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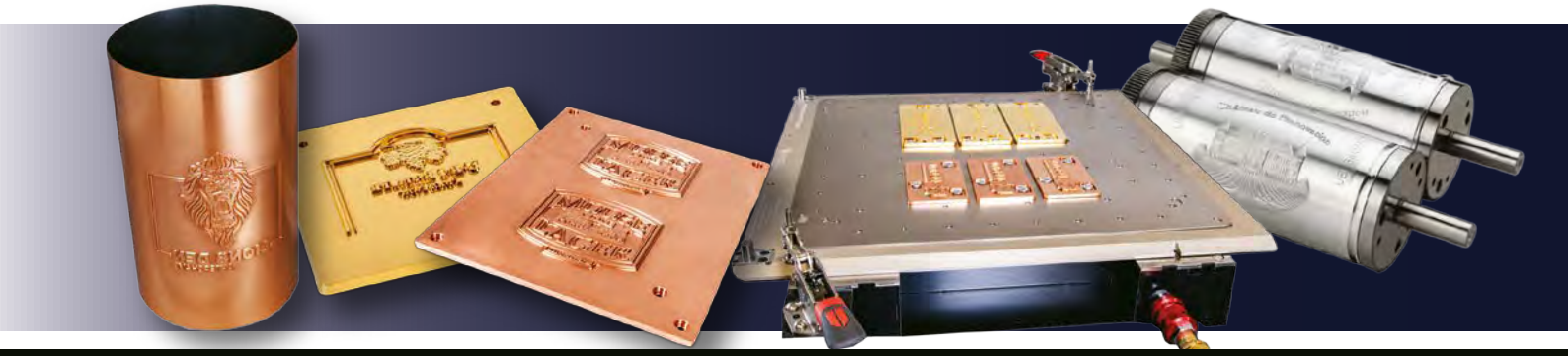

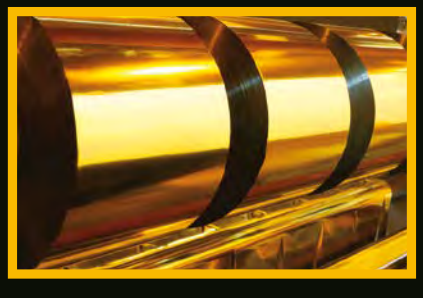

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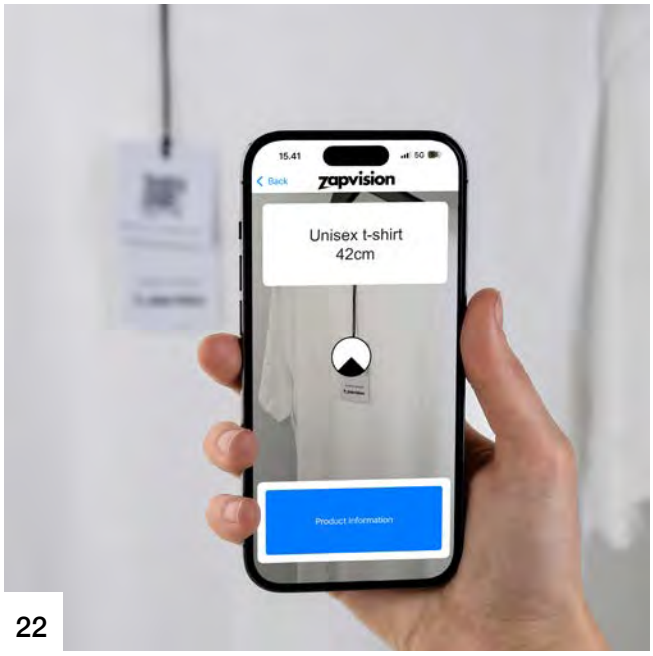

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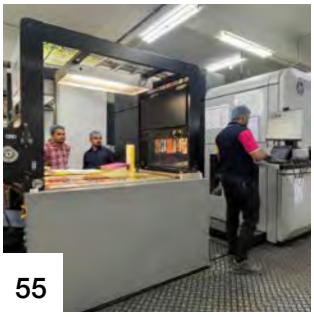
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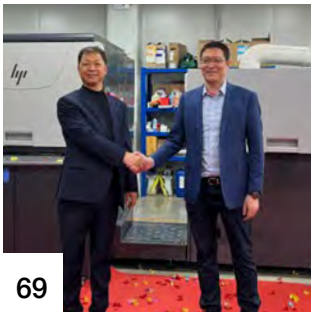
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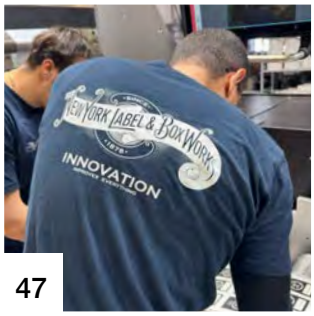

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Label and package printing trends

The emerging opportunities that are shifting the markets

TLMI meeting recap

Material prices, Middle East war and tariffs drove conversations

L&L looks back

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The price reckoning

Editor's note

There's never a dull moment in today's modern business climate. Just when the industry thought it was time to catch its breath from the destocking impacts, tariffs entered the picture. Now the conflict in Iran is providing a new source of stress for converters. This was a hot topic at the TLMI Converter Leadership Meeting where one thing was crystal clear: The label industry must buckle up and brace for impact as it grapples with 'historic price increases'.

Just ahead of that meeting, material suppliers sent notices of price increases, up to 15 percent in some reported cases. The meeting was predictably tense at times, as converters contend with the prospect of absorbing costs while maintaining profitability. You can read more about the TLMI Converter Leadership meeting by scanning the QR code on the left side of this page.

"It was a predictably tense situation at times, as converters grapple with how to absorb the costs while maintaining profitability"

I expect similar conversations to unfold at the annual European Label Forum hosted by Finat after this magazine is printed. And as the industry turns to Loupe Americas this fall, I anticipate these changes will mean more converters seeking new technologies around automation, waste reduction and workflow improvements to protect already compressed margins. Higher material costs may even further accelerate product diversification as converters explore higher-margin offerings in flexible packaging, RFID or even folding cartons.

Cost pressures like this don't just change purchasing decisions; they can change industry direction.

In the near term, these challenges are forcing converters to reckon with their pricing strategies and rethink their business models. Some are adjusting supply chains to be more regional, sourcing materials closer to manufacturing sites to minimize exposure to geopolitical disruptions. Others are diversifying their supplier base to avoid over-reliance on any single source.

Brands, meanwhile, are demanding greater transparency into marketing costs and may even simplify the materials used in their products as a result. This shift could mean fewer SKUs or standardized substrates.

Either way, the opportunity is here for brands and converters to work together to identify cost-saving opportunities without compromising quality or even sustainability goals.

Elsewhere in the US, private equity continues to reshape the label landscape.

Analysts now say PE firms may have overpaid for some acquisitions, while the US label market growth has slowed, leading to shake-ups at large label companies. Turn to page 37 for an excellent recap on the merger and acquisition market in the US, by North American editor Selah Zighelboim.

Chelsea McDougall, Editor

Installations

Gallus Five

Artes Etichette, Italy

Artes Etichette has become the first label producer worldwide to install the Gallus Five hybrid press, with the system now in full industrial production at its facility in Italy following its December 2025 installation. The converter has nearly five decades of experience with Gallus machinery, including two Gallus Labelfire presses installed in 2018 and 2022 and Europe's first Gallus One in 2024. 'Labels must be perfect, and the Gallus Five delivers the precision required to hit that standard every time,' said Artes CEO Luca Airoldi. Operating at up to 100m/min, the system reduces waste and shortens makeready times. Airoldi noted that a complex job that previously required several hours of preparation can now be started in about 30 minutes.

Nilpeter FA-17

Security Label, Germany

Security Label has invested in a customized Nilpeter FA-17. Security Label specializes in the aviation sector, working with over 400 airlines and airports in 100 countries to produce airport tags. These tags require consistent print quality, mechanical precision, high production speeds and reliable finishing. With its modular design, stable web guidance and die-cutting technology, the Nilpeter FA-17 is well-suited for this application. Its precise rotary die-cutting is particularly key. This involves cutting the characteristic shapes of the baggage tags, usually with a slot, tear-off perforation, or reinforced ends, out of the material web with high accuracy. 'The Nilpeter FA-17 marks the beginning of a new chapter for us in terms of technology,' technical director Claas Hartung said.

Mark Andy Evolution Series E5

Piroto Labelling, UK

Piroto Labelling added a Mark Andy Evolution Series E5 flexo press, which joins its two Mark Andy Performance Series P5 presses. The new press runs regularly at 170m/min. It is fitted with both LED/UV and hot-air drying for water-based production of direct food-contact labels. Specification of the machine includes turn bars for delam/relam and cold foil capability. 'We have benefited from the unwavering support we have received from Mark Andy over the years, which has played a significant part in our growth and development here at Piroto,' chief executive Leigh Mann said. 'From technical advice to after-sales support, the partnership we have built with Mark Andy has been invaluable.'

Screen Truepress Jet L350UV SAI

PDQ Labels, Australia

PDQ Labels has installed a second Screen Truepress Jet L350UV SAI at its Sydney facility, becoming the first label converter in Australia and New Zealand to operate two machines of this type. The installation follows PDQ's first Screen L350 integration in 2021 and reflects a shift in customer ordering behavior toward shorter runs, higher SKU counts and just-in-time inventory models. 'Since installing our first Screen a number of years ago, we have noticed a massive shift in how people are ordering and the limitations that flexo was putting on us,' said Paul Bentham, managing director of PDQ Labels. 'Customers are increasingly working with a just-in-time approach and don't want to worry about how artwork changes will affect plate costs.'

Installations

Bobst Master M5

Royal Geostick Group, Netherlands

Royal Geostick Group has purchased a new Bobst Master M5 flexo press, purpose-built for the high-volume multilayer label production that its customers increasingly demand because of EU Regulation 2024/2865, which requires more label information. The Master M5 is fully equipped with a QN module and end to end automation. Cees Schouten, chief operations officer of Royal Geostick, said: 'We needed a press with the highest productivity and minimum waste. The Master M5 gives us exactly that: exceptional print quality, unmatched automation and the ability to produce highly specialized multilayer labels in one pass. Our continued investment in Bobst technology is directly linked to our success and to our mission to offer our customers the best possible service.'

Weigang ZJR-450G

Al Sabagh, Iraq

Al Sabagh Company for Digital Printing and General Trading installed a ZJR-450G 8-color flexographic printing press from Weigang to expand its label-printing capabilities and improve production efficiency. The press is designed for stable performance and efficient operation. The machine is equipped with a Siemens control system, advanced tension control and web-guiding technology, ensuring stable and precise printing performance. Key configurations include a BST stroboscopic inspection system, a corona treater and a double-side dust-cleaning system, a UV curing system from Italy, cold foil capability with differential shaft and a lamination unit for additional finishing flexibility. These features allow the press to handle a variety of label materials and printing requirements.

Durst RSCi

West Coast Labels, Canada

West Coast Labels has installed a Durst RSCi roll-to-roll label press to boost short- and medium-run output. The converter selected the RSCi for its high print quality, color accuracy, material versatility and fast turnaround. The press offers speeds up to 100m/min and 1,200 DPI resolution. 'We were looking for a machine that could deliver exceptional print quality, consistency and efficiency, especially for short- and medium-run jobs where turnaround speed is critical,' office manager Raeanna Joyner said. 'The RSCi aligned well with our goals of improving consistency, reducing setup time and increasing flexibility. The system is intuitive for our operators, and the workflow has integrated smoothly into our existing setup.'

Omet KFlex K4 530

AllenPack, Taiwan

Taiwanese packaging specialist AllenPack has strengthened its shrink-sleeve production capabilities with a new Omet KFlex K4 530 press. The machine was selected to increase efficiency and competitiveness in established markets, while opening opportunities for new segments where flexibility and waste reduction are critical. The machine enables faster changeovers and fine-tuned quality control, key factors for a company managing diverse SKUs and short-run requirements typical of today's consumer-goods landscape. Omet's dedicated representative in Taiwan, Ben Liu of Yah Sheng Chong Yung Kee, has been instrumental in this installation, creating a smooth channel between market needs and Omet's technology.

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Scan the QR code for more appointments on the Labels & Labeling website.

Appointments

Eric Zaremski
CEO, Unilux
Zaremski brought expertise in robotics and aerospace systems to the company. He leads Unilux's expansion into integrated machine vision, combining its established stroboscopic inspection platform with AI, advanced cameras and software capabilities designed for modern manufacturing environments.

Scot Neumann
Vice president of sales, Label Solutions
Neumann has nearly to 30 years of experience across pressure-sensitive labels, shrink sleeves, flexible packaging and digital print technologies to the role. He joined from Heidelberg US, where he served as regional manager for Gallus products, expanding flexographic and digital label-press opportunities across the Midwest and the Western US.

Mackenzie Henderson
Chief people officer, ePS
Henderson leads the company's global people and HR strategy across all regions. She builds on the company's established HR foundations, focusing on global consistency and strategic partnership. Henderson brought more than 10 years of experience to this role and has held senior HR leadership positions across North America and globally.

Max Winograd
Senior vice president, smart packaging solutions (RFID), MCC
Winograd has over 16 years of experience in smart and connected technologies across packaging and supply chain environments. In his new role, he leads MCC's Starport business and broader RFID portfolio, setting strategy and driving innovation across the company's smart packaging platform.

Paul Wilkinson
Chief financial officer, Dantex
Wilkinson joined from IWG-Regus, where he served as head of finance and treasury. In the new role, he manages the financial reporting of Dantex, overseeing all matters for individual subsidiaries, coordinates group-wide financial processes and supports the company's strategic ambitions, particularly its focus on growth through continued investment.

Wolfgang Knotz
Chief technical officer, Durst
Knotz has been with Durst for many years, most recently serving as managing director of Durst Austria. Since joining the company in 2013, he has played a key role in shaping core production and technology structures. As head of development since 2016, he has been instrumental in advancing and optimizing digital printing systems.

Evelyn Hartinger
CEO, All4Labels
Hartinger joined the team eight months ago and has gained a deep understanding of the operational and strategic priorities during this time. She started her career in global strategy consulting and then joined a leading European consumer packaging company, where she has held various leading international roles over many years.

Antoine Rieutord
Sales director, GM
Rieutord joined with a background in sales, account management and business development and holds a master's degree in international marketing and business development. In his current role, he works with customers and partners to strengthen GM's market position, identify new opportunities and support key account engagement.

Armelle Jaclot
European marketing director, Sato Europe
Based in Heidelberg, Germany, Jaclot is responsible for designing and executing Sato Europe's marketing strategy across the region, with a focus on strengthening brand positioning and driving demand generation. She brings a B2B marketing background spanning technology, EdTech and education, with experience in multicultural environments.

Cindy Cooperman
Vice president and general manager of Pantone, X-Rite Pantone
Cooperman leads the business unit to advance its role in color standards and digital workflows across the design-to-production process. She has more than 25 years of experience supporting brands, designers and manufacturers that rely on color authority and accuracy.

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Company: Flavor Makers, Cheer Pack Asia Pacific

Country: Australia

Category: Food

02 re/cycle HiProtex Paper

Company: Mondi

Country: Austria

Category: Health and personal care

03 Stand-up pouch mono-material Reciclável Com Barreira

Company: Camargo Cia de Embalagens

Country: Brazil

Category: Packaging materials and components

04 Flexible film 100 percent PCR – food contact

Company: Conver

Country: Brazil

Category: Food

05 X-Cycle mono-PE recyclable coffee packaging with high-barrier and easy-open

Company: A Hatzopoulos

Country: Greece

Category: Non-alcoholic beverages

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Andy Thomas-Emans
Hybrid variations

Will automated flexo, hybrid or standalone digital be the winners as we move into an era of even shorter runs?

For this issue of Labels & Labeling, I interviewed Dario Urbinati, CEO of Gallus Group, about the extraordinary turnaround he has accomplished at the company, turning it from a conventionally-minded narrow-web production company to a 'digital first' mindset and production program in just a few years.

In concrete terms, this resulted in the development of the Digital One inkjet press, followed by the more recent launch of the Digital Five at Labelexpo Europe, all forming part of a modular system based around the Labelmaster flexo press platform.

Apart from being a major feat of change management, Urbinati's future vision for Gallus shines a spotlight on the range of choices facing label converters as we move forward into a landscape of ever-shorter runs and multiplying design variants.

Urbinati does not believe conventional printing is dead, far from it. Gallus continues to develop its Labelmaster and RCS press platforms. But Urbinati believes that with 80 percent of label jobs now under 10,000 linear meters, a hybrid platform with a digital print engine provides the lowest TCO.

A different view

Contrast this with Nilpeter. In an interview in Labels & Labeling (Issue 3, 2025) last year, CTO Carsten Clemenson indicated Nilpeter has moved away from the hybrid model, focusing instead on further automating its flexo press technology to reduce the need for operator intervention and fully automating job changeovers on the run.

At Labelexpo Europe in Barcelona, the company demonstrated a 'live' changeover between two four-color jobs on a running FA4 press, with just a few meters of waste between them. With two die-cut units on the press, it would also be possible to change the die-cut on the fly.

Clemenson's view is that this technology eliminates the need for a hybrid press, allowing for a full-color change or just a black-plate change while remaining within a converter's established flexo ecosystem.

This is a fascinating and energizing difference of philosophy, presenting the label converter with different ways to organize production for an environment where short runs, proliferation of variants and inventory reduction are unstoppable trends.

The other flexo press manufacturers take positions somewhere between Nilpeter and Gallus, choosing different points at which hybrid will be preferred over flexo and vice versa.

Finishing landscape

The increased automation of flexo technology and the integration of flexo presses into digital networks have certainly reshaped our understanding of where flexo fits in the shorter run, multi-SKU environment.

At the same time, flexo automation and digital integration have powerfully impacted the efficiency of hybrid press systems, reducing overall job setup and changeover times.

Converting technologies such as high-speed semi-rotary dies have impacted the efficiency of both flexo and hybrid systems, as has the increasing use of sleeve technology.

"Perhaps most exciting is the potential for automation of the finishing step, where a quiet revolution is already underway"

What these two approaches have in common is viewing the label converting process as an in-line operation, from the roll to a printed, embellished and die-cut piece.

This is the traditional narrow-web workflow from the days of rotary letterpress onward, adapted in various ways to a world of ever-shorter run lengths.

Where does this leave standalone digital presses with off-line (more accurately near-line) finishing? Will the increasing efficiency of automated flexo and hybrid overtake and eventually eclipse the two-stage digital print and converting model?

A two-stage workflow involves work in progress, generates some waste by reregistering pre-printed jobs for off-line converting processes, and, despite the depth of automation around the digital press, still requires manual operator skills on the finishing side.

It might be argued that two-stage digital print and finishing only became the dominant configuration because, in the early days, digital presses were so much slower than converting systems. Does it make sense to finish off-line now that we are approaching flexo productivity at speeds of 75-100m/min and upwards?

But separating the print and converting steps still has key benefits compared to an in-line approach.

Flexibility is key

The most obvious advantage of a two-stage model is flexibility. The digital print engine keeps printing, no matter the complexity of the finishing steps required for each job on the roll. Also, finishing can be easily scaled to reflect increased productivity on the press.

Perhaps most exciting is the potential to automate the finishing step, where a quiet revolution is already underway. The Mercian Labels automation project (scan the QR code below to read the full story on the L&L website), demonstrates the impact this will have on the overall efficiency of the two-stage process, with the setting and operation of the converting line moved from the operator to a new programming layer within the company.

What seems clear is that each approach, automated flexo, hybrid and near-line converting, has its own unique advantages, meaning that for the foreseeable future they are likely to co-exist.

The tough question for converters is to decide how the pieces of the jigsaw fit into the workflow architecture of their long-term strategic plans.

Scan the QR code to read more about Mercian Labels automation project

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Partner, not vendor: Elevating your value before Loupe

Regular catch-ups and meetings are the magic ingredients that turn a vendor to a vital business partner, writes Lois Ritarossi

In my last column, we explored how AI can sharpen your sales follow-up and how to lead with a differentiation strategy. But true differentiation isn't just about how you sell; it's about how you show up after the deal is closed. Successful salespeople share a common habit: they conduct regular, high-level planning meetings with their largest clients. Whether you call them quarterly business reviews (QBRs) or executive strategy sessions, these meetings are the 'secret sauce' for moving from a vendor to a vital business partner.

Manage relationships, not jobs

Your production and CSR teams are sprinting every day. They are navigating substrate shortages, managing press schedules and ensuring the color match on that difficult SKU is perfect. It is easy to let 'the work' get in the way of 'the relationship'.

I challenge you to manage your accounts as if you could lose them tomorrow. Even if you've been the incumbent for years, the label, packaging and printing landscape is shifting. If the bulk of your sales conversations are about job requirements, purchase orders and delivery schedules, you are missing the opportunity to be a strategic resource.

QBR: Not a status report

A true planning meeting is not about the jobs in production this week. It is a structured, senior-level dialog focused on business impact. The goal is to elevate the conversation from 'When will I get my job?' to 'How can we help you grow your market share?'

The agenda for a planning meeting will focus on your customers' goals and results:

- The success recap: Reminding about the challenges you solved together in the last 90 days.
- Quantifiable results: What was the impact of the completed projects?
- Future roadmap: What new product lines or rebranding efforts are on their three-to-six-month horizon?
- Strategic alignment: Being seen as a consultant who understands their business goals for labels and packaging.

"If the bulk of your sales conversations is about job requirements, purchase orders and delivery schedules, you are missing the opportunity to be a strategic resource"

Build an agenda

One of the biggest hurdles to successful planning meetings is the preparation. This is where your AI strategy comes back into play.

You don't need a complex system; you need a Crispe prompt to ensure your agenda isn't boring.

Context: Describe the background of the situation

Role: Clearly define what you want the AI to do

Instruction: Provide specific, detailed instructions on the task

Specification: Define the desired format, tone, and style

Parameters: Set constraints or formatting rules, such as what to avoid

Examples: Provide examples of desired output and the number of iterations

Before your next review, try feeding your AI assistant a prompt like this:

'I am a sales leader in the label and packaging industry. I have a QBR with a [insert industry, e.g., craft beer or pharma] client. Our goal is to move from 'vendor' to 'partner.' Based on current trends in [insert industry] such as [e.g., sustainable packaging or regulatory changes], generate a five-point strategic agenda. Focus 20 percent on past performance and 80 percent on future business strategy, including [insert client-relevant topics, e.g., SKU optimization and cost-saving innovations]. Give me three 'provocative' questions to ask the [customer job title, e.g., brand manager] about their fourth quarter and 2027 goals.'

This turns a sales call into a high-value strategy session that your client will look forward to.

Plan for Loupe

As we look toward September, the industry is buzzing about Loupe Americas. For many, this is the most critical face-to-face time you will have with your key clients all year. But here is the reality: if you wait until you're on the show floor to ask your clients what they need, you've already lost the competitive edge.

Schedule a summer QBR to create immediate momentum for September. By scheduling these planning appointments now, you transform Loupe from a browsing exercise into a high-stakes strategy session. You aren't just another vendor at a booth; you are a consultant delivering value.

The QBRs you conduct in June and July are your 'reconnaissance missions.'

They allow you to walk into Loupe with a curated 'solutions roadmap' for each key account. Your conversations will be relevant and memorable as they wander the show floor. Your solutions will stand out to resolve their business issues from the dizzying array of exhibitors on the show floor.

