during distribution to keep fresh product moving out to retail outlets."

The bar codes on the corrugated cases enable distributors to easily keep track of products entering and leaving the distribution center. Therefore, it is essential the codes are crisp and clear so bar code scanners can read the codes the first time without requiring multiple scans, which can hinder productivity.



### Intuitive interfaces increase productivity

All the Videojet printers are used continuously during Top Tobacco's production hours. Each production line has its own set of printers, which are pre-loaded with variable data coding requirements for each product produced on that line. When a product changes on a line — which occurs approximately once per week — the operator needs only to select the job product code from the pre-loaded list.

"Changing products is very simple with the Videojet printers," Hopkins says. "The operators require very little training or assistance because selecting a job is about as easy as selecting a song on a jukebox."

In addition to the intuitive printer interface, Top Tobacco also appreciates the long periods between maintenance required by the Videojet printers. Hopkins notes that common maintenance tasks are easy to learn and perform as a result of the self-diagnostic features available on the printers. The printers display help screens to walk operators through routine maintenance, which reduces downtime that can shut down an entire production line.

"Whenever you can decrease the amount of time a technician must spend with a piece of equipment, you have gained an advantage," Hopkins says. "Since these printers need less attention from our technicians, our operators are able to handle product changeovers and our maintenance personnel can concentrate on other tasks."

Top Tobacco also consulted with Videojet when determining the appropriate printers to use on its production lines and to select the best inks for its substrates. For example, because the pouches can come in various colors, Top Tobacco uses both blue and black ink in the Videojet 43s printers. The blue ink shows up better on darker colors, and Videojet helped ensure the ink would be compatible with both the printer and the substrate.



“Videojet has always been available to us whenever we’ve had challenges with new packaging or needed to consult a field technician,” Hopkins says. “The technicians are well-trained, and our representatives really know their products and have demonstrated a real dedication to ensuring we are investing wisely in our printing technologies. We feel like Videojet is a true partner.”

By choosing variable data coding systems, Top Tobacco has been able to spend less time worrying about coding processes and packaging materials and spend more time focusing on its core service of producing and distributing fresh, quality tobacco products.



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