WIXON SHORTENS LEAD TIME, INCREASES PRODUCTION SPEEDS WITH VARIABLE DATA CODING SOLUTIONS

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Wixon, Inc., with headquarters in St. Francis, Wis., bills itself as "a 100-year-old company with the innovative drive of a start-up." Throughout its history, Wixon has maintained attention to service, detail and the customer as its top priorities, and on many occasions, innovation has helped Wixon rise to new challenges to satisfy customer expectations.

In 2004, Wixon invested in Videojet® DataFlex® thermal transfer overprinters, and CLARiNET® and CLARiSOFT® packaging coding management (PCM) software from Videojet Technologies Inc. to enable variable data coding on its variety of packaging substrates. The solutions helped Wixon to meet increased customer demand for customization, shorten lead times to provide packaged products to customers and increase the speeds of its production lines.

"Today, we can run anywhere from 20 to 70 packages per minute," says Rob Marlette, Wixon maintenance manager. "This is up to 40 packages per minute more than we used to be capable of with our old process, which represents a 133 percent increase. We can basically set the printers and forget them, which is exactly what you want to happen on a packaging line."

Meeting demand for customization, reduced lead times

For businesses in the grocery and retail, food direct marketing, or food service industries, Wixon develops seasoning and flavor systems, dry packaged food and beverage products, and flavor modifiers. The company also offers solutions to enhance food, such as technologies to extend shelf life and reduce sodium. Experts from Wixon can help food service businesses develop menus and packaging options to fit brand standards. Wixon can provide assistance from product

development to creation of product packaging that meets regulatory and customer requirements.

A wide variety of dry food products, such as seasonings, spices and mixes, are packaged at Wixon, and these products require flexible packages, such as foil, clear plastic film or opaque pouches. Before installing seven Videojet DataFlex printers on its production lines, Wixon used hot stamping to put custom information, including customer logos and product names, on packaging. Hot stamping required long lead times because plates had to be created by an outside vendor and shipped to Wixon. If customers wanted to change any information, a new plate had to be created. Hot stamping also was inconvenient because the heat transfer could destroy some substrates, so Wixon was not able to customize some types of packaging.

The increased customer demand for customization and shorter lead times led Marlette to investigate available solutions from Videojet. Marlette developed a list of criteria for the new printers he sought: The printers had to be capable of printing logos and be easy to set up and troubleshoot. In addition, it was critical the printers be networked for efficient message management.

"With the hot-stamp printers, we had to go from printer to printer and manually set up jobs," Marlette says. "We would load in a plate and screw it on, and the process was very cumbersome. We were looking for new printers that would allow us to expand our capabilities to our customers to offer them the ability to print what they wanted on packaging and make changes quickly if necessary."

With the PCM software from Videojet, Wixon's line supervisors use a network computer to enter required expiration dates, lot codes, time stamps, logos or other necessary information specific to a customer's

packaging. The customer can receive a preview of the information to approve, and then it is loaded onto a network directory that is accessed by Wixon's manufacturing department. From the network, the file is sent to a specific printer, making it easy for the operator to select information to be coded from an approved list. The operator simply enters the product number into the Videojet DataFlex printer's interface, and the details of the data to be printed are already set. If the customer requires any changes, the supervisor can make changes from the computer instead of manually making adjustments on multiple lines.

Preloading information onto the network has made it extremely easy for Wixon's 12 line operators to set up the printers. Marlette says printer setup takes less than 10 seconds for the line operators because the printer interface is extremely intuitive.
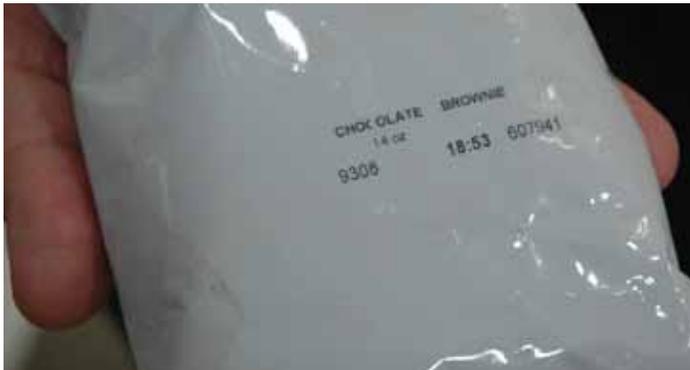
"Our operators simply have to know which product they are running to start a project, and then the printer prompts them to verify any other variable data required," Marlette says. "Now we can print anything our customers want and they are extremely impressed with the short lead times. It has become almost standard for our customers to expect that they can put anything they want on a flexible package."

Code quality critical to uptime

Wixon also found the Videojet DataFlex printers could keep up with the company's two-shift operations. Some days, the printers can run for 16 consecutive hours and continue to provide the clear codes and uptime on which Wixon relies.

Clear codes also are important to maximize uptime and avoid wasted packaging. If any codes do not pass Wixon's quality control standards, new packages must be created, resulting in lost time to recode products. Marlette has found that the Videojet DataFlex printers provide consistently clear codes, helping Wixon meet its own requirements and those of its customers.

During operations, Wixon operators typically interact with the printers only to change project information or the ribbon cassette. Changing the ribbon takes only a few seconds, helping Wixon maximize throughput.

The ability to rely on the coding equipment to meet production demands is extremely important. If the printer goes down or requires troubleshooting, the entire packaging line must stop until the issue is resolved. Marlette says he can count on the Videojet DataFlex printers, and it's easy for operators to make any minor adjustments while the line is still running to avoid downtime.

Through its ability to quickly and accurately code customized information onto flexible packaging, Wixon has been able to expand its core competencies and increase the services available to its customers. With the help of the Videojet DataFlex printers and networking software, Wixon was able to create a new standard of service by offering customization and reduced lead times, enabling Wixon to continue its tradition as a leader in customer service and expand upon its long history of ingenuity and technological advancement.

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