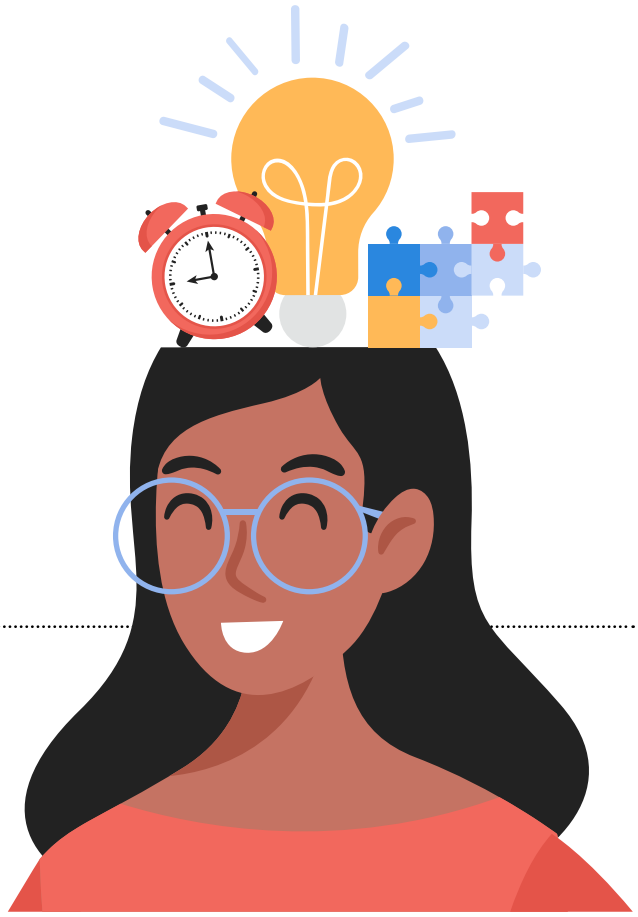
Sales in action

There is a narrow window between now and the summer 'vacation dip' to get these meetings on the calendar. Identify your top five accounts. Use the AI prompt above to draft a strategic agenda that moves the needle to ensure your success at Loupe and revenue growth for 2027.

Lois Ritarossi is a certified management consultant and president of High Rock Strategies, an independent management consulting firm focused on sales and marketing strategies and business growth for firms in the print, mail, communications and B2B sectors. You can read more about sales strategies at www.highrockstrategies.com. Email Lois at Lritarossi@highrockstrategies.com

From niche to mainstream: Design paved the way for SkyPop

Vicki Strull explores the before-and-after packaging transformation story of a powerhouse protein soda, featuring interesting twists, technical hurdles and lessons learned



Let's be clear: Designers don't design for design's sake.

In the high-stakes world of consumer packaged goods (CPG), we design to drive business growth. We design to secure shelf space, increase sales and ultimately, impact the bottom line.

For proof that design is a growth engine (in addition to being a problem-solver), look no further than the transformation of SkyPop.

Who's doing protein's PR?

You've probably noticed that protein is having a moment, showing up in all sorts of products from popcorn and gelato to candy and cookies. One of the newest market entrants is the world's first protein soda, under the sports nutrition brand, Don't Quit.

Until recently, Don't Quit was primarily sold in health food stores, gyms and a few national retailers. It catered almost exclusively to fitness-focused men. But the brand had bigger ambitions. To drive real growth and expand its footprint into more national retailers, it needed to shift from a niche fitness product to a broad-appeal lifestyle brand. To achieve this, the company needed to refine the formula, introduce new flavors and expand its target audience. The problem was that the drink's packaging and branding were decidedly masculine and no-nonsense, creating a disconnect with its ambitious goals. So, Don't Quit hired me to design a brand makeover that would align its branding and packaging with its sales goals.

The strategic pivot

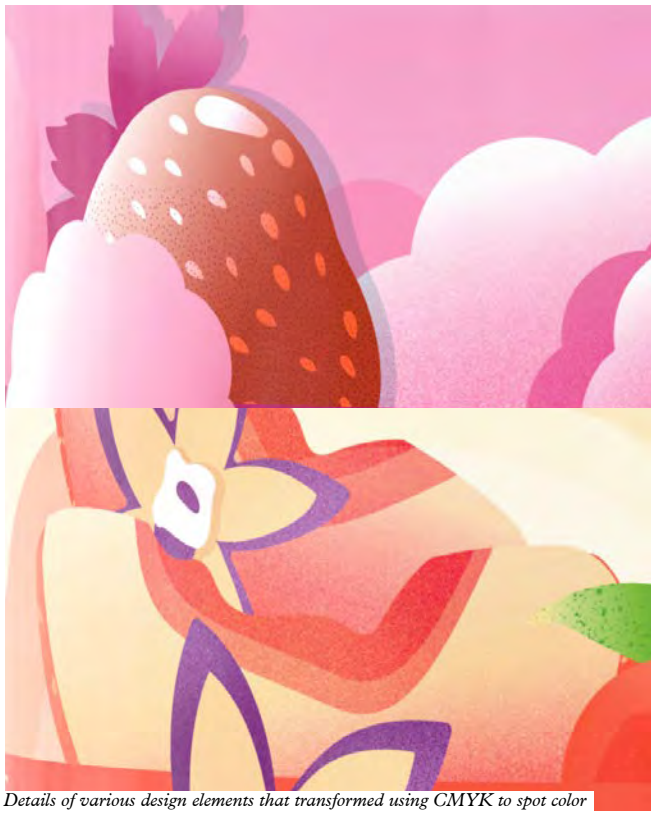
The Don't Quit brand set its expansion goals by talking with a dozen or so top retailers about what it would take to get its protein soda on their shelves. Retailers were excited right out of the gate, but said that the packaging needed to change. To reposition itself as an alternative soda rather than a protein recovery drink, the brand needed to become a lifestyle brand, one that could compete in the market with brands like Poppi and Olipop (two prebiotic soda brands).

The brand's creative brief was clear. The new target audience was younger, modern, health-conscious and fun-seeking. This wasn't just about recovery; it was about enjoyment and function. The brand needed a visual identity with flair, whimsy and cheer. A stark departure from its utilitarian roots. What an opportunity for a packaging designer. And that's exactly what I created. Same name, same logo, but a completely different packaging design.

Adding personality

We moved quickly. The new design concept was built on color: variations, nuances and gradations to infuse personality, playfulness and whimsy onto the can. There are colorful fireworks exploding; there's foam floating and fruit flying around; there are squishes

"In the high-stakes world of consumer packaged goods, we design to drive business growth. We design to secure shelf space, increase sales and ultimately, impact the bottom line"



Details of various design elements that transformed using CMYK to spot color

We built all of the orange in fruit punch using a spot red mixed with a spot yellow

"In the CPG world, volume can change everything. When you move to that level of scale, unit costs become the primary driver"

Direct-to-can production prints on aluminum cans

Prominent placement of 'protein soda' on the can because it is a brand-new category of soda in the alternative soda market

and squirts of popsicles, cherries and strawberries. The identity embraced a touch of fantasy that speaks to the new flavors as well as to the broader audience, new professionals, young parents and fitness enthusiasts, who want their protein with a side of joy.

My client loved it. More importantly, the retailers and buyers loved it.

For the print nerds among us, the nuances in the colors were intentional, designed to match the design's new vibrancy and movement. I knew we could achieve the look and smooth gradations because the cans would be produced on a shrink sleeve using CMYK.

The production curveball

The design concept was approved, the buyers love it and we were finalizing our designs, when my client says: 'We need to change the production method.' Why? Well, the buyers were so excited about the new design that the projected production run skyrocketed. We went from planning for hundreds of thousands of cans to millions. We're talking Walmart, Target, Kroger, CVS and more.

In the CPG world, volume can make or break everything. When you move to that level of scale, unit costs become the primary driver. The leadership team made the call to switch from CMYK shrink sleeves to direct-to-can printing.

And why that choice? Margins. Printing direct-to-can is significantly less expensive per unit than applying a shrink sleeve. When you're producing millions of units, those pennies add up to massive profit margins. It was a smart business decision, so how could I be upset?

The new product projections were a great compliment to the design, and my client was thrilled, but I had concerns. The designs would go from printing CMYK, where I can achieve millions of colors pretty easily, to printing direct-to-can, which only allows five Pantone colors plus white.

That's it.

If you're not familiar with direct-to-can printing, which I was not, it is a completely different process. So now we have a design that everyone loves, but a production method that is not conducive to it. I'm worried that we won't be able to print the multitude of shades or achieve the new energy and vibrancy.

After my first call with the new production team (I'll let you imagine what that conversation was like), I say to my client: 'We may have to change the design.'

And they say: 'No, we're not changing the design. We love the design. The retailers want that design on their shelves. We're not changing it.'

Of course, I bring up my concerns with the printer, and surprisingly, the team leader says they can work with it. They have expert color separators, and they will make it happen. But it's going to take some ingenuity to achieve my vision within their production capabilities.

Identity crisis

Okay, so now you're all caught up. Let's go back to where I was when I turned in the artwork: the fresh, whimsical, fruit-exploding design paired with the masculine, determined Don't Quit logo and brand name.

I'm guessing some of you may have an inkling about what happened next. While everyone loved the new visual identity, there was now a disconnect between the name, logo and logotype and the packaging's fresh energy.

And that's when my client says: 'We want to change the name.'

We had debated a name change at the start of the project, but it was not viable then. Sometimes you must go down that road with a client so they can see it. I call this a step process. They simply could not envision the need until they saw the new design. The packaging evolution forced a brand identity evolution.

We were already on a tighter-than-tight schedule: Retailers needed the product in their stores within five months. It had been two months since I started working on the project. A renaming project typically takes months of brainstorming, trademark research, URL hunting and approvals. After just four weeks, my client lands on a name that embraces the lifestyle of their broader audience, their new flavors and the alternative soda market: SkyPop.

Now they needed a new logo for the new name. Did I mention we were on a short timeline? The good news is, we already had a packaging design that captured the brand's personality: pizazz, fun and joy. Now I had to translate it to the new logo.

We questioned how to narrow the scope to meet the new deadline with the can manufacturer: Is it a hand-drawn typography or something simple and slightly customized? Is it a logo, a mark or an icon? Is it just a mark, and the type is secondary? In the interest of time, we decided on a unique logotype without a mark or icon.

Once the SkyPop logo was approved with flying colors (pun intended), I revised the label design to accommodate it. The old logo was triangular, and the graphics on the can flowed around that shape. The new logo was horizontal and curvy. Every explosion of fruit and splash of foam had to be shifted and rebalanced.

The before and after packaging designs of the energy drink

"Sometimes you must go down that road with a client so they can see it. I call this a step process. The packaging evolution can force a brand identity evolution"

Let's get technical

Back in production, I worked with the separator to identify Pantone colors that best matched the CMYK nuances of my original design. And we had to account for the substrate: Pantone colors look different on aluminum than they do in my fandeck, which is printed on white coated paper. Additionally, we could specify some colors to be transparent, so they have a metallic sheen from the aluminum, but I wondered if they would lighten the look? Or darken it? Some colors are brighter on aluminum than others. And then we needed some colors to be 'neck-friendly', because aluminum bends, and the ink in those spots needs to be forgiving of that movement, so it doesn't crack.

Wait, there's more. Printing on aluminum is a 'wet-on-wet' process. So, on a can, the inks cannot touch while wet. If you take a loupe to a direct-printed can, you will see tiny aluminum hairlines between colors. No two colors ever touch. Contrast that with CMYK printing, where we layer cyan with magenta, yellow and black to achieve millions of color nuances.

The separation phase was very time-consuming. We went through the artwork piece by piece, for seven flavors, seven different designs and five sets of Pantone colors. That gave us 35 colors, plus white, to cover the full range of color shades, gradations and nuances.

As I worked with the color separator, he took elements of each design and adjusted them for the production process. We used stochastic screening in the gradients for a better continuous tone. We used optical mixing to create new colors from our limited palette.

For example, the fruit punch design features a pineapple, an orange and a cherry. We didn't have a spot color for orange. But with yellow and red specified, the separator used the proximity of dots to create the illusion of orange. And we had to do that for each can design. It was a masterclass in aligning creative vision with production capabilities.

It was a wild ride, and well worth it. SkyPop Protein Soda is set to be in thousands of stores nationwide by summer 2026. That breadth is pretty much unheard of for a new brand. And, for a designer, it's always a thrill to see your work 'out in the wild'.

While this appears to be the story of a product's before-and-after design, it's really a business case for the ROI of strategic design. I'm not overstating it when I say that the packaging sold this product to the buyers.

Sure, they loved the taste, but the retailers would not have taken it on without the new design. They needed shelf impact in the lifestyle soda aisle.

The leadership team understood a fundamental truth in business: Design is a means to an end. It is not just about aesthetics; it's also about economics. The design enabled distribution. Distribution enabled volume. Volume enabled scale. Scale enables a sustainable business.

This is design as a growth engine. And the theory proved itself with SkyPop.

Vicki Strull has over 25 years of experience in the marketing and design industry as a brand strategist, creative director and packaging designer. She serves as an adjunct professor at Tulane University and frequently speaks at industry conferences in the US and internationally. Join fellow trendsetters at vickistrull.com or follow Vicki on LinkedIn @vickistrull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SMART LABELS TRANSFORM BRAND EXPERIENCE

For decades, the 'static' label was the industry's 'silent salesman', but in an era where regulations are tightening, a package that stays silent is a package with something to hide, Akanksha Meena reports

Connected packaging is no longer optional for brands; it has become an essential part of the packaging experience, providing consumers with unit-level intelligence and transparency. Packaging that utilizes QR, RFID, NFC and digital watermarks shifts the format from a one-way channel to a multidirectional digital footprint. These technologies are evolving rapidly as global regulations inch closer.

QR CODES AND GS1 DIGITAL LINKS

QR or 'Quick Response' codes store more data than traditional barcodes and can be quickly scanned with smartphones. With fast, omnidirectional scanning and error correction, it's widely used across industries and growing rapidly with smartphone adoption.

GS1 digital link, set to become mandatory from 2027, enables barcodes and other data carriers to serve as web links, connecting a product's unique identity to online sources of real-time information that brands can control.

The adoption of QR codes is becoming the norm, as scanning a package or label has become a reflex for most consumers. Around 75 percent of consumers scan QR codes to get more information, ahead of those seeking discounts (52 percent) and making payments (35 percent), according to a 2026 research report by Uniqode. Yet only 36 percent of marketers use QR codes to deliver additional information, highlighting an opportunity for brands to better match QR code content to consumer intent.

RFID AND NFC

RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) and NFC (Near Field Communication) are wireless communication technologies that use radio waves to identify objects. Unlike QR codes, these technologies don't require a direct line of sight to be read. RFID is designed for distance and volume and is particularly useful in supply chain and inventory tracking.

While NFC is a branch of RFID. It is designed for secure, two-way communication at close range. The technology enables contactless payments and 'tap-to-interact' packaging.

Alice Rackley, CEO of Polytag

Jenny Stanley, managing director and founder of Appetite Creative

"LABELS WILL INCREASINGLY BECOME GATEWAYS TO MUCH LARGER VOLUMES OF DIGITAL INFORMATION"

NFC tags are increasingly being developed with sustainability in mind. For example, Tageos' new NFC inlay lines, EOS Lite and EOS Zero Lite, feature Pragmatic Semiconductor's ultra-thin PR1301 chip for low-carbon smart packaging. EOS-932 Zero Lite is a paper-based NFC inlay designed for scalable use in packaging and labels.

Avery Dennison also launched a flexible NFC inlay range using Pragmatic Semiconductor's FlexIC technology. The ultra-thin inlays target retail and healthcare, with a lower-impact manufacturing process that uses less energy, water and chemicals than traditional silicon. It can also be adapted for curved packaging surfaces.

DIGITAL WATERMARKS

Digital watermarks are invisible codes embedded directly into a package's artwork. Unlike a QR code, which requires a specific black-and-white square, a digital watermark is woven into the design itself, altering colors, shading and textures at a microscopic level. With digital watermarks, every surface of a package becomes scannable with smartphones or industrial scanners.

After years of development and testing, digital watermark technology is now proving it can deliver the precision needed to enable packaging recycling and sorting, as L&L reported in Issue 4, 2025. Traditional sorting technologies cannot identify crucial information, such as product applications (food, cosmetics or detergents); recycled content levels; or whether materials are bio-based or fossil-based. Digital watermarks address these gaps by encoding detailed information directly into packaging during the printing process.

REGULATORY FORCES

Regulations such as GS1's Sunrise 2027 initiative are driving the shift from 1D barcodes to 2D QR codes, enabling greater transparency, traceability and consumer engagement while improving inventory management, recall management and authentication. At the same time, the European Union is introducing Digital Product Passports (DPPs) under the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), providing detailed lifecycle data to support compliance and sustainability. Complementing this, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) will require recyclable packaging, recycled content and waste reduction by 2030, with connected packaging playing a key role in enabling traceability, digital labeling and efficient reuse and recycling systems.

Jenny Stanley, managing director and founder of Appetite Creative, an expert in connected packaging, says that connected packaging addresses both regulatory requirements and consumer trust simultaneously.

'We're facing a number of transitions right now. There's the Sunrise Project, which is driving the shift to QR codes

"CONNECTED PACKAGING CAN HAVE A VERY TANGIBLE IMPACT ON SALES. WE TYPICALLY SEE AN INCREASE OF AROUND 20-30 PERCENT, WHICH IS A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE VALUE STORY"

Sunny sees strong consumer engagement with smart packaging

by 2027 as part of a GS1 initiative around digital links. Then there's the legislation around DPP and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).

'All of these changes are pushing brands to find ways to meet new requirements. What's compelling about connected packaging is that it transforms compliance from a necessity into an opportunity, one that allows brands to deliver genuine value to the consumer while staying aligned with evolving regulations.'

Connected packaging helps brands engage directly with consumers, especially in FMCG, where end users are often unknown, while delivering detailed, compliant product information in a clear, engaging format. It also improves transparency and builds trust by replacing dense legal text with more intuitive, visual communication.

Camilla Mjelde, compliance and sustainability director at Trimco Group, a Gurugram, India-based label and packaging supplier with expertise in traceability and RFID, says: 'Labels will increasingly become gateways to much larger volumes of digital information. With DPPs, products will carry access to far more data, and often more complex information than what can realistically fit on a physical label.

'What we see is that brands are approaching this differently. Some want to keep it simple and focus on compliance, while others are looking to capture the full potential of connected products and deliver as much value and information as possible through the digital layer.'

A 'MUST HAVE'

Research by Appetite Creative and Koenig & Bauer Auraveo reveals that 92.3 percent of those surveyed say that connected packaging will be increasingly important to the packaging industry in the next 12 months and beyond, up from 88.8 percent in 2025.

Adoption of connected packaging has risen strongly, with 81.2 percent of companies currently using the technology, up from 72.6 percent last year.

The shift from single technology to multi-technology implementations continues. Around 47.1 percent of brands use QR codes and NFCs combined, compared to QR codes alone (31.8 percent) and NFC tags alone (21.1 percent).

Interest in serialized QR codes increased to 73.2 percent in 2025, reflecting a strong majority in favor of more sophisticated connected packaging. Industry skepticism has dropped, with only 7.7 percent of respondents viewing connected packaging as a passing fad, down from 13.4 percent in 2025.

'What I've seen from working with brands like Tetra Pak is that over 78 percent of customers agree connected packaging helps them better understand sustainability credentials. That's a strong signal,' Stanley adds. 'It shows a shift away from greenwashing towards something more tangible and meaningful for consumers.'

As a result, consumer expectations of connected packaging have shifted from a 'nice to have' to a 'must have'. Today's consumers want more. They expect to understand what they're buying, and they're looking for experiences that are engaging, interactive and even rewarding. Consumers want the full story behind their purchase.

That's where connected packaging becomes a gateway to deeper engagement. When a consumer scans a QR code, they're stepping into a richer experience. The shift is redefining packaging from a static touchpoint into a dynamic, data-driven channel for engagement and connection.

What is equally valuable is the data that connected packaging creates. Brands can see where consumers spend the most time, what information they engage with and what matters most to them. This allows

SUNNY LEVERAGES AI AND CONNECTED PACKAGING FOR CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

Cooking oil brand Sunny in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), owned by IFFCO, in partnership with Appetite Creative, launched a new AI-driven interactive smart packaging experience.

In a new campaign, 'Keep it Smart, Keep it Sunny', the brand highlights the benefits of using quality cooking oil. It shows customers how the product can save time in the kitchen, freeing them up to spend time with their family and friends.

The web app-based connected experience offers users the opportunity to play games to win prizes, learn new cooking hacks and take part in fun daily activities. The smart packaging campaign, accessed via QR codes, runs across three Sunny products, including Everyday, Crunch Lite and Sunflower.

'With Sunny cooking oil in the UAE, consumers don't just access nutritional information, they can explore AI-powered recipe suggestions based on ingredients they already have at home. They also get cooking tips, interactive content like games and a more immersive brand experience overall,' Stanley explains.

The web app tracks real-time interaction, such as buying habits, product preferences, average engagement time, age, location, scan rate, page views, number of users, return users and social media shares, including GDPR-compliant personal data to enable the brand to optimize its marketing and better understand consumers.

The Sunny oil campaign delivered strong results, with 10.7k total pageviews and high engagement reflected in 11.43 views per visit. The bounce rate was a low 21 percent, indicating excellent retention, while the average visit duration reached 6 minutes and 46 seconds, one of the best recorded.

"WHAT I'VE SEEN FROM WORKING WITH BRANDS LIKE TETRA PAK IS THAT OVER 78 PERCENT OF CUSTOMERS AGREE CONNECTED PACKAGING HELPS THEM BETTER UNDERSTAND SUSTAINABILITY CREDENTIALS. THAT'S A STRONG SIGNAL"

brands to refine both their messaging and the overall consumer experience continuously.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI is opening up a wide range of possibilities within connected packaging. For instance, it can power personalized product recommendations by analyzing consumer behavior and preferences.

There's also predictive repurchase. By understanding consumption patterns, brands can anticipate when a product is likely to run out and proactively prompt a reorder. With messaging platforms integrations, this can be as seamless as sending a direct link to repurchase at the right moment.

Another key area is content optimization. 'Based on what we know about a consumer, we can tailor the experience, whether that's highlighting recipes, sustainability information, promotions or interactive content. And as we gather more data, that experience continues to evolve, becoming more relevant over time,' Stanley says.

'That said, I think it's important to stay grounded. The goal isn't to use AI just because it's the latest buzzword, much like we saw with augmented reality. The real focus should always be on delivering genuine value to the consumer. If a technology enhances the experience in a meaningful way, then it has a place. If not, it risks becoming noise rather than something truly useful.'

COMPETITIVE EDGE

Connected packaging isn't just for large brands; smaller ones can benefit too. They're often more agile, able to experiment quickly and act on opportunities without complex approval processes.

'While larger brands might work on planning cycles of one to two years, smaller brands can often bring something to market in three to six months. That speed can be a real competitive edge,' Stanley highlights.

For smaller brands, focus is key. Rather than doing everything, they should prioritize use cases that deliver the most value, such as engagement, education, loyalty, data or sustainability storytelling.

A clear objective enables more targeted campaigns and smarter execution, often by building on existing tools, such as QR codes, rather than starting from scratch.

Reusability is key. Designing experiences that can be updated over time turns one-off campaigns into long-term value and makes investments more efficient.

For smaller brands, this means meaningful consumer engagement through content or storytelling, without a large budget, as long as the approach is strategic and intentional.

Connected packaging also offers strong scalability for multilingual, adaptable content across markets without repeated redesign, making it highly efficient for global brands.

'So ultimately, I do think smaller brands can compete with larger players when it comes to innovation. The key is having a clear strategy, strong creative thinking and a sharp focus on delivering genuine value to the consumer. That principle holds regardless of the size of the brand,' Stanley notes. 'Connected packaging can have a very tangible impact on sales. We typically see an increase of around 20-30 percent, which is a significant part of the value story.'

Beyond sales, engagement is another key metric. Stanley observes that consumers spend around two to three minutes interacting with connected packaging experiences, which is a

CONNECTED PACKAGING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Connected packaging can unlock new applications and address everyday challenges in ways that were previously not considered.

For example, as QR codes evolve and become mainstream, applications are expanding across industries. Trimco Group partnered with Zappar to bring Zapvision Accessible QR codes to the apparel and footwear industry for people who are blind or have low vision.

Zappar provides the technology to create and manage accessible QR codes and product data, while Trimco integrates them directly into garment labels during manufacturing. For brands, it's a low-friction shift: use QR codes as usual, with accessibility built in, without separate labels or symbols.

Accessibility entered the conversation through discussions on the upcoming Textile Labeling Regulation (TLR) revision. A key concern about digital labeling is that it may exclude certain consumers, such as the aging population in Europe, who are not comfortable with fully digital formats.

'Traditional QR codes were designed for sighted users, so they assume you can see, align and scan the code precisely,' says Max Dawes, chief operating officer at Zappar. For people who are blind or have low vision, QR codes create multiple barriers. There's no guidance to locate them, limited scanning flexibility and no accessible way to deliver structured information. Accessible QR codes address this by improving scanability and linking to content that works seamlessly with VoiceOver and TalkBack via assistive apps.

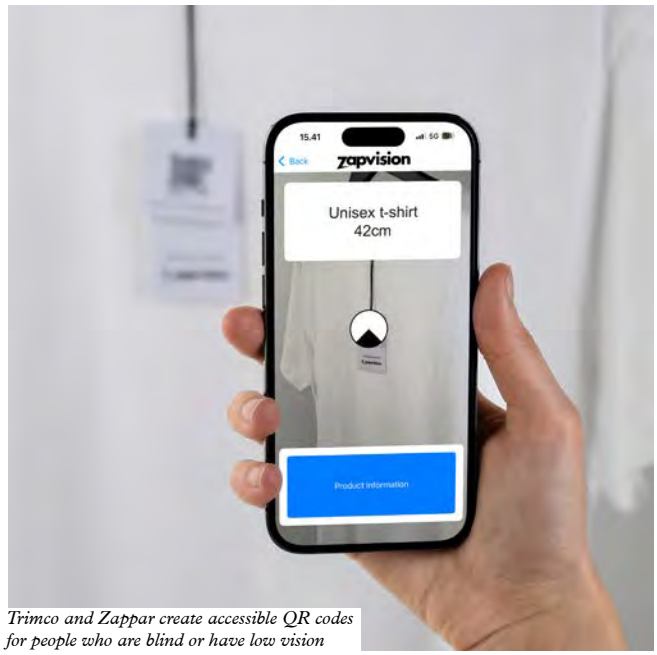
As QR codes become a likely carrier for DPPs, these systems must be designed to work for all consumers from the start.

'If accessibility isn't built in at that stage, we risk recreating the same exclusion we see today with physical labels, just in a digital format. The opportunity right now is that the industry is still in transition. QR codes are being adopted at scale, so there's a window to make them accessible by design before they become standard across billions of products,' Dawes days.

Mjelde from Trimco Group, adds that the biggest challenge for accessible QR codes is awareness. 'In the apparel and footwear industry, accessibility in connected packaging is still almost unknown. Other industries, such as food, are further ahead in this area. In fashion, the first step is really about socializing the concept, communicating that accessible QR technology exists and educating the industry on why it matters.'

Mjelde adds that Trimco sees interest in accessibility from some of the largest brands, particularly those with strong resources dedicated to digital product development, traceability and on-product digitalization. However, most brands are not yet requesting accessibility features, largely because many are still unaware that such technologies exist.

'That is why Trimco is actively bringing this conversation to the industry together with Zappar, because we believe it is an important step as connected packaging evolves,' Mjelde says. 'We see two distinct mindsets emerging. Some brands view DPPs mainly as a regulatory cost, while others see the potential to elevate the consumer experience.'



Trimco and Zappar create accessible QR codes for people who are blind or have low vision

"THE GOAL ISN'T TO USE AI JUST BECAUSE IT'S THE LATEST BUZZWORD, MUCH LIKE WE SAW WITH AUGMENTED REALITY"

substantial amount of time. In some cases, like the Sunny oil campaign (see box out), that engagement time has gone even further, reaching over six minutes per session on average. What's equally interesting is repeat interaction. Consumers don't just engage once; they often come back three to four times.

'If you think about it, even at an average of two minutes per session across multiple visits, that quickly adds up to meaningful, sustained engagement,' Stanley says. 'For me, it all comes back to one core principle: genuine value. If the experience is relevant and interesting, consumers will spend time with it and, more importantly, they will return to it. That's where you start to build trust, loyalty and deeper brand relationships.'

ENABLER OF SUSTAINABILITY

While connected packaging is often associated with consumer engagement, the technology is a critical enabler of sustainability, helping bridge the gap between products and recycling systems by delivering clear information that guides consumers toward better disposal and circular practices.

Polytag, for example, provides brands with connected packaging technology that serves as consumer engagement and marketing tools and optimizes supply chain processes.

Alice Rackley, CEO of Polytag, says: 'Traditionally, we have focused on the recycling and reuse opportunities unlocked with next-generation QR codes and invisible UV tags, to trace product and packaging through circular economies. However, brands that work with us are looking to unlock benefits across the entire lifecycle of a product, and DPPs are a significant area of opportunity for everyone moving into 2027 and beyond.'

QR codes powered by GS1 enable product-level data to be delivered directly to consumers via a simple scan. The content is fully branded, easily updated and highly effective for communicating information on recycling, reuse and repair.

The use of invisible UV tags on packaging enables barcode-level tracing in recycling centers, unlocking rich, never-before-seen insights into the quantity of packaging being recycled.

'This is helpful for many agents operating in the recycling circular economies today because what gets measured gets managed, and we need to see change in our lifetime. The introduction of EPR means that brands now have to contribute financially to the optimal end-of-life management of their packaging. Data and insights from Polytag are essential for this new legislation to be effective,' Rackley explains.

With regulations such as DPPs and EPR evolving globally, Rackley urges brands to get started now, 'because the opportunities are significant for brands that move first and unlock the marketing and customer communication benefits of on-pack QR codes built on global open standards.

Once the QR codes are included in your product and packaging artwork, you can evolve the content that they link to thanks to the flexible, customizable and interoperable tools available on your brand account on the Polytag platform.'

CHALLENGES

Implementing connected packaging can bring several challenges, including high upfront costs, complex integration with legacy systems and large-scale data management. Data security and privacy risks are also significant, particularly when handling consumer data.

'When we talk about AI in connected packaging, it has to be aligned with regulations like GDPR in Europe, alongside other global privacy standards. For me, that means ensuring clear opt-in mechanisms and being transparent about how consumer data is collected, used and managed. That trust piece is critical, especially when you're building more personalized, data-driven experiences,' Stanley explains.

Looking ahead, content management is also becoming a major challenge. With so many data points being generated, it quickly becomes a data problem, including organizing, updating, controlling and scaling content effectively.

'At the same time, not every consumer is equally comfortable with technology, so it's important to ask whether AI-led experiences are right for the audience you're targeting,' Stanley notes. 'Some consumers will be highly tech-savvy and excited by these kinds of interactions, but others may feel hesitant. For example, it may not resonate with older audiences who might be less comfortable using features like opening their phone camera.'

Those are important points to consider, because the success of any connected packaging experience depends on how well it aligns with the needs and behaviors of the people it's designed for.

As packaging and labels evolve into a true communication medium, this shift also applies to design. QR codes no longer need to be plain black-and-white squares hidden on the back of pack.

'When they're thoughtfully designed with a clear call to action, we can achieve scan rates of over 10 percent, which is significantly higher than typical digital click-through rates,' Stanley says.

That introduces a new kind of design challenge. Packaging needs to be designed to invite interaction while also making it easy for consumers to access and understand the product's story and its recyclability.

Connected packaging is redefining what a label looks and functions like from static to a smart entity that opens a world of engagement, trust, compliance and transparency.

As consumer expectations and regulations evolve, the real opportunity lies in delivering meaningful, consumer-first experiences. Because in the end, the brands that win won't be the ones using the most technology, but the ones using it most meaningfully.

The Label Academy's newest book will be on RFID technology, scheduled to be released ahead of Loupe Americas 2026.

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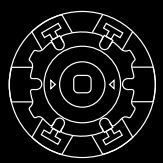

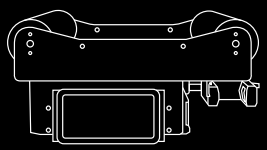

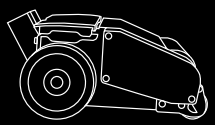

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Gallus completes 'digital-first' strategic transformation

With the launch of the Gallus Five at Labelexpo Europe 2025, Gallus completed its transition to a 'digital first' strategy. Andy Thomas-Emans reports

Gallus Five forms part of the modular System to Compose ecosystem

"At a high level, I no longer want to talk about machines, but about modules, about different building blocks which can be combined"

The launch of the Gallus One (G1) digital press in 2022 marked a major strategic shift toward digital from a company best known for its high-end conventional presses.

The Gallus One was not Gallus' first venture into digital, of course. The LabelFire hybrid press, built on the ECS flexo press platform, was launched in 2015. But the LabelFire was very much subsidiary to Gallus' conventional flexo and offset press programs.

The development of the Gallus One marked the start of the company's move to a true 'digital first' strategy, a change conceptualized and driven by Dario Urbinati, CEO of Gallus Group.

Urbinati became CEO in December 2022 at a defining moment for Gallus, with the conclusion of the proposed Benpac transaction and a renewed focus on strengthening Gallus' role within the Heidelberg Group.

'When I returned, we had to figure out how to move forward,' recalls Urbinati. 'Gallus was quite simply not functioning sufficiently, and not because the people were wrong, but because the system was not working anymore. My biggest concern was that Gallus had somehow become irrelevant as a company.'

The first thing that needed to change was the internal culture. 'Gallus was very hierarchical. Today, it is a flatter structure. I do not feel like an "outside" CEO with a closed-off office. In the early days, I moved my desk to different departments to engage with our employees.'

A key priority for Urbinati was strengthening strategic alignment within the Heidelberg Group, fostering even closer collaboration and a shared momentum. Gallus benefited from extensive support across Heidelberg, particularly in digital technologies, as the group advanced its broader digital transformation strategy.

Urbinati put together a VIP sounding board, including both large and small customers, and asked what was important to them. 'This gave us the baseline for thinking about what technologies we needed to develop.'

Inkjet first

Urbinati saw inkjet as the 'technology of the future', with the greatest potential for development.

'By 2021, inkjet was on the same point along the technology S curve as flexo in terms of productivity, print quality and speed. Now digital has surpassed flexo in terms of total cost of ownership (TCO), makeready and "coolness".'

Urbinati points out that 80 percent of label jobs are under 10,000 linear meters, benefiting the TCO case for inkjet technology.

'Having made the decision for inkjet, I had to reset the company, and this was at the center of the development of our new product range. We needed to become a primarily digital company. The most important thing was to explain to our employees and stakeholders why we are doing this, and to formulate it into a strategy. It has changed the whole culture of the company. People now understand the new direction and why it's necessary, and their part within it. This alone creates its own energy.'

System to Compose

Urbinati sees inkjet as one module in a wider hybrid ecosystem, which the company calls System to Compose.

'Digital does not solve every problem, and not everything can be, or should be, digital. There will always be a place for flexo, where there are certain color gamut requirements or where certain substrates are specified. But for most applications, a hybrid configuration between flexo and inkjet provides the most flexibility and lowest TCO.'

The System to Compose is built around the Gallus Labelmaster platform. The Gallus One was the first digital building block and was designed in compatible widths of 330mm and 430mm (13in and 17in).

The Gallus One is a 7-color UV inkjet engine (CMYK+OVW), imaging at 1,200 DPI native resolution and printing at speeds up to 70m/min (229ft/min). The Gallus One can be combined with any module from the Labelmaster range, either specified from new or retrofittable in the field.

At Labelexpo Europe 2025, Gallus extended the modular System to Compose ecosystem with the Gallus Five (G5), designed for higher-volume workflows and with a new energy-efficient LED-UV curing system.

Once again, this is built on the Labelmaster platform, allowing 'almost limitless' combinations of digital and analog modules.

The Gallus Five is available in 330 and 430mm (13in and 17in) widths and uses the same 1,200 DPI imaging system as the Gallus One, but increases speed to

100m/min (328ft/min) using Heidelberg's Saphira UV05 LED-UV ink set. The 6-color configuration (CMYK+OV) covers around 95 percent of the Pantone Plus V4 color library.

Gallus' new SDC Pro semi-rotary die-cutter was also launched at Labelexpo Europe 2025. It is fully compatible with System to Compose and operates at 100m/min.

The Gallus Five press at Labelexpo Europe was configured with two flexo units before and after the digital print engine, rail-mounted cold foil and lamination units and the SDC Pro die-cutting module.

Modular future

'At a high level, I no longer want to talk about machines, but about modules, about different building blocks which can be combined,' explains Urbinati. 'When we asked customers about their use models, they said "we want to be able to change modules as our business changes".'

Urbinati says most printing machines today are like 'small factories within a factory', with boundaries defined by software, operator training and tooling across different machines. These 'museums of different brands' are complex and expensive to manage, difficult to automate and with little effective redundancy.

'With System to Compose, the printer tells us which printing and converting blocks they require, all with the same operating platform. If you have a digital press, you can add a compatible flexo station and go straight into production with the same operator. This is a different way to think. You then have redundancy within the plant, with the ability to move jobs between presses.

'We have seen customers with existing Labelmaster flexo presses retrofitting digital, and customers who started with a G1 press adding Labelmaster flexo modules. In some cases, customers have used the System to Compose to build off-line processing units for standalone digital presses.'

The longest hybrid press sold by Gallus so far is 34m (111ft) long, built for special applications.

The future

In conclusion, it appears Urbinati's vision of 'turning round the oil tanker' has been a success, with around 60 percent of Gallus' turnover now coming from inkjet-led System to Compose modular press sales, both from existing and new customers. 'We have almost doubled turnover over the last four years,' says Urbinati.

Urbinati says Labelexpo Europe 2025 was by far Gallus' best show to date, despite issues with the air conditioning in Hall 3. The company sold 10 G5 presses directly off the stand.

Looking to the future, Urbinati believes there are several ways the supplier side of the industry can further reduce complexity for the label converter. For example, cutting down on the bewildering range of substrates label converters have to manage and standardizing the exchange of production data.

'There is a lot of scope for the labels industry to agree on standardization measures for the seamless two-way exchange of production data. As an industry, we need to sit down together and discuss standards for data exchange and open networks, so everybody uses those standards. For example, we have Bluetooth, which works as a standardized way to transfer data across multiple brands and tools. Maybe we can create a way forward for the printing industry by applying the same mindset? We also need to discuss how to transfer data in a safe and secure way to fight against cyber attacks.'

Aligned with Heidelberg's Prinect workflow system, Gallus also supports other industry-standard MIS and workflow platforms, ensuring broad compatibility across the market.

'Integration should be straightforward. Our aim is to make Gallus presses easy to adopt within any professional workflow environment.'

Alpha inkjet press

While System to Compose builds on long-established in-line working models in the label-converting industry, most existing digital installations use standalone digital presses with near-line converting.

'We believe in-line has a lot of benefits, but for those converters who want to work with off-line finishing, we developed the Alpha roll-to-roll press, which we launched in Barcelona,' explains Urbinati.

The Gallus Alpha is only available in a 340mm-wide roll-to-roll configuration. It offers a native resolution of 1,200 DPI in five colors (CMYK+W) printing at 65m/min.

Urbinati insists this is not an 'entry-level' press, but rather a gateway into the wider System to Compose ecosystem. 'It is either for a customer with an existing off-line workflow, or someone entering digital printing for the first time.'

Gallus One in hybrid configuration including MatteJet module copy

"Digital does not solve every problem, and not everything can be, or should be, digital. And there will always be a place for flexo"

Inkjet vs offset

One of Gallus' most successful legacy presses was the intermittent offset TCS 250, which found a niche particularly in the short-run, high-quality wine, food and spirits sectors.

UV Inkjet has found it difficult to replace offset because of the inherent glossiness of its inks in a market that values matte design themes.

Urbinati believes that Gallus' MatteJet technology now enables UV inkjet to compete directly in these kinds of offset applications. MatteJet changes the optical appearance of the inkjet dot, reducing direct reflections to give the appearance of a matte finish.

'The purpose of MatteJet is to bring inkjet closer to offset in terms of print quality and perception, and we are very, very close with this module. We are now having these discussions with printers who are committed to offset.'

MatteJet is currently available only as a System to Compose module for the Gallus One.

Scan the QR code to read about the press technology showcased at Labelexpo Europe 2025

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Mark Andy, Talkin' Things host RFID workshop in Poland

Industry experts from Mark Andy and Talkin'Things gathered in Warsaw for a hands-on workshop exploring how smart labels are gaining momentum, as RFID continues to be incorporated more across labeling and packaging. Will Drysdale reports

RFID is shifting from an underused technology into a practical tool, now being deployed at scale across packaging, retail and logistics. As costs fall and regulatory pressure intensifies, the industry is increasingly embedding smart labels into production lines to improve traceability, speed up operations and link physical products to digital data.

A recent RFID workshop by Mark Andy and Talkin' Things in Warsaw demonstrated how RFID can now be integrated directly into label production and move from specialist adoption to mainstream industrial use.

Talkin' Things, based in Warsaw, Poland, is a technology company that develops connected packaging technology using NFC and RFID chips that then enable interaction between physical products and supply chains.

During the workshop, the companies said that the adoption of smart labels was slow between 2019 and 2022, but in 2023, the number of tags rose to 44.8 billion from 28.1 billion. This is predicted to climb to 171.8 billion by 2032 according to the most recent statistics from the graph on the right, with the retail sector accounting for more than half.

One of the constraints for investing in RFID labels has been cost, which, as the materials and technology become cheaper, will soon be less of an issue.

The workshop wasn't just a high-level discussion around RFID as a technology; it was centered around real-world applications. The focus of the workshop was to demonstrate how RFID can be integrated into label production environments, as shown in a live production demo on a Mark Andy Evolution Series E5 press at the Mark Andy demonstration center in Warsaw, followed by a visit to the Talkin Things RFID factory.

RFID inlays were applied in a single, streamlined workflow. This production-ready approach is becoming increasingly important as converters shift their attention from merely understanding RFID to actively exploring its implementation on the press floor.

Speaking at the RFID smart label workshop, Jacek Terski, sales and business development director at Talkin' Things, explains how RFID is moving beyond a specialist technology and becoming a central tool for brands seeking traceability, efficiency and consumer engagement, using the graph to show how adoption has increased and how it is predicted to grow.

'Each corporation wants to connect packaging with digital identity,' he says, adding, 'RFID is currently the most practical technology to achieve that.'

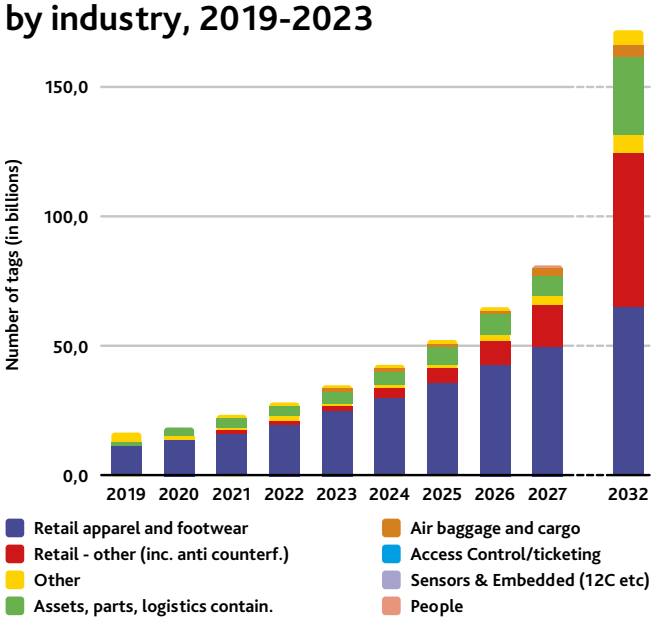
As the day progressed, it became clear that Mark Andy and Talkin' Things believed RFID could become one of the most transformative developments in the labeling and packaging industry, enabling brands to connect physical products to digital information and unlock new levels of supply chain visibility.

How RFID works

Unlike barcodes, RFID tags do not require line-of-sight to scan, allowing multiple items to be identified simultaneously.

This simultaneous identification was demonstrated during Terski's presentation. Bags were handed out upon entry, each fitted with an RFID label, bearing the guest's name. Terski then walked up and down the room, and within seconds, every RFID label had been scanned and identified, proving how much time can be saved on a warehouse stock take, for example.

Passive RAIN RFID tags in units by industry, 2019-2023



The global growth of RFID adoption

> "Each corporation wants to connect packaging with digital identity, and RFID is currently the most practical technology to achieve that"

Terski says: 'On one hand, you have the RFID label, which contains a chip that stores information and an antenna that allows the tag to communicate with a reader.

'The reader collects the data, but that's only the beginning. You need a system to process and use that information, otherwise the technology has no real value.'

Talkin' Things provides software systems for its customers that can be fully integrated into the current management systems, which are then linked to the Talkin' Things internal systems.

When discussing how the label performs in extreme conditions, such as extreme heat or cold, Terski notes that this is not a problem if the right components are used, including the adhesive.

However, he did say that a problem for the apparel sector is that RFID labels can lose effectiveness when close to the human body because the water in the body affects the radio frequency emitted by the microscopic chip. This problem still needs to be solved.

Regulations driving adoption

One reason RFID labels could be gaining traction in

RFID integrated into the converter

"The label generates data, but the real benefit comes from how the data is used"

Europe is due in part to sustainability regulations. The Digital Product Passport (DPP) and the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) are forcing companies to take accountability by introducing measures to ensure transparency throughout the lifecycle of product packaging.

A key part of this will be tracking the materials used, their composition, recyclability and carbon footprint. Terski shares that the materials used to create RFID labels are so small that they do not qualify for tracking under the regulations.

DPP will be rolled out gradually from 2026 across sectors such as textiles, electronics and construction products, and each physical product will require a data carrier, such as a QR code, NFC chip or RFID tag.

As regulators demand more detailed sustainability reports and lifecycle transparency, Terski believes that technologies like RFID could move from optional add-ons to essential components of the supply chain, as tracking material sustainability is not the only benefit.

Retail, the largest adopter

The technology has seen its fastest adoption in retail, particularly in clothing, where brands use RFID to improve inventory accuracy and automate stock management.

Major retailers, such as Walmart and Decathlon, are already using RFID at scale to improve overall supply chain efficiency. Decathlon has integrated the technology into its inventory management and checkouts, which has resulted in an 11 percent increase in sales, holding onto inventory for 23 percent less time and reducing the time a customer spends at the checkout by two minutes on average.

However, Terski believes RFID adoption in retail is only just beginning. Other sectors, including logistics, pharmaceuticals and food, are exploring the technology to enhance traceability and product authentication.

Terski says: 'Retail started the adoption, but other industries are following. It's the same technology used in contactless credit cards. With NFC-enabled RFID, a consumer can interact with a product using their phone.'

In simple terms, RFID is designed for speed and automation in industrial systems, while NFC is a short-range, consumer-focused form of RFID, designed for controlled, one-to-one communication.

While the hardware is essential, Terski emphasizes that the broader ecosystem around RFID, including software, data management and system integration, is what delivers value.

'The label generates data, but the real benefit comes from how that data is used,' he says.

RFID in logistics

UPS is expanding its use of RFID package sensing technology across its US network. A key part of this rollout is the installation of RFID sensors across major hubs, alongside plans to introduce RFID label printing capabilities for customers between 2026 and 2027.

UPS is targeting a future where almost every package in its network is RFID-enabled, supported by more than 100 million USD already invested in the technology. Lower tag costs are a key enabler here, helping move RFID from specialized use cases, such as healthcare and retail, into a vast array of sectors.

RFID allows parcels to be automatically detected as they move through the network, reducing manual scanning processes, with UPS aiming to eliminate nearly 20 million manual scans per day.

This could be a strong indicator that RFID is no longer an emerging technology, but one that is increasingly being embedded into everyday logistics workflows at scale.

Inside the RFID factory

The Talkin' Things workshop also gave attendees insight into the production capabilities of the company that operates an RFID manufacturing facility in Warsaw, Poland, through a tour of the factory. The company designs and manufactures RFID and NFC tags used across sectors, including retail and logistics.

At the site, the company combines product design, prototyping and manufacturing under one roof, allowing engineers to develop and test RFID tags before moving them into production. R&D laboratories simulate the conditions labels would encounter in the real world, enabling engineers to develop the correct antenna designs and ensure tags perform reliably when embedded in various packaging types.

The production floor is equipped with bonding and converting lines that attach microchips to antennas and transform inlays into RFID products such as labels and hang tags.

These lines can produce tens of thousands of smart labels per hour while maintaining high-quality standards.

Quality assurance plays a central role in the process, as the chip must fit within a space of 120 microns, Terski shares. Advanced testing systems verify tag performance throughout both the design and production stages.

The company produces hundreds of millions of tags per year at the facility, highlighting how RFID manufacturing is growing to meet demand from global brands looking to digitize their products and supply chains.

Moving to necessity

As the workshop in Warsaw demonstrated, RFID is no longer considered a niche technology. The technology is improving; chip prices are dropping, and more rules are being implemented. As a result, smart labels are becoming more common in the labeling and packaging industry.

While new skills pose as constraints in handling inlays, adhesives and testing systems, the benefits of adding RFID to labels outweigh the constraints. Brands want to see what's happening in their supply chains, and regulators want more information on materials and sustainability, which could mean RFID labels could soon be a standard part of modern packaging.

Scan this QR code for more information on RFID from Talkin'Things

Printma's digital turning point

Polish label converter installs a Durst Tau 340 RSC E and transforms its production in a matter of months. Piotr Wnuk reports

In the three months following the installation of a Durst Tau 340 RSC E inkjet press at its facility in Lublin, Poland, Printma produced more linear meters of labels than it had in the entire four years of operating its previous machine. Unit costs on comparable jobs fell by 60 percent. What had been a business constrained by substrate limitations, slow finishing speeds and a narrow customer base, within a single production quarter, became something materially different.

Road to independence

Printma was founded in 2019 by Patrycjusz Mamczarz, whose connection to the printing industry goes back to childhood. His father ran a printing company from the late 1980s through a period of profound economic change in Poland, and Mamczarz grew up around the business before eventually moving into it professionally.

'I started doing basic things in the company, then holiday work during my studies, even though my degree had nothing to do with printing,' he says. 'And later it just happened naturally. I moved into working at the company full time.'

His early career was spent running a separate sheet-fed digital and pre-press operation before establishing Printma as his own venture in 2019, initially in sheet-fed digital and later adding a roll-fed press to serve customers moving toward automated label application. For around four years, that configuration sustained the business. Then its limits became a problem.

The substrate ceiling

Dry-toner technology imposes firm material boundaries. For Printma, that meant polyethylene, thermal paper and metalized substrates were all beyond the press' capability, a structural exclusion from a significant portion of the label market.

'I couldn't do thermal labels, polyethylene and metalized materials. Anything with polyethylene, thermal paper or using white color was simply off the table,' explains Mamczarz. 'A lot of jobs were falling through. There were customers who wanted to work with me, but I simply couldn't serve them. The thought started growing: I needed to invest in something that would expand my product portfolio.'

The finishing side was also problematic. A plotter running at 12m/min on larger labels and as little as 1.5m/min on small ones was a hard ceiling on throughput, and the toner press required dedicated specialty substrates at a price premium over standard materials. Across substrates, speed and cost, the existing setup had exhausted its potential.

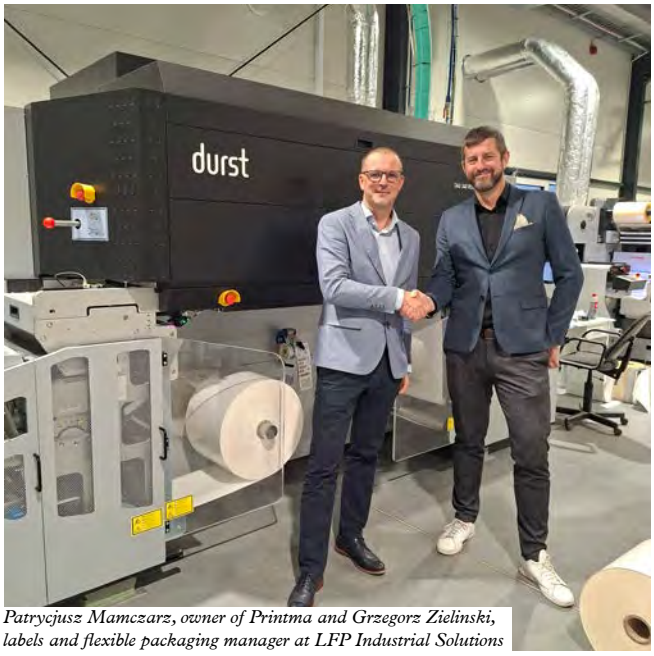
Evaluating the options

Mamczarz approached the investment decision methodically, evaluating hybrid presses, electrophotographic digital technology and inkjet, gathering commercial proposals for each. Hybrid presses were set aside on economic grounds.

'I also looked at hybrid presses, but when I ran the economics, the cost of the machine versus the volumes and customers I had at the start, didn't add up,' he notes. 'A hybrid is for a company running two or three shifts with solid volumes. Not for someone starting out in this market.'

The electrophotographic option offered strong color capability but carried a mandatory monthly service contract. Inkjet offered Mamczarz a clearer running cost model.

'The service contract was a significant monthly commitment on top of financing the machine. The technology is great and gives you a lot of color possibilities, but I decided I didn't want to commit to that monthly burden,' he adds.



Patrycjusz Mamczarz, owner of Printma and Grzegorz Zielinski, labels and flexible packaging manager at LFP Industrial Solutions

"This isn't marketing, it's mathematics. I calculated it on real jobs. 60 percent cheaper. Period"

The case for Durst

Within inkjet, the decision in favor of the Durst Tau 340 RSC E was shaped by a visit to Durst's headquarters in Brixen, northern Italy, and by the conduct of LFP Industrial Solutions, Durst's Polish distributor, throughout the evaluation process.

At Brixen, Mamczarz tested his own substrate samples at the Customer Experience Center. The results matched what he had already seen in printed samples sent earlier, with no difference between the demonstration environment and real-world output. 'Those tests confirmed everything I had seen earlier,' he recalls. 'Theory matched practice perfectly. And one thing struck me positively: Durst doesn't make a lot of marketing noise about itself. The brand is a bit understated. Paradoxically, that works in its favor. Here, quality speaks for itself.'

LFP Industrial Solutions structured the sales process around Printma's specific situation. Grzegorz Zielinski, labels and flexible packaging manager at LFP Industrial Solutions at the time, describes an approach built on detailed pre-sale analysis. A questionnaire covering budget, transition timeframe and the customer's key performance indicators, generating multiple investment scenarios. LFP worked with Mamczarz to ensure the machine configuration matched the reality of the business rather than an idealized version of it. LFP sees clearly that converters are increasingly looking not just for efficiency, but for predictability and control over their production process.

'The entire process, working from the general to the specific, culminates in a tailored configuration that, from the moment of installation, is already performing the tasks it was designed for,'

he says. Mamczarz experienced that process directly. 'I received complete information: fast, concrete, without storytelling,' he comments. 'I felt that if I bought something, I would have a partner, not a salesperson.'

Preparing for the installation

Before placing the order, Mamczarz built a new production hall. The existing premises could not accommodate the Tau 340 RSC E's footprint, and he resolved that before the machine arrived. Installation took place in June 2024. It was carried out by LFP's service team, which handled setup, configuration and operator training. Operators adapted to the press interface quickly, practical features such as web rewinding to minimize substrate waste were in use from the first week, and there was no gap between what had been demonstrated in Brixen and what the press delivered on the production floor.

A parallel investment in a semi-rotary finishing machine, made alongside the press order, addressed the throughput ceiling. Finishing speeds increased dramatically, removing the last constraint on production capacity.

The results

The production figures reflect several factors converging simultaneously: the Tau 340 RSC E handles substrates the toner technology could not; throughput is substantially higher; standard inkjet substrates replaced the toner-specific specialty materials; and the removal of a fixed monthly service overhead reduced the cost base immediately. Mamczarz puts it plainly.

'This isn't marketing, it's mathematics,' he comments. 'I calculated it on real jobs. 60 percent cheaper. Period. And the volume: after the Durst installation in the second half of last year, I produced more than I had in previous four years.'

The commercial impact has been equally significant. Printma's few-day delivery lead time, compared with eight to 15 days at larger conventional print shops, has become the company's primary sales argument. A customer who had previously been unable to source metalized labels because of the toner press limitation returned once the Tau 340 RSC E was installed.

'He brought his label and said: if you can match the quality of this sample, I'm in,' Mamczarz recalls. 'Shorter delivery time, compared with his previous supplier, was another argument for working with us.'

Most new business at Printma now arrives through referral rather than marketing.

After-sales and monitoring

The after-sales relationship with LFP has been a meaningful part of the operational experience, with remote monitoring through the Durst Analytics platform, meaning potential machine issues are identified and acted on before they reach the operator.

'LFP service sees a message on the machine before I even realize something might be wrong,' Mamczarz explains. 'I've been an entrepreneur for years, and I know how painful downtime can be. And suddenly I have no stress. That's truly a new experience.'

Zielinski describes Durst Analytics as operating across three areas. 'The first is reactive service: sensor density throughout the machine allows LFP engineers to remotely diagnose and resolve most operational issues, at a success rate he puts at over 80 percent. The second is proactive maintenance, in which consumable components such as UV lamps are monitored against usage intervals, enabling planned replacements coordinated with the customer's production schedule and supporting a higher OEE rate. The third is operational intelligence.

'We accumulate knowledge about each customer's production and the challenges they face day to day,' he notes. 'If the data shows the machine recording increased idle time on certain substrates, that may indicate an opportunity to discuss production planning with the operator and suggest some optimization.'

All remote access sessions take place with the customer's full knowledge and explicit consent.

Printma offers a few-days delivery lead time, compared with eight to 15 days at larger conventional print shops

"It's not just about printing faster and cheaper. It's about the quality of my life as an entrepreneur. Durst opened a new chapter for us"

What comes next

The Tau 340 RSC E currently runs one eight-hour shift a day, and Mamczarz is candid about the pressure that is building.

'I'm still only running one shift. I'll probably need to think about additional staff, because jobs that used to take two or three days are now taking longer simply because there are more of them,' he explains.

'I also have plans to add some kind of digital enhancement capability, digital varnish perhaps, or a 3D effect. We currently have one flexo station and cold foiling on the finishing side, so some basic spot coating is possible. But a next step toward more decorative labels is something I'm thinking about, probably not this year, maybe next.'

A second press is the medium-term ambition. The production hall was designed with expansion in mind, and additional floor space is already reserved.

'I prefer to grow steadily so I don't end up with financial problems or a machine I can't keep running,' Mamczarz says.

What the past 12 months have demonstrated is that a five-person team working one shift has multiplied its output many times over, reduced its unit costs and opened customer segments it could not previously reach, all within its first production quarter on the new press.

'It's not just about printing faster and cheaper,' Mamczarz concludes. 'It's about the quality of my life as an entrepreneur. Durst opened a new chapter for us.'

Scan the QR code to learn more about Printma

The state of private equity

In the US, multiple large PE-backed companies in the label industry have gone through changes that suggest a complex market. Selah Zighelboim reports

Over the past year, several large private-equity-backed companies operating in the label space have undergone notable changes.

In August of 2025, Brook + Whittle secured 130 million USD as part of a refinancing transaction.

In November of 2025, plastic materials supplier Klöckner Pentaplast filed for prepackaged Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in the US Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Texas and entered into a restructuring support agreement, reducing its debt by about 1.51 billion USD.

In January of this year, MCC entered into a prepackaged Chapter 11 process and restructuring support agreement that eliminated 3.8 billion USD in debt.

In February, Resource Label Group appointed several new C-suite leaders and separated from much of its former senior leadership.

Analysts say these developments are not isolated incidents but part of a broader trend. They note that PE firms may have overpaid for acquisitions, while the label market growth has slowed.

PE in labels

The label industry is an attractive market for PE companies. It offers consistent, low-risk returns, and it's highly fragmented. Additionally, many label converters are family-owned companies with second- or third-generation owners who may be looking to exit and who may lack a next generation interested in taking over the business.

Generally, when a PE company enters the label space, it buys an initial company, which it then uses as a platform to acquire further businesses, eventually building a network of label converters.

'Within each private equity firm, there are different cultures, different approaches they take, in terms of how much management, support they give, or how much they leave the acquired company alone, and everywhere in between,' says Corey Reardon, president and CEO of Alexander Watson Associates, a market research firm. 'So that varies. A lot of the private equity firms today are good stewards of a business, with the financial objectives of creating a well-positioned, strong business.'

The last 25 years have seen PE companies entering the label space, acquiring both converters and suppliers. The result has been that companies with PE ownership models dominate the pool of the largest label converters.

'In this slightly expanding pond, the big fish are getting huge, and the small and mid-sized fish are kind of the same,' says Thomas Blaige, founder of Blaige Industry Analytics. The analytics firm tracks and analyzes merger and acquisition activity across resins, colorants, concentrates, adhesives, sealants, inks and coatings and capital equipment in packaging and converting.

> "The key is that these acquirers need to maintain discipline on buying right and not overpay"

Blaige says that, in the label industry, more than 80 percent of the top 10 percent largest companies have now either sold or merged, while fewer than 20 percent of the small and mid-size companies have done so.

At the same time, consolidation among suppliers has reduced the number of supplier options for converters.

Blaige says that everyone in the industry, especially smaller companies, needs to pay attention to consolidation, as it is easier than ever to be outcompeted by larger businesses.

'They need to be looking at their competitive landscape, who's buying who. It's like musical chairs,' Blaige says. 'They need to pay a lot more attention to their external environment in their strategy and follow a novel, creative strategy every year, not just repeat what was done in the past.'

Overvaluation

After 25 years of consolidation in the industry, some large-cap PE-backed label converters are restructuring their debt or making leadership changes.

Blaige says that acquisition prices are rising as converter companies are repeatedly bought and sold by PE firms, leading to overpaying. Blaige emphasizes that this phenomenon primarily affects large-cap companies because they command the highest multiples and take on substantial debt when making acquisitions.

'It's like New York real estate,' he says. 'Somebody buys a property. It's a family, and you get the real estate. It's a humble little thing. Then someone says, "Oh my gosh, it's a diamond", so they pay double for it and take out a big bank loan. Then someone says, "Well, it's a double diamond". And five years later, they take out an even bigger bank loan. Then someone says, "That's a triple diamond". Now, it's a quadruple diamond. People are paying four times as much as they would have 20 years ago. They're borrowing all this money, and it's not working out, and they're squeezing all the juice out of the lemon each time they buy it.'

Each time a company is acquired, it is evaluated at a higher price,


Thomas Blaige


Jonathan White


Corey Reardon

"A little bit of the shine has come off, but it will always be an active market"

but that doesn't mean that it's worth more, Blaige explains.

This phenomenon is not unique to labels; Blaige has seen it in other industries as well. However, plastic packaging is particularly vulnerable to this overvaluation due to the industry's high degree of fragmentation and its age. In contrast, metal and glass packaging are older industries, so they're less fragmented with less potential for consolidation.

'Each private equity group holds for about five years, and then they flip it. It's like real estate,' Blaige says. 'Every time it gets flipped, they're trying to get a little more, so that by the time you get to the fourth flipper, the price is super high and it's very risky.'

Complex landscape

Jonathan White, managing director of Mezzo Investment Banking, attributes the financial challenges to a complex array of factors, including occasional overpaying and/or poor management and integration of new acquisitions. White has been involved in investment banking in the packaging space since the mid-1990s.

'Acquisition models had worked very well for a long time within the label space,' White says. 'The key is that these acquirers need to maintain discipline on buying right and not overpay. You've got to manage right, do the hard work of integration to enhance growth and enhance margin, and you've got to be cognizant of where you are within the cycle. If you miss any one of those three things, you may have a problem.'

Some acquirers have paid amounts for label companies that make it difficult to justify the returns that a PE company would need, White notes. Others may not be making the necessary improvements to increase value.

Meanwhile, growth in the label industry has slowed recently, creating a further challenge. White attributes this slowed growth, which is primarily evident in PS and cut-and-stack labels, to the overall stress currently affecting consumer products in developed markets.

White sees PE companies holding onto businesses for longer periods of time before selling than they used to. This is a challenge because PE companies realize most of their returns when they sell businesses, so holding on to them for longer could indicate underlying issues.

'Sometimes you have a company that's not performing as well as you would like, so it's not the right time to take it to market,' White says. 'In other cases, it could be that they're struggling to find the right buyer. Some of the larger roll-up entities started as smaller entities and then serially traded from one private equity group to the next. It starts with a smaller-market private equity group, then trades up to a middle-market group, and finally to a larger-market group. Eventually, you end up with the largest private equity groups. At that point, to whom are you going to sell?'

Reardon emphasizes the market's role.

'These companies have been bought with debt, and that debt is manageable at certain market or business conditions, but if that is softer or goes down, then the debt the company has is much harder to service,' Reardon says.

The US market

Though there has been some overvaluation in the European market, the US market is particularly vulnerable to overvaluation in mergers and acquisitions activity, given the level of PE in the US.

'There's more private equity here, so usually it's more competitive,' Blaige says. 'It's more prevalent in the US because the premiums are higher, so they're stretching the companies. They're stretching a little further on these prices. There's more risk.'

PE interest

Reardon, Blaige and White agree that PE companies are still interested in the label industry.

'The basic tenets that drew interest to the space are still there,' White says. 'It's still a fragmented, competitive base. It's relatively low in capital intensity compared to other forms of packaging. It's one of the smallest percentages of the overall shelf price of a good, so because of that, you tend to make a little bit better margin, because it's not as noticeable, it's not worth the investment of your customers to spend a lot of time fighting with you over a half cent. Also, it's not worth switching; customers can be very sticky, so it's just not worth the risk of switching suppliers on that. The space is generally resistant to import competition. It's mainly a local, regional market. None of that has changed.'

According to White, consolidation in the industry peaked around 2021 and 2022. Those years saw 40 and 49 add-ons, respectively, while 2021 saw seven new PE companies enter the label space, and 2022 saw three. Over the last two years, those numbers have dropped to 28 add-ons and four new platforms in 2024, and 23 add-ons and two new platforms in 2025.

'A little bit of the shine has come off, but it will always be an active market, in my view,' White says.

AWA analyzes the label market for PE companies looking to enter the space, and Reardon has noticed fewer such companies in recent years.

'You're not seeing as many new private equity firms buying into the sector; rather, existing platforms grow through acquisition,' Reardon says.

Blaige expects PE to continue showing the same level of interest in the label industry, but that the valuation of converter companies will decline.

'A few people get burned,' Blaige says. 'The activity is the same. They just pay less.'

Scan the QR code to read more news about the North American label market

Clemson University prepares students for print careers

Amid an industry struggling to find enough qualified workers, Clemson University's graphic communications program is developing the future workforce. Selah Zighelboim reports

Step inside the Advanced Lab at Clemson University's Godfrey Hall, and you will see machinery donated from suppliers in the print industry. This includes a Nilpeter FA-17 and a Comco Captain press from 1990 that allow students to get a feel for printing labels. Outside of the Advanced Lab, Clemson University has two additional label presses: a Sohn 4400 small stack press and an Omet VaryFlex 530 press, the latter of which is in the university's Sonoco Institute of Packaging Design and Graphics.

'We're not teaching them to be perfect every time,' says Michelle Fox, a senior lecturer in Clemson University's graphic communications department. 'We're teaching them to learn how to make mistakes, think critically and figure out how to solve problems.'

Clemson University's graphic communications program prepares students for careers in the print industry, including label manufacturing. The university, located in Clemson, South Carolina, is a state school with about 24,000 undergraduate students and 5,000 graduate students. It offers one of the country's leading graphic communications programs, with about 400 students, who learn the steps of print production, from Adobe design tools to platemaking and print technologies, including flexography, offset and screen printing.

Alongside its graphic communications major, Clemson also offers a packaging science program that focuses on the structural and materials science aspects of packaging.

The graphic communications program is housed at Clemson University's Godfrey Hall, while the packaging science program is located at the Sonoco Institute.

Students go into a variety of careers, including sales, branding, marketing and flexography. Fox notes an increasing trend of students pursuing roles in flexo, sales and R&D.

Education today

Clemson's graphic communications program starts with the fundamentals, such as the principles of design and what plates are. Throughout their time in the program, students learn how to conduct market research, create promotional and functional labels, and provide and receive peer feedback. Alongside these technical skills, students also learn employability, or 'soft' skills.

L-R: Caroline Yaman and Michelle Fox in front of the Nilpeter FA-17 at Clemson University

"I really loved how wide open this major was, the number of options it offered"

Fox says that education today focuses more on employability skills, such as having difficult conversations, owning deadlines and taking charge of the learning process, than it did in the past.

'So many of our students are coming in strong, motivated and highly intelligent,' Fox says. 'It's those small little tweaks that I believe make us more dynamic, like thinking ahead of a deadline, speaking with more confidence and handling a project with more confidence.'

Fox has taught print for 20 years, 10 years at the high-school level and 10 years at the higher-education level.

She has seen the student body become more diverse, with more women and more ethnic diversity in the program.

Schools are still recovering from the changes brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, Fox says. It moved many students online, and teaching hands-on content to them in a virtual setting was challenging. Though students are no longer learning virtually, the pandemic has had a lasting impact.

'Confidence isn't where it used to be in students,' Fox says of the impact of Covid-19. 'They're so smart that if they give themselves the chance to be a little bit more confident, they could do so much more. One of the things I hope I instill in them, is the confidence to be independent and do really great things, or to try and fail at them. Making mistakes is really scary to them, and I think the fear of mistakes is one of the biggest changes I've seen. But I've also seen over the past year or two that with some gentle nudging, they're really growing and having a lot more confidence.'

Student perspective

Caroline Yaman is going into her senior year as a graphic communications major at Clemson University. She chose to pursue this degree because she felt it would open a variety of opportunities for her.

'I really loved how wide open this major was, the number of options it offered. Because I really don't like being tied down to one thing,' Yaman says. 'I loved how there were about 10 different tracks, which had both creative and technical aspects to it.'

Yaman is particularly interested in flexography. 'It's really interesting with all the complexities with it,' she says.

'I really enjoy platemaking and the pre-flooding process and color management. I'm a big problem solver; I really like working through things. With flexo, there are just so many things that can go wrong, and you have to figure them out. There are so many elements in it that you have to figure out to get the perfect print.'

The graphic communications program requires students to undertake two internships. Yaman's first was a sales internship at a commercial printing company; she intends for her second to be in flexo.

During her time as a student, Yaman has enjoyed running the Nilpeter and Comco presses and making plates. She has had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for the inks and substrates lab. Yaman has been able to attend industry events, such as the Flexo Pre-Press Platemakers Association conference and the Flexographic Technical Association's Women of Flexo conference, with support from both Clemson University and the events themselves.

For a future employer, Yaman wants someone who is, she says, 'not only supportive of me and trusts me, but also has high expectations and pushes me. Learning is really important to me. So, an employer who encourages me and gives me opportunities to continue learning and not just stay stagnant.'

Challenges

Print programs in education are tackling one of the most significant issues facing the industry: the shortage of skilled labor. But these programs at both the high school and university levels are shrinking in number, as they close or get absorbed, leaving fewer funnels through which students enter the industry.

Fox believes that a longstanding myth that print is dying has fueled closures of these programs.

'That's really concerning to me,' Fox says. 'It's not that there is a lack of need in the industry, because there very much is a need that's being unmet.'

Fox wants to get the industry involved in keeping these programs alive. She also hopes university students can help keep them running by going to high schools themselves to teach these programs.

Fox herself has gone into elementary schools to introduce young students to basic print production concepts. She even once taught a group of girl scouts to run the Comco press.

'If we can keep those high school programs alive and well, and feed them into the community college and college programs, that's going to help keep the print programs stay healthy and ensure our workforce stays healthy,' Fox says.

Additionally, Fox has seen companies in the industry pull back on offering internships in recent years due to smaller staff sizes.

'They don't necessarily have the bandwidth to take on interns,' Fox says. 'For our program that requires two internships, it makes it even more difficult to place students with meaningful experiences.'

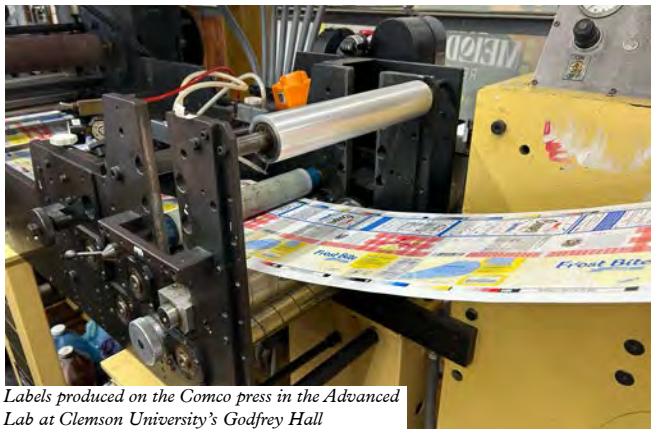
Amanda Bridges, an assistant professor in Clemson's graphic communications department, has been teaching in higher education since 2005.

She says that, like all fields in education, resources can be a challenge, though Clemson University's program fares well in that regard due to support from the print industry and the university. Some of the substrates, plates and machinery that students make use of are donated by industry suppliers. Finding qualified faculty who are interested in teaching can also be difficult.

'Any graphic communications educator would tell you that money, resources and just being able to get the things you need to teach in this field can sometimes be an issue,' Bridges says.

AI in the classroom

AI has been a complex topic in education across various fields and levels. Fox doesn't want students to rely on AI to do their thinking for them. Rather, she wants them to command AI and use it as an accessory.



Labels produced on the Comco press in the Advanced Lab at Clemson University's Godfrey Hall

"Any graphic communications educator would tell you that money, resources and just being able to get the things you need to teach can sometimes be an issue"

'I know our students are resilient. I know they're leaders. I know that they have tons of skillsets, and they're going to find how to implement AI in the workplace to make things more efficient, to make things part of a process, but not take over a process,' Fox says.

AI could create opportunities in the classroom. For example, Fox would value having students provide and receive more peer feedback than they currently do, but they are limited on time. Feedback from an AI agent could potentially fill that space.

'It's not driving their decisions,' Fox says. 'It's giving them a litmus test opportunity to get a baseline before they take it to their peers.'

In Bridges' design classes, students learn to use generative AI options in Adobe software products. Students also can use AI to generate some of the content in their designs.

'We definitely want to be on the front end,' Bridges says. 'We don't want to be left behind in this. The industry is going to drive how we use it. It could just be a tool, or it could be something that really impacts our industry in some different ways. So, it'll be interesting to see.'

Yaman says many of her professors support the use of AI in the classroom. In one of her classes, the students learned how to code and create personal assistants using AI.

'You are going to go into the workplace, and you are going to need to know how to use it,' Yaman says. 'I've been getting opportunities to learn it a lot more and how to apply it responsibly in a design way and also in a practical production way.'

Overall, Fox is excited for the future of the industry for her students and for how quickly it is changing.

'The fact that there's a press that runs off of an iPad, and now we can add digital stations at the end – that's something that I never thought I'd see in my lifetime,' Fox concludes.

Scan the QR code to learn more about The Sonoco Institute of Packaging Design and Graphics

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LABELS FLEXIBLE PACKAGING FOLDING CARTONS

Five generations in print at DWS Printing & Packaging

New York-based DWS Printing & Packaging has been in business for 161 years. With a legacy in offset and flexo printing, it looks toward the future. Chelsea McDougall reports

It could be said that the modern trajectory of DWS Printing & Packaging was changed by a horseradish sauce company.

Of course, for a 161-year-old printing business, there were many twists and turns before a fateful condiment company changed its direction. And there certainly were peaks and valleys after, but for this story, it all begins with horseradish.

> "It's important for us to be as efficient as we can be so we can compete against anyone"

It was 2008, and brothers Andy and Tom Staib were running DWS, a successful cut and stack label business on New York's Long Island, catering to food and beverage brands.

One of its top customers, the aforementioned horseradish company, changed its packaging format from glue-applied cut-and-stack labels to a pressure-sensitive format. DWS was an offset label printer with no flexo assets at the time.

So, the Staib brothers had a choice. Turn to flexographic printing or lose one of its biggest customers. Together with the deep expertise of its COO, John Gulino, DWS bought its first flexo press, a Nilpeter FB, which is still considered the workhorse of the facility, printing some of the company's longest flexo runs.

'We noticed a lot of beverage brands were also going from cut-and-stack labels to pressure-sensitive labels or even shrink sleeve,' Gulino says. 'We saw that evolution and said if it's going to happen to one account, it could happen to any one of them. We need to be able to change with our customers.'

'You have to keep in mind that we knew nothing about flexo when we started looking at it,' Gulino recalls, comically. 'I was literally looking at the plate, saying: "why is it rubber?" We had no experience, except that we were losing a customer from our cut-and-stack side that we wanted to keep, and it was enough work to spend the money in the press to learn about it.'

Eighteen years after that first flexo purchase, pressure-sensitive labels make up half of the company's jobs.

A defining moment

Another turning point for the company came in 2020, when Tom Staib passed away all of a sudden, a loss that profoundly altered the organization.

Anyone who knew Tom knew he was just as passionate about the family business as he was about his own family. He was equally as enthusiastic about music as an avowed 'Deadhead' and drummer.

Tom's presence is woven into the fabric of the facility. From the Grateful Dead stained glass hanging in the front window, to the rock concert photos that line the walls of the hallway to the office he once shared with his brother, Andy. Tom's son, TJ, was then three years with the company when his father passed, assumed the role of president.

Tom was a well-respected and engaging figure in the label industry. He frequently attended TLMI events and other industry conferences, often called upon to speak on panels and happy to swap stories of successes and setbacks with fellow label converters. Tom was not afraid to take a leap of faith on new equipment if it meant moving the company in the right direction.

'The move into flexo opened up a whole new area and marketplace to compete in,' says Andy Staib, owner and CEO.

DWS was an early adopter of in-house platemaking and ink mixing, as well as expanded color gamut printing. In 2017, it was the first converter to purchase a new MPS EF Symjet hybrid press with Domino, which helped the company better serve the craft beer and beverage markets.

Rounding out its PS label assets is an Omet XFlex X-6 in-line flexo press that helped the company expand into shrink sleeves and further into roll-fed labels; and an HP digital press for its short-run shrink sleeves and PSL work. DWS runs a Heidlberg XL 106 press for its cut and stack labels.

'Flexo changed the course and the direction of our business,' Gulino says. 'The Heidelberg gave us the capacity, the quality and the speed that we needed to keep competing in the market we were in. The Nilpeter gave us the speed, quality and capacity to get into completely different markets.

'If we didn't get into flexo, we wouldn't be doing shrink sleeves or printing on films. I think without our first flexo equipment, we wouldn't get the hybrid press, or the Omet press, or the HP. You probably wouldn't have seen 15 plus people that we've employed to work on this equipment.'

History

DWS stands for David Weil's Sons, a

TJ and Andy Staib at DWS Printing & Packaging

DWS Printing & Packaging were early pioneers of expanded gamut printing

"We need to automate as much as possible, if not more, to remain competitive. We automate wherever we can"

company that started as a lithographic printer in 1865 in New York City. Charles Staib, the great-great-grandfather to Andy, Tom and sister, Kathy, joined the company in 1888 and worked with the Weil family for more than 50 years, later becoming principal.

Tom joined DWS Printing in 1987 at a time when the company's growth was fueled by large beverage customers like Coca-Cola, Yoohoo and Snapple. Andy joined later in 1991, the pair assuming the roles of president and vice president in 1996. Kathy joined in 2013 after spending more than 25 years outside the company in print advertising sales. Kathy has since retired.

'Back when I joined the company, it was really Tom and me. Tom inherited my uncle's shoes, which was the administrative, due diligence and procurement side. You know, all the stuff I didn't really care for and wasn't very good at,' Andy says, laughing. 'I inherited my dad's role, which was sales, which I really enjoy. Tom and I really had that balance.'

Today, TJ sits at the desk his father once occupied, while Andy and Andy's daughter, Hope Staib, are across the large room. Tom, Andy, Kathy, TJ and Hope formed the fourth and fifth generations of this proud and enduring family business.

TJ oversees operations, planning and R&D. A graduate of Villanova (like his father), TJ went to work for Heidelberg in Germany after graduation, before signing on at DWS in 2017.

Hope is the newest Staib to join the family business, taking over many of Kathy's accounts and leading new sales and marketing initiatives.

'I think I'm bringing a young, fresh energy to it,' Hope says.

And like any good Gen Zer, she takes a digital-first approach to finding new business, often using Instagram, LinkedIn or even Slack channels to scout for new leads.

'I think I am trying to embrace the digital age, but I also know how important face-to-face meetings are,' she says.

Markets

DWS continues to serve food and beverage brands, including craft beer, while expanding into pet care and cannabis markets. Much of its growth is driven by the digital side of the business.

'The cannabis industry has really come in strong for us and leads to a lot of growth on our digital machines,' Andy says. 'They have all the different strains, different percentages of THC and CBD, and it's always changing, so these customers can't order a lot, because if the strain changes, then those labels are no good. They need quick-to-market, short-run, high-quality. It's perfect for digital.

'But for us, our bread and butter are still our longer runs,' Gulino adds.

Looking forward

While DWS's history provides a strong foundation, the company is firmly focused on where it's headed. They strive to be responsive, agile and ever evolving.

Longevity like that at DWS is increasingly rare in the North American label landscape, giving the company its competitive edge. Customers choose DWS for its adaptability and ability to move quickly to solve their problems, which they say is 'just as valuable as the label itself.'

That mentality also reshaped production operations, with a stronger focus on efficiency at every stage.

Gulino says: 'We compete against the big guys, and we have a lot of the same technology, but on a much smaller scale, and under one roof. So, it's important for us to be as efficient as we can be so we can compete with anyone.

'Being out on almost the furthest part of the East Coast, in a very expensive area, can make it very difficult. So, we need to automate as much as possible, if not more, to remain competitive. We automate wherever we can.'

That automation at DWS starts the minute a job comes through the door.

Company leaders quickly recognized during the Covid-19 pandemic that the bottlenecks had shifted from the production floor to the front end of the business. A surge in orders during that time meant that moving jobs through estimating, pre-press and the art department began to slow down overall production.

'As we were increasing efficiencies in the pressroom, we were able to push out more work. It gave the sales team more tools to go out and sell more, but those files and all have to be entered into our systems, and estimates need to go out, or the artwork needs to be automated, and that's constantly evolving,' Gulino explains.

'Right now, our biggest focus is automating on the front end: how are we going to get the work into the art department fast? Because you still have to write up a job ticket, you still have to estimate it and enter it into our MIS system. How can you automate all that? For us, it's very tricky because we're dealing with a very wide range of clients, but we've come a long way.'

Honoring the past

While the company's legacy speaks to resilience and continuity, the Staibs are open-minded about the future.

'We get solicited all the time, and you know we never say never. But this has been in our family for 161 plus years, there's a lot of weight to that.'

That enduring legacy feels especially poignant in light of Tom's passing.

In a tribute video produced by Domino, Tom's own words echo what generations built before him: 'I think our forefathers would be proud'.

LABELS & LABELING

Scan the QR code to learn more about DWS Printing & Packaging

New York Label & Box Works unites labels, carton production

Third-generation family-owned company brings together labels and in-line folding carton production, offering customers a faster time-to-market. Chelsea McDougall reports

"I looked at our customers who were ordering labels and cartons, and I said, 'well what if we could do both?' It's kind of a no-brainer"

The team at New York Label & Box Works setting up an Edale press

New York Label & Box Works president Steven Haedrich

Industry ambassador

Steven Haedrich, president of New York Label & Box Works, has been selected as a Loupe Americas 2026 industry ambassador. As a Loupe ambassador, Haedrich will share his knowledge and insights on moving into in-line folding carton production. He joins ambassadors representing other segments and key topics. Katie Harrington of Winpack will serve as future leader ambassador, David Totten of Nosco will serve as flexible packaging ambassador, Tyler Matusevich of Brook + Whittle will be sustainability ambassador and Corey Reardon of AWA will serve as label market intelligence ambassador.

New York Label & Box Works is redefining what it means to be a modern packaging converter. The 148-year-old company, based in New York's Long Island, has been steadily expanding into folding carton, bringing both label and carton capabilities under one roof.

The company is unique in offering both labels and folding cartons. New York Label & Box Works can streamline its production, match labels and cartons, reduce complexity and offer customers a faster time-to-market at a lower cost.

Equipment

New York Label & Box Works offers both sheet-fed and in-line carton production and pressure-sensitive labels. The labels are produced on twin 10in, 10-color legacy Mark Andy presses, while in-line carton production is done on a pair of Edale FL5 presses, first installed in 2021. New York Label & Box Works was the first converter in the US to invest in the 20in, 8-color Edale in-line folding carton press.

With the Edale press, the converter can print on both sides of 700-micron board material and offer its customers other value-added features, such as coating, laminating, cast-and-cure, varnishes, foil stamping and embossing, and in-line die-cutting, all in a single pass. But what brands really love, the company says, is its ability to match color between label and folding carton jobs.

New York Label & Box Works president Steven Haedrich explains that this process allows its customers to achieve brand and color consistency across formats, a quicker time-to-market and reduced costs. Offering those same valued-adds and embellishments on a sheet-fed production line would mean higher operational costs and longer lead times.

'A big factor for our investment [in Edale FL5 machines] was the ability to embellish in-line, including front and back printing, film lamination, cold foil and the use of specialty UV ink,' Haedrich said at the time of the installation. 'There are so many advantages to running everything in-line rather than on separate pieces of equipment as in a typical sheet-fed factory, which takes more time, needs more people and ultimately costs more.

'Our investment allows us to present to our clients new embellishment possibilities, a lower cost of manufacturing due to greater operational efficiency and speed of response. Traditionally, it can take between eight and 16 weeks for carton production. We aim to reduce this time by at least 50 percent.'

Deming philosophy

The agile operation at New York Label & Box Works not only reflects where the industry is headed, but it's a philosophy rooted in the management theories outlined by Dr W Edwards Deming.

Deming is an American statistician and management thinker whose principles for operational performance were popularized after WWII and became widely recognized after a revealing documentary was produced in the 1980s. Deming transformed manufacturing by focusing on quality, efficiency and continuous improvement. Haedrich not only took the Deming management principles to heart but also wove them throughout every facet of the business. Haedrich also serves as a board member in the Deming Institute, a group that honors the teachings of Dr Deming.

At its core, the Deming philosophy focuses on building a system that consistently produces quality outcomes and continuously refines processes, products and services. Businesses should reduce variation, as stability and predictability are essential for quality, Deming says.

The Deming philosophy appears well-timed for today's label converter, many of whom are reassessing their position in the packaging value change and diversifying their product portfolios.

Reducing press variability means better print quality; process control means less waste; supplier relationships mean more stable performance; and continuous improvement means easier expansion into

new areas. For New York Label & Box Works, that meant a move into in-line folding cartons.

'One of the key tenets of the Deming philosophy is that you've got to innovate and delight your customers,' Haedrich explains. 'If your customer is buying a label and a carton, you're helping them by producing both. I looked at our customers who were ordering labels and cartons from other suppliers, and I said, "What if we could do both?" It's kind of a no-brainer.'

Haedrich became interested in Deming's philosophy shortly after taking over operations at New York Label & Box Works in 1996, when the company's largest customer demanded improved quality from all its vendors. He then began reading everything he could about quality. He soon discovered that in every book he read, Deming's name appeared. Haedrich credits the Deming philosophy for guiding the company through economic ups and downs, and shaping decisions that didn't always look obvious at first glance.

Haedrich admits that he's not particularly risk-averse. Especially if he's confident it's the right business move. This no-fear attitude led him to invest in a second Edale carton press before the first had reached full capacity. In his view, it wasn't a gamble, but a necessity.

'A client does not want to walk into my shop and see one press,' Haedrich says. 'Their immediate reaction is what if this press goes down? How will I get my cartons? So, I'm of the opinion you had to have two machines.

'My people just looked at me and said I was crazy. But if you look at every single innovator in the last 200 years, they've all been called crazy. I'm not innovating. I'm just using innovative technology, and to my customers, their perception is we're ahead of the curve. And that's everything.'

Customers

New York Label & Box Works caters to the vitamin, cosmetic and food industries. In addition to color consistency and a 'one-stop-shop' mentality, what customers really love is the speed-to-market it provides.

'Our biggest competitive advantage is that we can turn around jobs faster than any billion-dollar printer,' Haedrich says. 'And that is the magic bean. Because the world changes so quickly, people can't accurately predict their inventory levels. When they're out of labels or cartons, they're out. So, we've got to get to the order quickly. It's very difficult to predict people's buying patterns right now.'

History

New York Label & Box Works was founded in 1878 in New York City, providing labels and folding cartons to pharmacies across the city. 'At the time, pharmacies were like Starbucks; there was one on every corner. It was a very good business back then,' Haedrich says.

In 1930, Frederick Haedrich Sr, Steven's grandfather, purchased the company. Steven is the third generation in his family to run the company. Today, the company has 53 employees.

As New York Label & Box Works has evolved from labels to cartons, it has maintained a focus on high-quality production by leveraging advanced technology and maintaining strong vendor relationships.

'We don't beat up vendors,' Haedrich says. 'We want them to make money. We want them to stay in business. We want them to continue to be our partner. We want them to continue to help us improve our quality continuously.'

It's exactly what New York Label & Box Works looks for in its own customers as well.

'It's always messy, it's always challenging, there's always a learning curve. But Dr Deming said, "You must have quality and must have innovation, and when you can do those two things, well, you'll be on the path to success".'

The Loupe and Labels & Labeling team with Steven Haedrich from New York Label & Box Works

"You must have quality and must have innovation, and when you can do those two things, well, you'll be on the path to success"

Examples of jobs run at New York Label & Box Works

Edale on the future of folding carton

Technology alone will not define success in 2026. Workflow intelligence and production resilience will.

Converters are no longer chasing a single perfect technology. Instead, they are building mixed fleets of digital, offset and flexo presses, and making practical decisions about which process fits each job best. It is less about tradition and more about what works.

Flexo's role is shifting from a high-volume method to an efficient production platform, delivering automated, repeatable output, particularly where in-line finishing and process consolidation reduce complexity.

Automation will be judged less by how impressive it looks and more by what it removes: labor pressure, variability and work in progress. Stability, predictability and ease of operation will matter more than novelty.

At the same time, brand owners are pushing for consistency across labels and packaging, further blurring the line between label and carton production.

The converters who outperform in 2026 will be those who simplify and use data to orchestrate production for efficiency, quality and resilience.

Scan the QR code to learn more about New York Label & Box Works

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FTA Mexico launches training program in Spanish

FTA Mexico's president Martin Maldonado believes the training and certification program can help professionalize the country's flexo industry. James Quirk reports

FTA Mexico has announced the availability of First (Flexographic Image Reproduction Specifications and Tolerances) 7.0 in Spanish, in what the association's president Martin Maldonado believes could be a transformative step in the development of the flexo industry in Mexico and the wider Latin American region.

First 7.0, developed by the FTA in the US, is the world's leading technical standard for flexographic printing, establishing precise guidelines for achieving quality, consistency and control in image reproduction.

This edition is the first official version in Spanish, with FTA Mexico responsible for its promotion, distribution and marketing throughout Latin America (except Brazil) and in Spain.

The unveiling of First 7.0 in Spanish took place in April 2026 at the Juan José Arreola State Public Library of Jalisco in Guadalajara, bringing together specialized media and industry leaders interested in strengthening the quality and competitiveness of flexographic printing.

Speakers at the press conference included José Trinidad Padilla López, director of the library, Rubén Masayi González Uyeda, representative of the industrial sector and FTA Mexico president Martin Maldonado.

'The arrival of First 7.0 in Spanish represents a fundamental step in raising the technical level of our industry and aligning ourselves with international standards that are now essential for global competition,' said Maldonado during the event. 'This effort not only impacts companies but also strengthens talent development and collaboration with academic institutions, creating a more robust ecosystem for the sector's growth.'

Martin Maldonado, president of FTA Mexico

First 7.0 in Spanish could be a transformative step for the local industry, says Martin Maldonado

"With First 7.0 in Spanish, we are ready to begin the standardization and professionalization of the flexo industry in Mexico"

Key step

The initiative, finalized following extensive talks between FTA Mexico and its counterparts in the US, marks the first time this expert technical guidance is officially available in Spanish.

For Maldonado, it represents a key step in the development of the Mexican flexo industry.

'With First 7.0 in Spanish, we are ready to begin the standardization and professionalization of this industry,' he says. 'Despite rapid growth in the Mexican packaging industry in recent years, thanks to nearshoring and a booming e-commerce sector, Mexico is not at the same level as the US and Brazil when it comes to the level of professionalization and standardization of processes.'

This rapid growth has brought pressure on the local industry, believes Maldonado. The nearshoring trend has seen international brands set up factories in Mexico to serve the US market with shorter supply chains. 'This puts pressure on local converters who want to serve these brands to meet certain quality and operational standards in order to guarantee the quality of their products,' he says.

'Since FTA Mexico was established in 2023, we've had several global companies based in Mexico contacting us saying they are interested in gaining certifications,' Maldonado continues. 'Unlike in the US, certifications for businesses and individuals are not mandatory in Mexico. With nearshoring, new accounts come to converters and say, "I love how you print, but can you guarantee that you have your certifications? Can you guarantee that you can print to the same standards as the company that prints for me in the US or Canada or Europe?" Many local converters don't have the capacity to demonstrate this. The best way is through certification of the company's processes or personnel.

'Just as we have pending issues on the agenda, which Mexico needs to address, such as environmental sustainability, the standardization and professionalization of the industry is one of those areas that can no longer be delayed.'

In recognition of this need for professionalization, FTA Mexico, headquartered in Guadalajara, was founded in 2023. The initiative was driven by a group of industry suppliers, led by DuPont, that pitched the FTA in the US to establish a branch of the Flexographic Technical Association in Mexico. Among its supplier members are Comexi, Esko, Flint Group, Gallus, Hybrid Software and Mark Andy.

'Due to Mexico's proximity to the US, the FTA was always a reference point for the local industry,' says Maldonado. 'Converters here have always been keen to be a part of it, but there is often a language barrier, which makes it hard to take advantage of the conferences, studies and research. And there is the problem of distance.'

'Progress since FTA Mexico's foundation has been positive,' says Maldonado. 'We have been promoting ourselves and establishing a presence in the country. We held forums at two prestigious universities, the Autonomous University of Guadalajara and the University of Celaya.

'The goal is to promote the association,

invite business owners and converters to see the importance of professionalizing the industry, and also, crucially, to try to attract young talent into the sector. This is of the utmost importance because our industry, like others, is experiencing a severe labor crisis. There is a generational shift.

'The only way to address this is to go to universities and show students what the flexo industry is, its history and what we do, so they can see the opportunities that exist for professional development.

'So, we kill two birds with one stone: we promote the industry and connect with students, and we build bridges between the universities and the private sector. We demonstrate FTA Mexico's ability to create these connections.'

The unveiling of First 7.0 in Spanish took place in April at the Juan José Arreola State Public Library of Jalisco in Guadalajara

"We've had lots of interest in the project in the short time since the announcement"

Interest

In the press conference marking the launch of First 7.0 in Spanish, FTA Mexico announced that commercial availability would begin in May.

'We've had lots of interest in the project in the short time since the announcement,' says Maldonado. 'As well as converters in Mexico, we've been contacted by companies in Guatemala, Ecuador and El Salvador, as well as by associations in Chile, Colombia and Peru.

'This is a great step forward for us because it projects us internationally as an association and pushes us to work and collaborate with other institutions throughout Latin America, and even Europe. We become the central hub. The agreement is to market, promote and distribute First 7.0 certification in Spanish from Mexico to Patagonia.'

The exception to FTA Mexico's remit in Latin America is Brazil, where the local flexo association, ABFlexo, partners with the FTA to bring the latter's technical standards and research to the Brazilian market.

There are three levels of First certifications for individuals. Level 1, Fundamentals, is for beginners and non-production personnel, learning the core concepts of flexography and First. Level 2, Implementation, is aimed at individuals applying the First methodology in their day-to-day workflow. Level 3, Expert, is for experienced professionals, who lead process control, optimization and communication across departments.

'We are ready to begin the certifications in the third quarter of this year,' says Maldonado. 'The schedule will be released to begin offering online certifications in Spanish, which FTA Mexico will offer through the FTA platform in the US. They have all the technical infrastructure and the digital platform for the Spanish certifications to take place.'

The next stage is in-person training and certification, which will take place at the Stampa Academy in Queretaro, launched two years ago. 'It's a certified flexo training center that operates within the facilities of CETis 16 [a technical vocational public high school] and is equipped with technology from DuPont, Tesa and Esko, among others, as well as a full 8-color flexo press,' says Maldonado. 'It includes every part of the flexo printing process, but only for narrow web at the moment. So it's still lacking, but it's part of something that's just starting.

'Our objective, as the FTA, is to encourage companies, entrepreneurs and the government to invest so an academy like this can grow and not only have narrow-web equipment, but also mid- and wide-web too. And not only in Queretaro; we want to have staff there, but also, let's say, start-up academies in Monterrey, Guadalajara and Mexico City. It will be a phased process.'

With 25 years of experience in the Mexican flexo industry, Maldonado is a passionate advocate not only for the industry's professionalization but also for a greater focus on environmental sustainability.

'Sustainability is another area where we need to improve,' he says. 'Other parts of the world have regulations and legislation around how to operate more sustainably. In Mexico, we are behind. Even countries such as Chile and Colombia, smaller markets than ours, are implementing standards and adopting sustainability initiatives. But in Mexico, there is no government legislation that obliges companies to operate according to certain sustainability standards. FTA Mexico has to work with companies, with organizations and with the government to encourage progress in this area.

'It's time for Mexican suppliers and converters to organize and start setting our own operating standards. We're still a step behind; we must acknowledge this. But more and more companies in Mexico are beginning to address this issue.'

About First

FIRST, which as an acronym stands for Flexographic Image Reproduction Specifications and Tolerances, is the flexographic industry's leading set of best practices, specifications and process control guidelines. Developed and continually refined by industry experts, First provides a standardized approach that ensures consistent, predictable and high-quality print. By aligning people, processes and technology across the entire workflow, First helps organizations achieve efficiency, accuracy and repeatable results from job to job and press to press.

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Trigon Digipack redefines packaging

The shift toward digital versatility is no longer a futuristic concept; it is a present-day reality, redefining the packaging industry. Standing tall among the front-runners is Trigon Digipack. Adyasha Sinha reports

The global packaging sector is currently navigating a tectonic shift, one where the traditional boundaries separating labels, flexible packaging and folding cartons are dissolving. This convergence was the defining thought behind the rebranding of Labelexpo to Loupe (as an acronym, LOUPE stands for Labels and Outer Packaging Embellishment), signaling a new era of multi-format conversion. Amidst this backdrop of change, one name emerged with distinction: Mumbai-based Trigon Digipack.

Trigon's recent streak of accolades has sparked a renewed curiosity about the company's trajectory. What began as a modest pre-press and mock-up house has transformed into a digital titan, making it a natural focus for this exploration into the future of integrated packaging.

The architect

Every great transformation starts with an architect who understands the foundation. Anil Namugade, the founder and owner of Trigon Digipack, did not inherit a printing empire. He built one from the technical ground up. Beginning his career in the trenches of the early digital era as a scanner operator, Namugade mastered the intricate nuances of color reproduction and substrate behavior.

His journey took him through the ranks of industry leaders like Kodak, where he developed a deep understanding of pre-press workflows. It was during these years that he identified a glaring inefficiency in the market.

'While massive FMCG brands had their logistics solved, they struggled with the "mock-up phase"; the agonizing wait between a digital design and a physical sample,' shares Namugade.

In 2008, alongside co-founder Milind Deshpande, Namugade launched Trigon in Mumbai as a specialized boutique for packaging proofing and product mock-ups.

This 'service-first' mindset became the company's DNA, while Namugade's background as a technician gave him an edge. He wasn't just selling a print; he was selling the ability for a brand manager to hold a center-seal pouch or a rigid box in their hands within days, rather than weeks.

His philosophy is simple: 'If you can perfect the prototype, you can dominate the production'. This philosophy is rooted in Namugade's commitment to the customer, and in a team-oriented leadership style, based on mutual respect rather than a rigid corporate hierarchy.

Expansion

Today, Trigon operates from nearly 100,000 sqft of space across Mumbai, Vasai, Delhi, Bangalore and Dubai. The 2024 expansion at the Vasai (near Mumbai) facility was particularly significant, with the addition of a 3D flat-bottom pouching machine and a full line for rigid boxes and composite canisters.

This expansion has allowed the company to master the full spectrum of packaging: from center-seal pouches to high-barrier laminates for the snack and beverage industries; premium labels with complex embellishments and cold-foiling; folding cartons that enable brands to test new markets. The company also specializes in rigid boxes for luxury cosmetics, perfume and beauty products.

HP Indigo 25K machine at Trigon Digipack

"Suddenly, a startup could order 500 high-quality pouches with the same quality as a million-unit run"

The great pivot

Trigon's evolution from 2008 to today is a timeline of bold technological bets that anticipated the 'all-in-one' mindset. 'Starting our business with a Kodak Approval NX, we have come a long way. While the specifics of the pioneering Kodak printer might seem modest compared to our current technology, it ignited a passion for innovation and exceptional packaging that continues to fuel our success today,' comments Namugade.

For its first six years, Trigon focused on the 'Trupac' mock-up technology, concentrating on creating high-fidelity, 'true-to-vision' prototypes that allowed brands to test and visualize their packaging before full production.

'At a time when brands had to wait weeks for a physical sample of a pouch or a box, Trigon promised turnaround times of just three to four days,' Namugade adds. 'By using actual packaging substrates, be it metalized film or textured board, we allowed FMCG giants and startups alike to hold the future of their brand in their hands before committing to massive analog runs.' This era solidified Namugade's reputation as the go-to partner for the creative community, bridging the gap between imagination and manufacturing.

With Trigon's services grabbing more attention, Namugade decided to transition from mock-up to production. In 2018, he invested in an HP Indigo 6900 label press, replacing the HP Indigo WS6000 digital press installed at Trigon in June 2017. Recognizing that the short-run demand was exploding, Trigon quickly became a leader in digital labels. However, Namugade didn't stop at self-adhesive labels. He pushed the technology into shrink sleeves and in-mold labels (IMLs), categories that were traditionally the domain of large-scale rotogravure printers.

While many converters hesitated during the global pandemic, Trigon accelerated. In 2021, the company installed Asia's first HP Indigo 25K press designed specifically for digital flexible

L&L and Loupe team with Anil Namugade and Parija Namugade at Trigon's Mumbai facility

Trigon enhances finishing capabilities with Orthotec

Trigon Digipack has installed an Orthotec FDC-3030 twin-head flatbed hot-stamping and die-cutting machine. The investment aligns with the company's strategy to meet the growing demand for premium, high-impact packaging from brand owners across segments.

Before the installation, Trigon Digipack faced challenges with registration accuracy, hot-stamping consistency and productivity, especially on complex jobs. Multi-step workflows and manual interventions were impacting turnaround times and overall efficiency. The Orthotec machine addressed these challenges, and since then, the impact on production has been tangible. Setup times have decreased, repeatability has improved, and material wastage has decreased, contributing to higher productivity.

Namugade shares: 'The twin-head configuration of the Orthotec FDC-3030 was a key differentiator. The machine offers greater flexibility and efficiency. Its solid build quality, precision engineering and ability to handle demanding substrates made it a clear choice for us. It delivers industrial-grade performance while remaining operator-friendly, which is critical in a production environment like ours.'

The Orthotec FDC-3030 is currently used for a wide range of premium applications, including luxury labels, cartons, specialty print jobs and packaging components requiring intricate die-cuts and high-quality foil stamping. The machine is particularly effective for short to medium runs, where detailing, finish and consistency are critical.

"The winners in this new era are those, who can provide a cohesive experience across every surface of a product"

packaging. This was a direct assault on the conventional idea that pouches required minimum orders of massive size. 'Suddenly, a startup could order 500 high-quality pouches with the same quality as a million-unit run,' recalls Namugade.

In 2024, Trigon repeated this feat by becoming the first in the region to install the HP Indigo 200K. This press, which offers 30 percent higher speed and 45 percent higher throughput, enabled the company to scale its labels to flexible packaging, transitioning to an industrial level by reaching speeds of 56 m/min.

'We installed the new machine in our newly built 50,000 sqft facility in Vasai, near Mumbai, to increase capacity for flexible laminates. We also enhanced our converting capability by installing a 3D flat-bottom pouching machine to cater to a premium market segment and be the only company to offer such pouches with digital printing,' shares Namugade.

At the new facility, the company also installed a full line of equipment to produce rigid boxes and canisters to meet the demand of its existing customers. All this was done to become a one-stop packaging provider and be at the buyer's doorstep when needed.

New frontier

Perhaps the most powerful weapon in Trigon's arsenal is variable data printing (VDP). Unlike conventional printing, where every pack in a run is identical, digital printing allows for absolute personalization. Walking through his 'hall of fame', where he proudly displays all his awards and recognitions, and printed samples and mock-ups, Namugade shares: 'The difference between digital and conventional printing isn't just about speed; it's about business agility.

'While conventional printing requires physical plates for every design – a process that can take two to three weeks and incur significant setup costs – digital printing requires only a file. You just need to give me the data, and I'm good to go.'

This agility has allowed Trigon to serve over 100 global FMCG brands while simultaneously supporting over 500 startups.

Trigon's work on a Mother's Day campaign for Tata Tea serves as a landmark example. The order consisted of 3,000 packs, each featuring a unique image of a mother and daughter accompanied by a personalized message.

'Every pack looks different from each other,' Namugade explains, highlighting how this technology transforms a mass-produced product into a personalized connection between the brand and the consumer.

This capability extends into security printing as well. By using invisible inks, microtext, and Guilloché designs, Trigon helps brands combat rampant counterfeiting in the Indian market, ensuring that every product is as secure as it is beautiful.

Sustainability metrics

In today's world, a company's success is also measured by how it impacts the environment. Trigon has aligned its digital expansion with the growing demand for eco-conscious packaging. By moving away from physical plates and cylinders, the company has eliminated the chemical waste typically associated with plate production.

Furthermore, digital printing's 'print-to-need' model directly addresses the industry's massive overstocking problem. For the hundreds of startups Trigon supports, this means zero obsolete inventory, a critical factor in reducing the supply chain's carbon footprint. These startup facilities are increasingly experimenting with recycled, recyclable and compostable substrates, ensuring that the 'outer packaging' is as sustainable as it is beautiful.

The future through the 'Loupe'

As the industry prepares for the 2026 edition of Loupe India, the Trigon Digipack story serves as a benchmark for what a modern converter can achieve. It is no longer enough to be just a 'label guy' or a 'pouch guy.' Or as Namugade says: 'The winners in this new era are those, who can provide a cohesive experience across every surface of a product.'

Trigon's story is a roadmap for transforming the Indian packaging industry. By viewing every challenge through a wide-angle lens, the company has proved that in the world of packaging, the only real limit is the one you place on your own vision.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Trigon Digipack

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Scancode begins digital journey with Domino

The shift toward short-run label production and increasing SKU complexity is accelerating digital adoption in India. Akanksha Meena reports

Ahmedabad, India-based Scancode Auto ID Technology is accelerating its transformation from a label supplier to a full-service packaging provider, owing to its latest investment in Domino N610i digital printing technology.

The move reflects not just a technology upgrade, but a broader strategic shift driven by evolving customer demands, SKU proliferation and the rise of startup brands across India.

Mitesh Patel, managing director of Scancode Auto ID Technology, began his journey in 2016. He started with Panth Print Pack, supplying plain and pre-printed self-adhesive and barcode labels to manufacturing industries. However, close interaction with customers revealed recurring challenges around material quality, service reliability and flexibility.

'I realized that to solve these issues, we needed control over the entire process,' Patel explains.

This insight led to the establishment of Scancode Auto ID Technology in 2021, with the acquisition of a small print company and the opening of its first manufacturing facility. The move enabled the company to produce both plain and pre-printed labels in-house, improving consistency, quality control and delivery timelines.

Scaling up

As branding and packaging requirements became more sophisticated in the region, Scancode expanded its capabilities in 2023 by installing an advanced 450mm, 8-color LED flexo press from Multitec, one of the first-of-its-kind in Gujarat.

This investment allowed the company to strengthen its presence across key sectors, including FMCG, food and beverage, pharmaceuticals, home and personal care and agrochemicals.

Today, labels account for 60 percent of the business, complemented by a growing flexible packaging division.

Recognizing the growing need for branding and packaging, Scancode launched Imprenta, its premium printing and packaging brand, as an end-to-end service. Imprenta offers services from design and printing to packaging for both domestic and international customers.

Through Imprenta, the company now delivers a wide portfolio including labels, shrink sleeves, flexible packaging pouches, folding cartons, laminated rolls and seamless tubes.

L-R: Nikhil Patel, sales and production manager and Mitesh Patel, managing director at Scancode Auto ID Technology

> "Customers who start with digital for short runs can scale up to flexo as their volumes grow"

Digital investment

The next turning point came as the Indian packaging and label market began to evolve rapidly. A surge in startups and direct-to-consumer brands brought with it a demand for multiple SKUs, shorter product cycles and smaller order quantities.

To address this shift, Scancode invested in the Domino N610i digital label press in 2025, its first digital press and a key addition to its hybrid production strategy. This is also the third Domino press installed in Gujarat.

'We recognized the growing demand for digitally printed labels,' Patel says. 'With Domino, we are able to deliver faster, more flexible and high-quality labels.'

The press enables Scancode to efficiently produce short runs, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand labels, which were previously uneconomical on flexo due to high setup times and plate costs.

New business opportunities

The investment is already opening new avenues for Scancode, unlocking sales opportunities and better serving customers seeking speed and flexibility.

The digital press also complements Scancode's existing flexo capabilities, allowing the company to support customers throughout their growth journey, from short-run product launches to high-volume production.

The press enables Scancode to efficiently produce orders as small as 500 to 3,000 labels. These volumes were previously difficult to justify using flexo technology. This capability is particularly relevant for fast-growing segments such as cosmetics and personal care, where brands often operate with batch sizes under 5,000 units and require frequent design iterations.

The company is currently producing approximately 25,000sqm a month on the Domino press, which operates at 600 DPI.

Importantly, Patel notes that digital is not a replacement for flexo, but a complementary technology. 'Customers who start with digital for short runs can scale up to flexo as their volumes grow,' he says.

The Domino press, with its UV inkjet capability and hybrid configuration, can integrate with pre- and post-processing modules for coating applications, enabling greater versatility on press.

Looking ahead

With a 6,000sqft facility, a growing team of around 25 employees and a portfolio of labels and flexible packaging, Scancode is now seeking further expansion.

The company is exploring new markets in the US and Canada, while also evaluating future investments in higher-resolution digital presses and offset printing for folding cartons.

'At Scancode, our philosophy is very simple: understand customer needs, invest in the right technology and grow alongside our customers,' Patel concludes. 'Most importantly, we never say no to any customer.'

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Skanem Africa installs first Durst digital press in East Africa

The investment enables Skanem to accelerate speed, flexibility and hybrid label production. Akanksha Meena reports

Skanem Africa has strengthened its production capabilities by installing a new Durst Tau RSCi 420 digital inkjet press at its Nairobi facility. The investment marks the company's first move into digital printing and the first Durst installation in East Africa.

The decision reflects a broader transformation in the regional labels market, where demand for faster turnaround times, increased SKU variation and shorter production runs is reshaping converters' strategies, such as Skanem's. The shift is encouraging converters to adopt a hybrid production setup in which digital complements traditional flexo.

The company houses four Bobst conventional flexo presses. The integration of Durst's digital inkjet press enables Skanem to respond more effectively to changing brand-owner requirements while complementing its existing flexo strengths.

According to Sachen Gudka, managing director of Skanem Africa: 'This investment marks an important step in how we support the market. Brand owners today need faster product launches, more flexibility across SKUs and lower inventory risk.

'Our investment in the Durst digital inkjet platform allows us to respond to these needs in a much stronger way. It positions Skanem Nairobi as a more capable hybrid partner for customers across East Africa.'

By combining digital and flexo technologies, Skanem can now manage a broader mix of job lengths, from short to long runs, with improved efficiency.

'The investment is about helping our customers move faster and innovate more confidently, knowing the new product development cycle will be shortened, and also bring products to market with greater speed and agility,' he adds.

Skanem Africa evaluated several options before selecting its digital partner. Beyond technical performance, the strength of the partnership and regional commitment were key differentiators.

'We chose Durst based on support, responsiveness and interest. We are Durst's first customer in East Africa, and they were very keen to use us as a flagship customer in the region,' Gudka notes.

He also emphasizes confidence in inkjet as the future direction of digital printing. 'I believe digital inkjet is the way forward and will come out stronger. Durst is a good quality machine and gives us the right placement.'

To complement the press, Skanem has also installed A B Graphic Digicon Series 3 off-line finishing equipment, enabling a complete and streamlined production workflow.

Changing print landscape

The installation represents a key milestone not only for Skanem Africa but also for the wider East African label market, positioning the company as an early adopter of industrial inkjet technology in the region.

'I think for us, it's really about the fact that labels should be an enabler, not a bottleneck. And it is a strategic capability investment,' Gudka says.

'The hybrid capability of conventional flexo and digital gives our customers more choice and a better fit-for-purpose solution. So ultimately, it's about speed, flexibility and lower commercial risk.'

Skanem Africa has installed East Africa's first Durst digital press

"We are Durst's first customer in East Africa and they were very keen to use us as a flagship customer in the region"

Middle East disruptions

The recent disruptions in the Middle East have impacted the global supply chain. For Skanem Africa, these disruptions have impacted the sourcing of BOPP films. Fortunately, the company was able to secure shipments ahead of escalation, allowing it to build buffer stock. However, replenishing that stock has since become difficult.

'Getting supplies out of the Middle East now is difficult. To mitigate this, Skanem Africa has begun diversifying its sourcing strategy. Suppliers with production capabilities in Egypt are offering some support, while we are looking at alternative supply routes from India and China to maintain continuity. However, this will result in longer lead times because of shipping routes and higher costs. We have to balance that, which eventually stretches our working capital,' Gudka says.

Material costs are rising, putting pressure on working capital. Gudka notes that disrupted shipping networks could take at least six months to stabilize.

'This is impacting consumers because converters will pass on price increases to brand owners, who will then pass on price increases to consumers. Consumers are already constrained and dealing with higher inflation arising from fuel costs and food costs, which will impact their disposable income and demand in East Africa,' he explains.

Interestingly, rather than slowing down, brand owners are engaging in panic buying to secure materials at current prices before new, more expensive stock arrives. However, Skanem Africa is prioritizing fair allocations to all customers.

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Sky Labels helps Adora shine in Kenyan market

In the competitive Kenyan beauty market, Adora has carved out a name for itself with eye-catching packaging and strong collaboration with local converter Sky Labels. Akanksha Meena reports

When Christine Kamanda and her team launched Adora in 2020, the world was in the middle of a global pandemic. The Nairobi, Kenya-based brand began its journey with a hand wash and a sanitizer in response to urgent demand. Since then, Adora has become one of Kenya's fast-growing personal care brands, now available in over 80 percent of towns across the country.

From the beginning, Adora focused on market awareness, product quality and a strong visual identity. Sky Labels, a Nairobi-based converter, helped shape the brand's standout shelf appeal.

Identifying market gap

Before Adora, co-founder Kamanda and her partner had experience distributing imported beauty products across East Africa.

She says: 'We noticed that imported brands often faced supply issues, high taxes and clearance delays, which made them expensive and inconsistent in the Kenyan market.'

At the same time, the market is seeing intense competition with new brands cropping up every week. Kamanda explains: 'Many new brands enter the market with low prices but can't sustain operations. While there are a few restrictions to entering the Kenyan market, many startups launch without proper certifications. Some begin small, even making products at home. But once they hit legal and regulatory hurdles, many can't keep up.'

The team moved quickly to create Adora, starting with accessible hygiene products and later expanding into hair care and skincare. Today, the brand offers 20 to 30 SKUs and serves the mass market.

Building a strong brand identity

A product's visual identity plays a major role in a startup's success. The team turned to Malik Hamisi, the company's graphic designer, who was instrumental in shaping Adora's early branding.

Once the designs were ready, the team partnered with Sky Labels to produce the final packaging.

'They did an excellent job. When our products hit the shelves, customers were drawn to them right away. That strong first impression helped us establish trust and recognition from the very beginning,' Kamanda says.

Adora uses bright colors and embellishments on its labels for an eye-catching look

> "When our products hit the shelves, customers were drawn to them right away"

Palak Dave, operations director at Sky Labels, explains that developing Adora's label required close attention to material, finish and functionality. Since Adora's products include oils, shampoos and pastes meant for use in humid environments such as bathrooms, the label had to be both waterproof and oil-resistant.

The team chose polypropylene (PP) materials, specifically silver-metalized PP and white PP. 'The PP silver added a glossy, metallic effect while resisting oils,' Dave explains. 'We printed the colors directly onto the silver and added foil stamping in gold and silver to the logos for extra shine.'

That shine on the labels was a strategic decision to help them stand out on the supermarket shelf.

Susan Wanjiku, sales representative for Adora at Sky Labels, worked closely with Hamisi to fine-tune the colors. To achieve brand consistency across dozens of SKUs, they combined CMYK process printing for images with Pantone spot colors for logos and key elements.

Challenges

The journey wasn't without its hurdles. Early tests revealed that some label adhesives reacted with Adora's product formulations, especially oils and moisture-heavy items. 'We had some cases where labels would peel or fade after a couple of weeks,' Dave recalls.

To resolve this, Sky Labels ran multi-week trials using different adhesives, working closely with its material suppliers and the Adora team. The issue was traced to incompatible adhesives.

Dave explains: 'We learned that some adhesives, like acrylic or hot melt, don't work well with certain product formulations. We worked closely with our materials supplier, ran multiple two- to three-week tests and carefully observed how the labels held up. Eventually, with the right adhesive and material combination, we got it right. Now the labels hold up well, even in bathrooms or high-moisture settings.'

Dave explains that a label's longevity largely depends on the type of bottle the brand uses.

'If the bottle has a smooth surface, the label adheres well and stays intact. But if it's grooved or textured, the label tends to peel off over time, regardless of the material,' she says.

Another challenge was ensuring color accuracy from screen to print. What you see on a monitor isn't always what comes off the flexo press.

Wanjiku explains: 'Sometimes we had to rework the plates or remix the Pantone inks to get it just right. Malik was always closely involved in approvals, which helped a lot.'

As for color mixing, Wanjiku notes that while some steps are manual, they also use color-matching systems to ensure accuracy in the final output.

For early-stage proofing, Sky Labels used digital printing for mock-ups and special shapes and sizes before committing to full production runs.

Typical production volumes for Adora labels run from 5,000 to 10,000 meters, for approximately 50,000 pieces per SKU.

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Scan the QR code to learn more about Adora

Ultra Labels bets big on digital

Australian converter has spent 15 years proving that conviction, patience and capital beat price-cutting every time. Piotr Wnuk reports.

It was sometime around 2008. Scott Springett had just sold Clear Image, the label business he had built over 12 years, to Australia's second-largest wine label printer, CCL Industries. He had capital in the bank, decades of experience and no particular plan. Then Shane Kelly, a former colleague to whom Springett had given his first job in labels back in 1991, got in touch. He had a business idea and a co-founder lined up. The three men met, and Kelly and Ross Fursey laid out their vision as Springett listened. Then he told them the plan was wrong.

'They wanted to become another flexo printer,' Springett recalls. 'And I said: the world doesn't need another flexo printer. There are enough of those around.' He had been an early investor in digital printing at Clear Image, installing one of the first HP Indigo presses in Australia in 2005. He had watched the technology's potential closely enough to see where it was heading. 'I said we really needed to approach this differently, coming at it from the digital angle. It was a classic story of talent meeting capital. They had the ideas and the operational know-how. I had the experience and the capital from the sale of the previous business.'

That conversation led to the founding of Ultra Labels in October 2009, with a single HP Indigo WS 6000 in a facility in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane. Sixteen years later, the company operates with three production sites across Queensland and South Australia, employs more than 80 people, prints over five million labels a week and has just taken delivery of the first HP Indigo V12 digital press in Asia Pacific. The V12 purchase, confirmed at Labelexpo Europe 2025 in Barcelona, was described by distributor Currie Group as the largest single digital sale in its history.

The thread connecting the first meeting to that Barcelona announcement is consistent throughout: Springett and his team identify where the market is heading, commit capital before the rest of the industry catches up and then have the discipline to wait.

"'The world doesn't need another flexo printer. We had to approach this differently, coming at it from the digital angle"

Ultra Labels with Currie Group and HP Indigo teams at the Labelexpo Europe 2025, announcing the sale of the first V12 in Asia Pacific

Learning to sell digital

In 2009, digital label printing was a genuinely difficult sell in Australia. The market was flexo territory: long runs, plate costs buried in the unit price, customers ordering six months of stock at a time. Ultra Labels' pitch required customers to think differently about the economics of labels, and not all of them were ready to.

'It took about 12 months,' says Springett. 'But we had a story to tell. We could show a customer what their label looked like before they actually ordered it. We could print a single sample. No plate costs. It was faster, it was offset quality and you didn't have to order 50,000 labels. You could order 5,000. Digital is a value product, and it was never about matching flexo prices. I told my team: this is a premium product, we have to find the customers who want it and they are out there.'

The early believers came from industries defined by high SKU counts, frequent design changes and a tolerance for paying more per label in exchange for flexibility and speed. Healthcare labels for pharmaceutical and nutraceutical products needed rapid updates and small volumes. Ultra Labels did not discount its way to growth. It waited for the right customers, added a second press for redundancy to protect its lead times and assumed market leadership in Brisbane within a few years.

A Sydney facility followed in 2013. A third press, the HP Indigo 6800, was installed in Brisbane in 2018. In 2021, Ultra Labels opened a production facility in Tanunda, South Australia's Barossa Valley, adding an HP Indigo 6K in 2022 to serve the local wine and spirits industry. By that point, the digital case had long been made. The question was where to go next.

The move into flexible packaging

The answer came, as so many of Ultra Labels' strategic moves have, from its existing customers. Brands that were already buying labels from the company were also buying pouches and flexible bags, typically from suppliers in China. When they asked Ultra Labels to take on that work too, the problem remained the same: offshore manufacturers required minimum orders of 100,000 units. Ultra Labels' customers wanted 5,000.

'They would tell us they couldn't buy from China because China wanted 150,000 units, not 5,000 or 10,000,' Springett explains. 'So, we kicked that idea around for years, and eventually our balance sheet was healthy enough to say yes. In 2019, we took the plunge and bought the first HP Indigo 20000.'

The printing side was familiar enough. Digital was digital and printing on unsupported film, rather than paper or facestock, was manageable. The converting side was a different discipline entirely. 'Once you put the ink on the substrate, that's where the similarities start and end,' Springett says. 'Flexible packaging is a very complex business.' Ultra Labels built out the capability regardless, constructing a flexible packaging operation in Brisbane that now runs two HP Indigo 20000 presses, two laminators, two slitting machines, a JetFX embellishment unit and three pouch lines. A Galaxy Packtech pouch-making machine, ordered after a visit to UK converter Bakers Labels, was due to arrive imminently at the time of this interview. It was expected to push monthly pouch capacity to two million units.

The investment in flexible packaging now stands at close to 15M AUD (10.7M USD). Springett is matter-of-fact about the logic. 'It doesn't take long to work out the size of the flexible packaging market and the opportunities compared to labels,' he says.

Mark Daws, director of labels and packaging ANZ at Currie

The HP Indigo V12 further expanded an army of HP machines

"'Digital is a value product. It was never about matching flexo prices, we had to find the customers who wanted what we were offering"

Group, which supplies HP Indigo technology across Australia and New Zealand, agrees. 'Flexible packaging is the fastest growing digital segment,' notes Daws. 'The ability to switch between flexible packaging and label applications, and print pressure-sensitive labels, flexible packaging and shrink sleeves on the same day is a game changer for our customers.'

The contrarian buys flexo

There is a certain irony in the fact that the man who told his co-founders the world didn't need another flexo printer has now bought one. A Nilpeter FA-26, installed at Ultra Labels' Brisbane facility, is the first 26-inch-wide press sold into the Australian market, marking Nilpeter's debut in the country. Springett and production manager Johnny Marusic flew to Nilpeter's factory in Denmark to seal the deal, on the same European trip that took them to Nordvalls in Sweden to see the V12.

The purchase is not a retreat from the digital conviction. It is an extension of the same logic that has driven every investment Ultra Labels has made: going up the volume curve to meet customers where they are.

'We had some longer running jobs on our HP Indigo 20000 presses and those machines are great up to a certain run length, but they don't go any faster,' Springett explains. 'We had large customers wanting to give us more volume. The FA-26 runs at around 10 times the speed of the digital press. So, it just made sense: if we're going up the volume curve on labels with the V12, we should do it on flexibles too.'

The FA-26 features UV LED curing technology, which reduces energy consumption and eliminates mercury lamps from the workflow.

It supports Ultra Labels' ISO 14001 environmental management certification and its commitments under Australia's 2025 National Packaging Targets. Marusic's existing flexographic experience helped manage the operational transition.

Seeing the V12 in Sweden

The HP Indigo V12 had been on Springett's radar for years before he finally ordered it. He had watched the press's development from a distance, grown skeptical when updates went quiet for a period and then received a call from Mark Daws at Currie Group inviting him to visit Nordvalls in Malmö to see the machine running at full production speed.

'I told Mark: don't take me on a wild goose chase. If it can do what they say it can do, I'm ordering it on the spot, because anything that enables us to produce more material faster, improve productivity and reduce unit labor costs is exactly what we need,' Springett says. 'We went up to Malmö. The HP team was there; we had a good question-and-answer session with the Nordvalls CEO. We talked to the operators on the press and saw it run. And when you have 20 years of experience in digital, and you see this thing, you just think: wow.'

The V12, powered by HP's LEPx technology, prints at up to 120m/min compared to roughly 1,000m/hr on Ultra Labels' existing HP Indigo 6000 fleet. The press is designed as a high-speed digital complement to analog flexo, enabling converters to serve medium- to high-volume runs without the setup times, plate costs and waste associated with conventional printing.

For Ultra Labels, which had already been seeing its run lengths grow as its customer base matured, the timing was right.

Managing director Ross Fursey was direct about the investment's implications.

'This machine is going to allow us to improve our lead times, quality and customer response,' he said at the Labelexpo Europe announcement. 'It allows us to increase our run lengths and move up to medium to higher volume for those clients wanting higher resolution for their labels. It complements our HP Indigo 20000 presses for flexible packaging and is a step up from our existing six HP Indigo 6000 presses.' In practical terms, the V12 replaced two of those 6000 machines, consolidating output onto a single press, reducing staffing costs per meter produced by a fraction.

Currie Group's Daws confirmed it was the largest single digital sale in the distributor's history, and one that carried personal significance.

'Our relationship with Ultra Labels stretches back to 2009,' adds Daws. 'This will complement the HP Indigos they already have in their portfolio and will revolutionize their speed to market with a broader client base.' HP Indigo Asia Pacific general manager Arnon Goldman echoed the sentiment at the announcement: 'The whole

idea of the V12 is non-stop printing, and I am personally excited that this is the first in Asia Pacific.'

Quality as competitive currency

The commercial ambition behind Ultra Labels' equipment investments is validated by the presses' actual output. At the 2025 FPLMA Print Awards, one of Australia's most prestigious packaging competitions, Ultra Labels won three Gold awards across flexible packaging (digital) and label (digital) categories: one for BsC Meal Replacement Shake flexible packaging, another for the Brookie's Rainforest Gin wine and spirits label, and a third for the IP Warhammer Protein Powder label. A Hentley Farm Cotes de Hentley wine label, which had won gold at the 2024 FPLMA awards, went on to win a World Label Award in the international L9WLA competition, a recognition that requires first winning a national association prize before being entered at the world level.

'These awards celebrate the innovation and dedication of our team and clients,' said Fursey. 'We're proud of this recognition, but even more excited to keep pushing the boundaries of print and packaging to deliver standout results.'

Sustainability: evidence, not aspiration

Ultra Labels' environmental credentials are formally established: ISO 14001 certification, HP Carbon Neutral presses, a take-back program for HP consumables and increasing use of polypropylene labels incorporating 30 percent post-industrial recycled PP resin content. On the broader sustainability question, however, Springett resists what he sees as a gap between industry rhetoric and commercial reality.

'The evidence for digital is empirical and irrefutable,' he says. 'Less energy, smaller footprint, less waste, everything is contained. That's a matter of fact. The bottleneck with sustainability is getting the right substrates available at production scale and at a price that works. We've developed recyclable material options for customers and then shown them the price and watched them walk away. There has to be a point where these materials are available, reasonably priced and proven to work through production lines. We don't see the problem being at our end. If we can get the material, we can print on it, we can make a bag.'

Discipline as strategy

With the V12 commissioned, the Nilpeter FA-26 running, and the Galaxy pouch line arriving, Springett believes the major investment phase is largely complete. A high-speed AB Graphic International Digicon finishing line to complement the V12 remains to be ordered, but the broad shape of the business is set.

The Nilpeter FA-26 is the first 26-inch-wide flexographic press sold in the Australian market

Ultra Labels' Brisbane HQ at Eagle Farm, Queensland

'The table is just about set for us now,' he says. 'In flexibles, we've got the laminators, the slitters, the embellishment unit, the pouch lines. In labels, we've upgraded heavily. Now we've got to work it. Now we've got to go in the same direction we've been going, in the same markets, with the same customers.'

Brisbane's growth trajectory adds to his confidence: population migration into Queensland, a favorable labor market compared to Sydney and Melbourne, and the 2032 Olympic Games on the horizon are all factors he cites.

In addition, the investment in flexibles alone stands at nearly 15M AUD (10.7M USD) over the past several years, with a further multi-million-dollar commitment to the V12. But Springett is just as emphatic about what Ultra Labels has not done as about what it has. The business has never competed on price. It has never over-invested in capacity ahead of the work to fill it. And it has never mistaken activity for strategy. 'Over capacity is the killer,' he says. 'Putting a machine in and saying you've got to get it on shift straight away to get your ROI. That mentality is a killer. We take the view that the machine should be put in and filled with the right work. I've seen where all the price cutters have ended up. Their doors aren't open today.'

"'We take the view that the machine should be put in and filled with the right work. I've seen where all the price cutters have ended up. Their doors aren't open today"

For converters considering a move into digital production or flexible packaging, he offers the same advice he has followed himself: find the gap before you spend the money. 'There has to be an opportunity. When I started Clear Image, I could see a gap in the label market. When I started Ultra Labels, I could see a gap. If you're going into a business just to be a price taker, that's all you'll ever be. These businesses take 10 years to build. You need a long-term view; you need to be prudent with your investments and your customer selections. Don't be afraid to say no.'

Forty-one years in, Springett has seen the labels industry survive recession, disruption and a pandemic, reinventing itself at each turn. He expects it to keep doing so. The V12 in Brisbane is not the end of the story. It is, as every major investment at Ultra Labels has been, the beginning of the next chapter.

Scan the QR code to learn more about Ultra Labels

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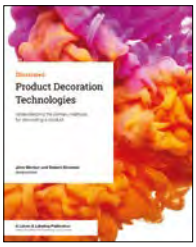

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Supvan invests in HP Indigo 6K+

The new equipment will accelerate the company's transformation from a consumables supplier into a high-end label converter. Yolanda Wang reports

Founded in 2005 and headquartered in Beijing, Supvan is a high-tech label converting company dedicated to the development, manufacturing and sales of industrial identification products. With thermal transfer technology as its core strength, the company's product portfolio covers a wide range of on-demand print and application systems, including desktop label printers, nameplate printers and tube printers.

New investment

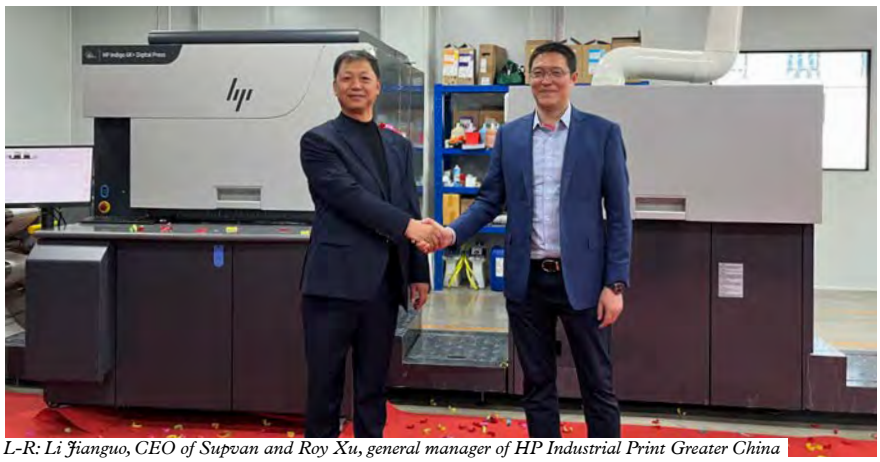
On March 18, 2026, Supvan held a launch ceremony for its new HP Indigo 6K+ digital printing press at its production base in Renqiu, Hebei Province, marking the first installation of this model in the North Asian market. The official agreement was signed at Labelexpo Asia 2025, which has since been rebranded as Loupe Asia.

Li Jianguo, CEO of Supvan, notes that with over 20 years of deep experience in the industrial identification sector, Supvan 'has long adhered to the core philosophy of technology as king. Amid an ongoing industry-wide transformation, digital technology has become increasingly critical, and digital printing boasts enormous market potential.' For Supvan, investing in digital printing is an investment in the company's future.

Regarding the selection of the HP Indigo 6K+, he shares: 'After extensive research and repeated evaluation, we chose to partner with HP, a global leader in digital printing. As a benchmark equipment integrating intelligence, sustainability and high efficiency, the HP Indigo 6K+ is equipped with a brand-new intelligent control system, reducing makeready time by 23 percent and energy consumption by 25 percent. Supporting a wide range of media, it perfectly matches Supvan's transformation needs.' Jianguo emphasizes that this cooperation represents a deep integration of technology, resources and vision. The two sides plan to build a 'long-term, in-depth and synergistic partnership in which the whole is greater than the parts.'

Roy Xu, general manager of HP Industrial Print Greater China, notes that the HP Indigo 6K+ represents HP's latest breakthrough in digital printing technology.

Liu Ziqi, general manager of Supvan, states that installing the HP Indigo 6K+ will not only boost the company's production capacity and efficiency in producing small-batch label orders but also enhance its core competitiveness in high-end label printing. Evolving from a supplier of on-demand print systems to a comprehensive print service provider, Supvan is striving to establish a one-stop service covering 'identification solution design through label production and delivery.'



L-R: Li Jianguo, CEO of Supvan and Roy Xu, general manager of HP Industrial Print Greater China

"Supvan is striving to establish a one-stop service covering identification solution design through label production and delivery"

Label division

As a supplier of thermal printer systems, Supvan also provides a full range of supporting consumables, including thermal paper, thermal transfer ribbons and various label materials tailored to different width and length specifications for diverse printing scenarios.

To better serve the wider customer ecosystem for these consumables, the company established a dedicated label printing workshop two years ago and has since invested continuously in advanced printing equipment to strengthen its in-house capabilities.

In 2025, Supvan officially opened its workshop to customers, and this now serves as one of two core pillars propelling the company's strategic transformation.

The label department works in tandem with the existing print supplier business to synergize resources and accelerate the company's transition toward a more comprehensive range of industrial identification technology.

The newly established label department employs a professional team of over 100 employees, equipped with a full suite of advanced production equipment covering the entire label manufacturing process, including flexographic press, offset press and digital die-cutting machines. These facilities enable the department to meet a diverse range of production needs, from standard label printing to customized, high-precision products.

Complementing its comprehensive production capabilities, the department also runs a dedicated R&D and testing laboratory. It focuses on overcoming key technical bottlenecks in label manufacturing and resolving complex labeling challenges across demanding industrial scenarios.

'The lab is committed to improving product performance, upgrading printing quality and developing innovative label solutions that align with the evolving needs of the industrial identification market,' shares Jianguo.

Renqiu Factory, Supvan's largest production base, was completed in 2023 and functions as the company's core hub for manufacturing and distribution. With a layout covering 30,000sqm, the facility processes an average of 1,000 orders daily, laying a solid foundation for the efficient delivery of label products and printers.

With over 20 years of industrial process expertise, Supvan has long upheld the strict principle of 'zero defective products reaching the market'. The company has established a comprehensive industrial workflow that integrates R&D,


Supvan label printing workshop


Supvan's warehouse

"Supvan will continue to ramp up its R&D investment and introduce digital management systems, such as MES, to further improve production transparency, process controllability and end-to-end traceability"

manufacturing, consumables production and after-sales service, forming a closed-loop system to ensure consistent product quality and reliable customer support.

The company allocates 35 percent of its annual gross profit in research and development, employing a team of over 100 R&D professionals and holding more than 200 patents. Driven by a commitment toward independent innovation, its core products, including tube printers, portable label printers and nameplate printers, have become the preferred identification equipment for customers across a range of industrial sectors. With annual sales volume reaching 2 million units, this translates to an average of one product sold every eight seconds.

In terms of channel development, Supvan has adopted an integrated online and offline operational strategy. The company launched its domestic e-commerce platform in 2018 and embarked on cross-border e-commerce operations in 2021. Today, overseas business accounts for one-third of the company's total business, significantly bolstering the company's global market expansion and international footprint.

Supvan has also built a comprehensive global after-sales network. Supported by its 400-strong customer service hotline and over 20 overseas after-sales centers, the company delivers full-lifecycle equipment maintenance and support to customers worldwide.

Transformation

Supvan unveiled plans for a further transformation at the launch event for its new digital press.

Jianguo notes that the introduction of the HP Indigo 6K+ is a pivotal step for Supvan in responding to China's national digital transformation strategy. This places higher requirements on 'precision, efficiency and customization' in industrial identification. Supvan will deliver integrated identification technology for key sectors, including the electric power industry, automotive (with a focus on electric cars), healthcare and chemicals, gradually advancing toward its vision of setting standards in the global industrial identification sector.

Regarding the next stage of the company's transformation, Jianguo outlines three core strategic directions: first, deepen its technology base by fully mastering the operation and maintenance of digital printing technology, and effectively translating these advantages into tangible strengths in production efficiency, product quality and product competitiveness.

Second, optimize the production system by restructuring workflows around digital printing, establishing an integrated management system that covers the entire process, from order receipt and production scheduling to delivery, thereby improving operational efficiency and reducing overall production costs.

Third, enhancing overall value by accurately identifying and addressing customers' core demands for small-batch, multi-variety orders, and continuously upgrading products and services to boost customer satisfaction and loyalty, laying a solid foundation for long-term development.

Jianguo adds that Supvan's steady development over the past two decades would not have been achievable without the long-term support of its partners. 'Looking ahead, the company will adhere to an open and collaborative philosophy, joining hands with partners across the industry to jointly build a healthy, win-win industrial identification ecosystem.'

On future deepened cooperation, HP Indigo's Roy Xu states that as an industry leader, Supvan's investment in the HP Indigo 6K+ will inspire more Chinese label converters to pursue high-quality, digitalized development. Moving forward, HP will further strengthen collaboration with Supvan in technological innovation, market expansion and industrial chain synergy, driving the entire industry to shift from 'price competition' to 'value competition'. Additionally, the two parties will share their digital transformation experience, provide professional technical guidance to small and medium-sized label converters and work together to foster a sound and sustainable industrial ecosystem.

Liu Ziqi elaborates on the application roadmap of the HP Indigo 6K+ digital press, and on Supvan's three- to five-year strategic development objectives. She notes that the company will establish a digital production center, with the Renqiu factory at its core, focusing on four key sectors: new energy vehicles, electrical communications, intelligent manufacturing in medical and chemical and the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT). Its goal is to become a national benchmark in the digital production of industrial identification, as well as a world-leading integrated service platform.

In the meantime, Supvan will continue to ramp up its R&D investment and introduce digital management systems, such as MES, to improve further production transparency, process controllability and end-to-end traceability.

The digital transformation journey of Supvan represents not only a roadmap for achieving high-quality development, but also a benchmark and model reference for the digital upgrading of China's label and packaging printing industry.

Scan the QR code to read more news from the region on L&L

polilux

Inspirational
PACKAGING

Youngest
BOPP CO.

Leading
PRODUCT

Polilux is the youngest player of BOPP production industry. The company was established in 2018 and its main purpose has been to focus special products such as IML, PSL so far. Polilux has been performing production with specially designed Brückner Technology in order to produce the highest quality of label materials.

Polilux today exports material to 26 countries and this number reached in only 3 years after establishment. The company has only one purpose as to be a leading producer of special products. As a consequence Polilux launched its first BML (Blow-Moulding Label) product in 2022 and the company is producing high quality of PSL Facestock material which can serve high end market since January 2023. Polilux invested the first of its kind investment which will be the only one in the World. The main purpose of this investment is to match with company's objectives as to be leading special product supplier.

polilux

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LABEL ACADEMY

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Tengen eyes global expansion

Tengen has expanded its retail and logistics consumables operations into new verticals, such as medical and e-commerce, as it transforms into a one-stop global operation. Yolanda Wang reports

As the first listed company in China focused on packaging consumables, Tengen has steadily advanced alongside the boom in e-commerce and logistics since its founding in 2010 and its 2020 market listing.

Following its listing, breaking through its traditional business boundaries and achieving high-quality growth became a core challenge. Zhou Xiaowei, founder of Tengen, emphasizes: 'Going public is a new starting point for us to break through bottlenecks, upgrade our capabilities and lay the groundwork for long-term, high-quality development.'

Targeting e-commerce

With sharp industry insight, Zhou entered the printing sector in 2002, focusing on retail labeling, and co-founded Jiuheng Barcode before establishing Tengen in 2010.

He foresaw the explosive growth of e-commerce and express delivery, leading Tengen, from the start, to adopt a diversified strategy covering a full range of express consumables such as envelopes, courier bags, labels and sealing tape.

This forward-looking market insight fueled Tengen's rapid growth over the next decade.

Full-category supply

After listing, Tengen carried out a pivotal strategic shift, moving beyond single-category express consumables to become a full-category consumables provider, spanning graphic, catering, industrial, medical, aviation and other high-potential sectors.

Zhou notes that growth in e-commerce logistics consumables has peaked, and that only by expanding into cross-industry consumables, leveraging Tengen's technical and operational strengths, can it avoid saturated markets.

This full-category expansion is rooted in precise integration around customer needs. 'Our goal is to enable customers to access products and services with lower costs, better quality, higher efficiency and stronger service through our platform,' Zhou says.

Backed by three production bases (Dongguan, Zhejiang, Hubei) totaling 300,000sqm, Tengen owns a diverse range of printing and converting equipment, covering paper, plastic, biodegradable materials, GRS-certified products and niche

Tengen headquarters in Dongguan, Guangdong, China

"Going public is a new starting point for us to break through bottlenecks, upgrade our capabilities and lay the groundwork for long-term, high-quality development"

industry-specific items.

Zhou notes: 'Most consumables require printing processes, which is our core strength. This synergy allows us to enter new sectors with lower barriers and deliver consistent quality that meets industry-specific standards.'

Industrial internet platform

Zhou outlines four core strategies to transform Tengen from a product manufacturer to a comprehensive consumables service platform.

First is a consumables internet platform, which integrates cross-industry consumables into online platforms to connect directly with end users, simplifying procurement, eliminating intermediaries and ensuring price and quality transparency.

The next strategy is building a global production and service network to establish domestic and overseas regional subsidiaries. Tengen has opened a flagship store in Indonesia and is negotiating agency partnerships in Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. It also promotes a co-founder model, with company-borne risk and profit sharing, to empower entrepreneurs and build stable teams.

It's third focus is on its win-win supply chain. The company cooperates with top suppliers to produce Tengen-standard consumables, reducing asset-heavy costs. Currently, 10 percent of products are outsourced; this ratio will rise significantly as the company transitions to an asset-light, platform-focused model.

Finally, Tengen is prioritizing product standardization and branding in 2026, launching Tengen-branded products with clear standards to build trust.

Notably, Tengen has closely followed the global sustainability trend, focusing on developing biodegradable, lightweight and material-reduced products. It plans to launch linerless labels and matching printers in 2026 to reduce waste and costs.

Future

Addressing post-listing development, Zhou expresses frankly: 'After going public, we experienced "listing syndrome", a period of adjustment where we took some detours and missed some opportunities. It took us three years to reflect, adjust our strategy and gradually turn the situation around.'

While its annual revenue has fluctuated slightly amid market changes, Tengen's overall development remains stable and positive. Label products remain a core segment, accounting for roughly one third of the business. To support its full-category platform strategy, Tengen is increasing digital investment, recognizing that digitalization is key to operational efficiency and customer engagement. The company plans to expand its 20-member IT professionals team to enhance its digital management capabilities, enabling precise control over products, supply chains and co-founders, including real-time sales and profit data, to optimize operations.

In brand promotion, both Zhou and the company are leveraging new media platforms like TikTok and WeChat. 'Our goal is to use such new media to attract more aspiring partners to join our co founder program, building a stable supply chain and sales network. Using platform based governance, I also want to ease pressure on the next generation of leaders and ensure smooth succession.'

Scan the QR code to know more about Tengen

OCEAN PLASTICS: FROM CRISIS TO CIRCULARITY

Plastic waste has long been an issue, but with increasing regulatory pressure, converters are being forced to adapt their sustainability strategies rather than ignore them. Will Drysdale reports

Plastic has been shaping the world for more than 160 years. When British inventor Alexander Parkes patented the first artificial plastic in 1862, it was developed as a substitute for scarce natural materials such as tortoiseshell and ivory during the late Victorian period. At the time, it was seen as a solution that would preserve natural resources while enabling industrial progress.

In 1907, Leo Baekeland combined phenol and formaldehyde to create Bakelite, the first fully synthetic plastic. It was durable, heat-resistant and could be mass-produced. This marked the beginning of plastics as a cornerstone material of the modern economy.

Over the following decades, plastics became embedded in almost every industry, from automotive and electronics to healthcare and, crucially, packaging. The versatility, low cost and durability made it indispensable; however, those same properties have also made plastics one of the most persistent environmental challenges facing the planet today.

Plastic waste is now being found at some of the deepest points in the ocean and even on the highest peaks on Earth. What was once considered a miracle material has become a symbol of poor waste management.

According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, the ocean could contain more plastic than fish by 2050 if current trends continue, as an estimated 13 million tons of plastic enter marine environments each year. This represents only a portion of the total plastic waste generated globally, with packaging accounting for a significant share.

Crucially, much of this plastic is not visible. Research from the European Investment Bank (EIB) suggests that around 95 percent of ocean plastics sink below the surface, settling on the seabed. This means the problem is far larger than what is visible on the surface and far more difficult to address once it reaches this stage.

A STRUCTURAL CHALLENGE

Despite growing awareness and increasing public concern, the global plastics system continues to favor the production of virgin material.

According to the EIB, around 95 percent of plastics are still made from fossil-based feedstocks, primarily because of cost. Producing virgin plastic remains cheaper and more efficient than collecting, sorting and recycling waste.

'The structural cost premium and low recycling rates greatly influence the cost of collecting, sorting and recycling plastics,' the EIB states. 'The problem is aggravated by most recycling systems being small and decentralized.'

For the label and packaging industry, this creates a fundamental challenge. As one of the largest users of plastic materials, the sector is under increasing scrutiny from regulators, brands and consumers. At the same time, it must operate within tight cost margins and highly competitive markets.

Progress in recycling has been slow, though. Surfers Against Sewage estimates that just 9 percent of all plastic ever produced has been recycled. The rest has either been incinerated, sent to landfill or leaked into the environment.

While charitable organizations continue to play an important role in removing plastic from oceans, it is increasingly clear that clean-up efforts alone will not solve the problem. The focus is shifting toward preventing plastic from entering the environment in the first place and creating systems that enable materials to be reused effectively.

A4 Labels ocean clean up project

"THE OCEAN COULD CONTAIN MORE PLASTIC THAN FISH BY 2050"

TURNING WASTE TO MATERIAL

One company attempting to address this issue is UPM Raflatac. Its Ocean Action label range is designed to convert ocean-bound plastic waste into usable label material. Rather than retrieving plastic from the ocean itself, a process that is both costly and technically challenging, the company focuses on intercepting waste before it reaches marine environments.

The material is sourced from Asia, where waste management infrastructure is limited, and the risk of plastic entering waterways is high. This approach aims to tackle the problem at its source while also creating value from materials that would otherwise be lost.

The Ocean Action label can be used across a range of applications, including food, beverage and cosmetics packaging. However, there are some limitations. Currently, the labels are available only in white or clear top-coated polypropylene (PP) films, which may restrict their use in certain design applications.

Despite this, the benefits are significant. By using chemically-recycled material, the labels reduce reliance on virgin fossil-based materials. The products are also certified under the International Sustainability and Carbon Certification (ISCC) scheme, providing traceability and assurance for brand owners.

UPM Raflatac states that the recycled material is 'identical to virgin plastic' after processing. This involves a multi-step system that begins with collection and sorting, followed by chemical breakdown and rebuilding into a new polymer.

However, the wider sustainability picture is more complex. Plastics are not infinitely recyclable. Most polymers degrade after repeated processing, meaning they can typically be recycled only two or three times before quality declines.

To address this, recycled material is often blended with virgin polymer or additional recovered plastic. While this helps maintain performance, it raises questions about how 'recycled' a product truly is.

This brings transparency into focus. As brands increasingly promote the use of recycled materials, there is growing pressure to communicate the amount of recycled content in a product clearly.

RECYCLED PP

Across Europe, CCL Industries is taking a different approach: Focus on mechanically-recycled polypropylene (PP).

Ocean plastics

"AROUND 95 PERCENT OF PLASTICS ARE STILL MADE FROM FOSSIL-BASED FEEDSTOCKS, PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF COST"

In collaboration with Innovia Films, Spectra Packaging, Bantam Materials UK and Petman, the company has helped develop what is described as the world's first EU-approved food-safe recycled PP material.

Using Starlinger Viscotec technology, the process focuses on recovering post-consumer PP, particularly from used cups collected near coastal regions. The partners estimate that this technology could prevent up to 500 million PP cups from entering the ocean each year.

Marika Knorr, head of sustainability and communication at CCL, says: 'These are not plastics that have been recovered from the ocean,' she explains. 'Controlled collection centers pay for used cups sourced from population centers near at-risk coastlines. Trained and registered collectors are paid, which provides local employment and prevents waste from being discarded into the environment.'

This model not only reduces environmental leakage but also creates economic opportunities in regions where waste collection infrastructure may be limited.

Initial testing showed that the recycled polymer performed well within Innovia's production processes. Early batches of film contained around 35 percent recycled content, with further optimization underway.

'Once we had the polymer, it was a matter of time to formulate films, run production trials and optimize our processes,' Knorr says.

The partners believe the material has potential across a wide range of applications, including bottles, caps and food trays. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding visual appearance.

In transparent applications, minor imperfections can be visible, potentially affecting acceptance among brand owners.

FOOD SAFETY AND REGULATION

In the UK, regulatory bodies are taking a cautious approach. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has stated that there is currently insufficient evidence to confirm the safety of certain recycled plastics derived from environmental waste when used in food packaging.

Dr James Cooper, deputy director of food policy at the FSA, notes: 'Such initiatives, if carried out appropriately, can protect the environment while supporting innovation and economic growth.' He further says: 'However, our role is to ensure food is safe, and we have concerns over the safety of these plastics in their recycled form.'

Despite this, industry players remain confident that ongoing research and development will address these concerns over time.

Neil Hudson, technology expert at Innovia Films, describes access to EU-approved food-contact recycled PP as a 'game changer', enabling greater circularity in the food and beverage packaging sector.

THE COST AND ADOPTION CHALLENGE

Cost remains one of the most significant barriers to the widespread adoption of recycled materials.

'High-quality, mechanically recovered polymer is currently more expensive than virgin polymers made from fossil-based oil,' says Knorr. However, she argues that this additional cost delivers environmental benefits, including reduced carbon emissions.

She describes the price increase as a 'fractional' uplift that offers good value in the context of sustainability.

Adoption across the industry remains uneven, though, and some companies are investing heavily in recycled materials and processes, while others are taking a more cautious approach.

'Like any innovation, there are early adopters, and there are others who prefer to follow,' Knorr says.

With the EU's Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) approaching, this dynamic is expected to change. Companies that delay may face challenges in securing high-quality recycled materials as demand increases.

DESIGNING FOR RECYCLABILITY

In addition to material innovation, there is a growing focus on designing packaging for recyclability. This includes simplifying structures, reducing material combinations and moving towards mono-material options. By designing products with end-of-life considerations in mind, companies can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of recycling systems.

'These initiatives throughout the value chain will increase the quality of recycled polymer,' Knorr says.

For the label industry, this presents both challenges and opportunities, requiring new approaches to product design and material selection.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

It is not just consumer confusion about what plastic can and can't be recycled, but also companies struggling due to an ever-changing regulatory landscape.

"JUST NINE PERCENT OF ALL PLASTIC EVER PRODUCED HAS BEEN RECYCLED"

A4 Labels with Portslade Cricket Clubs

CHARITABLE EFFORTS FROM UK CONVERTER

UK-based A4 Labels has pitched in over the past year to help tackle ocean plastics on the South coast of Britain and has also been testing UPM Raflatac's Ocean Action labels. Charlie Hawker, managing director of A4 Labels, shares that the samples A4 Labels received had curled too much during the glassine liner process, and UPM was looking at kraft liner alternatives for them.

Although Hawker did share that this is common with glassine liners, as the 'heat from the press just rolls it up like a telescope and makes application fiddly and difficult.' He intends to use the labels on the company's roll-label digital printers later this year.

During the 2025 cricket season, the company sponsored Portslade Cricket Club and incentivized batters to score more runs by clearing 1kg of plastic waste from the shores of Brighton and Hove for every 20 runs scored.

Hawker shares: 'We wanted to bring something different to a traditional sponsorship.

'Supporting Portslade Cricket Club meant we could back a fantastic local team while making a measurable difference to our oceans. Every boundary hit took us one step closer to a cleaner planet.'

This wasn't the only recycling project A4 Labels focused on through 2025, though, as the business collected more than 2.25 tons in total.

Alongside charity Seven Clean Seas, the total amount of plastic removed from the ocean rose to 409kg, collected along 4.4km of the coastline, which is almost equivalent to 50 full-sized football (soccer) pitches.

A4 labels was founded in 2010 on the principle of sustainability by Hawker's father, Colin Hawker, who saw an opportunity in a wasted sheet of labels. Now, the company provides labels worldwide. It also supplied labels to the NHS during the pandemic.

Charlie Hawker feels the issue of ocean plastics is close to his heart, as the A4 labels factory is situated a stone's throw from the ocean in Brighton, and he can see the beach from his office, which is one reason the company feels so passionately about cleaning the ocean.

Charlie Hawker notes: 'I thought it would be the perfect kind of partnership and cause to have that eco-effect that we were looking for, but something that actually is quite close to us, not just as a business, but as the individuals within the business as well.'

He further notes: 'We try to have fun with social media, involving our customers with their designs so they can shout about it. We'll give them a shout out, and they can see from every order, they'll get an email from me of what percentage was donated from their order. How many kilos were collected and how many plastic bottles would that equate to?'

For this project, A4 labels worked with Seven Clean Seas but had previously worked with the Ocean Cleanup Project.

When asked about the ever-encroaching PPWR, Charlie Hawker comments that he has not been focusing on this too much yet, but it is 'on his radar,' as he exports labels to the EU.

In the long run, Charlie Hawker hopes his company's charitable escapade will inspire other label converters to play their part in tackling the issue of ocean plastics and intends to publish personalized stats for each of A4 Label's clients to share with them how much of an impact their custom is having on the clean-up with Seven Clean Seas.

Despite the honorable effort from A4 Labels, Portslade Cricket Club and Seven Clean Seas, there are still millions of tons of plastic waste in the ocean, causing damage not only to the aquatic ecosystems but also to the human population, as microplastics are being found within seafood and other areas of the food chain.

Martin Davis, former president of business unit films at Coveris, who now runs his own consultancy focused on sustainability strategy, highlights that it is a constant challenge to stay on top of the legislative framework and to integrate it into strategic decision-making.

'The packaging industry has always been conscious of its sustainability responsibilities, but progress towards true circularity and the elimination of waste leaving the sector has been inconsistent,' says Davis.

The introduction of Packaging Extended Producer Responsibility (PEPR) in the UK has, at its heart, the principle that the company that places packaging material on the market is responsible for covering the costs of collection, recycling and disposal of these materials. 'This new and highly complex framework will understandably adapt and evolve over time. It should not be underestimated just how much time and resources businesses require to interpret and comply with its requirements. This is particularly challenging for SMEs,' explains Davis.

There are also concerns about unintended consequences from the legislation in its current form, according to Davis. 'An example would be fiber-rich products with a small element of non-fiber material below 15 percent of total product weight. These fiber-based composite materials, including some types of labels, are recyclable within existing mechanical facilities but have a much higher burden of EPR fees than equivalent harder-to-recycle alternatives, potentially risking non-optimal packaging material choices.'

Davis highlighted that a combination of stakeholder pressure, government legislation and the understanding that improving financial performance and driving sustainability are not mutually exclusive has accelerated progress here, notably post-Covid. An example of this is the Coveris ReCover dedicated recycling business, which includes a significant investment in a bespoke printed-film de-inking line.

'The packaging sector is willing to step up regarding increasing recycling rates, and Coveris' ReCover business is a great example,' Davis says. 'For example, the majority of end-of-life printed polyethylene packaging has either been incinerated, sent to landfill or downcycled into low-grade single-use applications. Coveris has invested in ground-breaking de-inking technology, which allows printed flexible PE film to be cleaned and reused, keeping it in the circular economy.'

Specifically, regarding plastic waste entering the marine environment, Davis highlights initiatives such as Operation

Clean Sweep (OCS), the Ocean Plastics Charter and individual business activities such as 'owning' sections of UK beaches for cleaning as clear and positive steps forward.

As part of Operation Clean Sweep, packaging manufacturers are helping address ocean plastic pollution. This global initiative to prevent plastic resin loss into the environment is led in the UK by the British Plastics Federation (BPF). 'Whilst a voluntary scheme, OCS has over 300 participating signatories in the UK. By joining the scheme, businesses are given tools and support to improve management of their pellet-form raw material and, in particular, provide practical ways of avoiding pellets finding their way into the environment in general and water courses in particular,' explains Davis.

PPP cups recycled to be converted to labels and packaging

UK CAPACITY FOR RECYCLING

Davis also highlighted the importance of growing recycling capacity in the UK. 'A key element of the EPR legislation is the aim to increase curbside collection of packaging waste significantly, managed under the 'Simpler Recycling' initiative. However, there is a misalignment between the planned growth in waste collection rates and the current UK recycling capacity. There simply isn't enough capacity to recycle the collected waste at the levels planned, particularly regarding flexible plastic packaging.'

He highlights that, for several reasons, including adverse financial conditions for recycling businesses, 17 plastic reprocessing sites, with a combined capacity of 400,000 tons, have become nonoperational in the last three years (according to BPF estimates).

'It is vital that this issue is acknowledged and addressed, and there are levers available such as targeted energy cost support, toughening enforcement against fraudulent actors in the space and directing elements of the income from areas such as EPR fees and the UK Plastics Packaging Tax into recycling.'

The risk is that, without sufficient UK recycling capacity, UK packaging waste will continue to be exported in large quantities for reprocessing, and with it comes the risk that this waste will not be reprocessed in an environmentally responsible manner. 'Licenses for export reprocessing are meant to safeguard the outcome for UK packaging waste and avoid it causing environmental damage overseas. Practical oversight and auditing of overseas reprocessors is difficult and limited, says Davis.

'The current system makes it too easy and attractive for waste to be exported without the necessary checks and balances to ensure the waste is reprocessed in an environmentally responsible manner.

"THE PENNY HAS REALLY DROPPED WITH PACKAGING USERS AND PRODUCERS THAT IMPROVING FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE, CREATING VALUE FOR SHAREHOLDERS AND DRIVING TRUE SUSTAINABILITY WITHIN THEIR BUSINESS MODEL ARE NO LONGER MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE"

Reform of this system is a key element of ensuring UK recycling businesses are given a fair playing field, which in turn will assist the growth of UK recycling capacity.'

This is not just a UK problem. In 2023, 1.3 million tons of recyclable plastic waste were exported from the EU, a significant figure but accounting for just 15.3 percent of the total recyclable waste exported. The UK is considered the largest contributor to this in Europe, followed by Germany.

RECYCLED OCEAN PLASTICS

Recycled plastic packaging and labels sound great in theory, but they have some practical drawbacks.

When recycling flexible plastic materials, the recyclate often shows slight discoloration.

While this doesn't affect the product's mechanical properties, it can affect the material's visual appearance.

'Recycled polyethylene can, in its flat film format, appear to have a deeper haze than material made exclusively from virgin materials,' explains Davis. 'Other traits can be a light discoloration, often shown as a green tinge. When major brand teams see this effect, they often assume it indicates a quality defect and are sometimes reluctant to use the material.'

Through multiple mechanical recycling cycles, this effect can become more pronounced.

'If materials meet all technical, safety and performance requirements, the next step is a shift in mindset, from brands and retailers to consumers, with a willingness to accept small aesthetic deviations to continue to grow the use of recycled content.'

The big shift in business mindset is that sustainability is no longer considered a cost of doing business. Now it is an existential business driver.

Davis concludes: 'The penny has really dropped with packaging users and producers that improving financial performance, creating value for shareholders and driving true sustainability within their business model are no longer mutually exclusive. They are inextricably linked now.'

As the pressure on PPWR and EPR in the UK increases, converters must become proactive sooner rather than later. Those who delay may be left behind.

The number of options for creating labels and packaging from sustainable materials like ocean plastics is growing, and even if the finished product has flaws, it might be time to overlook them and educate consumers about why a product's branding has changed slightly due to recycled material and encourage them to embrace it instead of avoiding it.

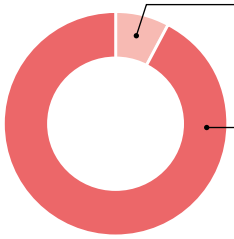
Scan the QR code to learn more about Operation Clean Sweep

Advertisers index

Label trends

Industry confidence in connected packaging reaches a new high in the latest survey by Appetite Creative and Koenig & Bauer Auraveo. Connected packaging is growing, driven by data, compliance and measurable consumer engagement.

Industry outlook



7.7% believe it's a passing fad (down from 13.4% in 2025)

92.3% say connected packaging will grow in importance (up from 88.8% in 2025)

Adoption trends

81.2%

of those surveyed are currently using connected packaging (up from 72.6% in 2025)

Key use cases (top drivers)

60.9% Data collection

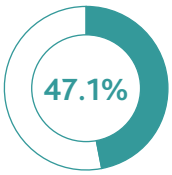
60.7% Compliance (GS1, digital passports)

60.4% Sustainability

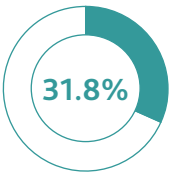
60.2% Marketing and loyalty

57.8% Consumer engagement

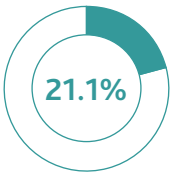
Technology adoption mix



QR and NFC combined



QR codes only



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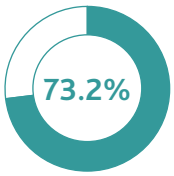

Interest in serialized QR codes (up from 66.1% in 2025)

Industry adoption by market sectors

14.2% Marketing and advertising

13.5% Automotive, travel

13.5% Manufacturing

12.4% FMCG

12.4% Packaging

Source: Appetite Creative's fifth annual Global Connected Packaging Survey 2026 in partnership with Koenig & Bauer Auraveo.

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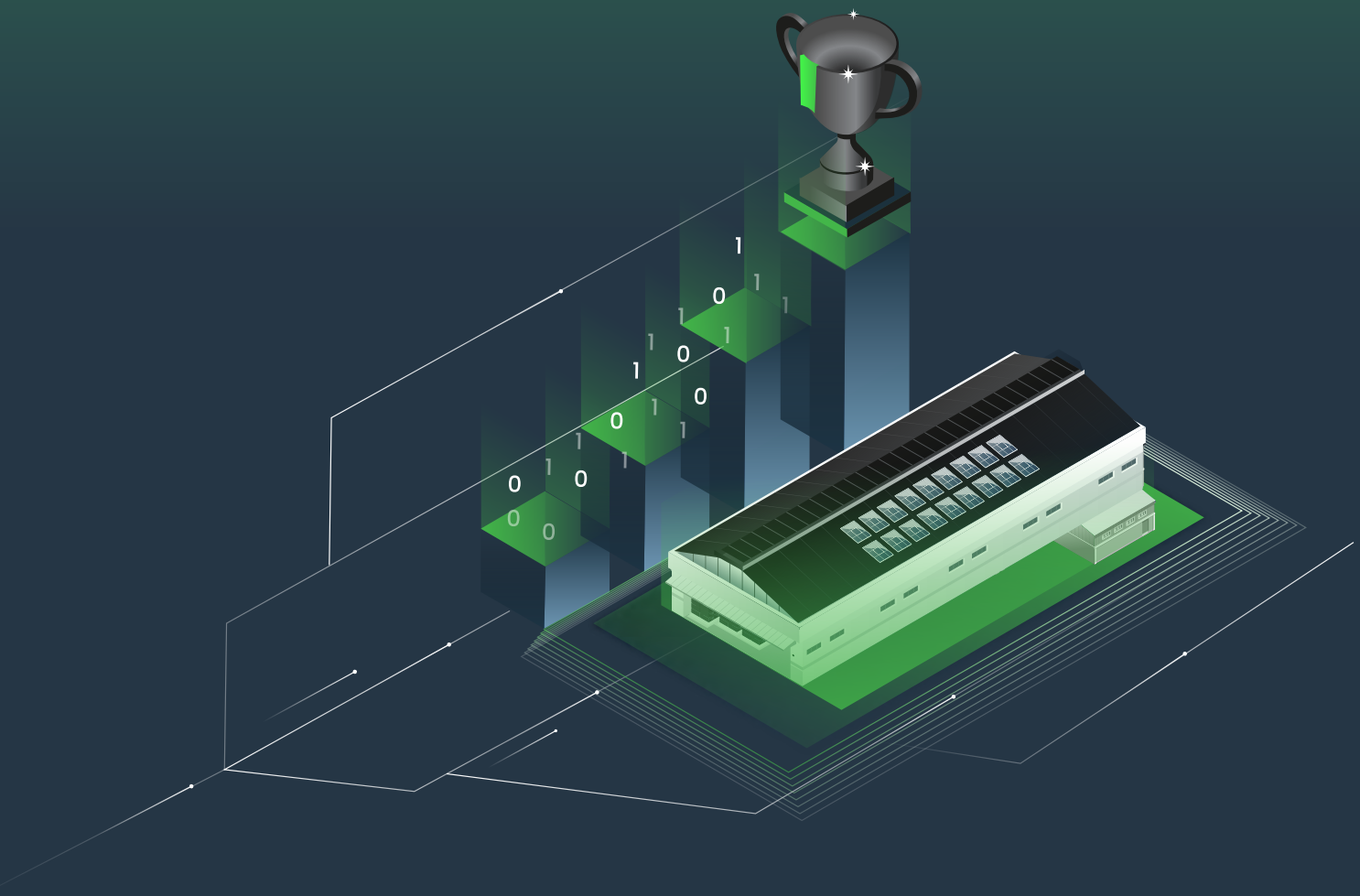

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Applications: PSL, Clear-on-Clear, Shrink Sleeve, Tube Laminate.
Material thickness: 12-350 microns.
Finishing processes: full or selective varnishing, digital embellishment, UV or water-based coatings, hot foiling, hot stamping and die & laser cutting.

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