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APPLICATION BRIEF

Fetzer labels no wine before its time

Switch from ink-jet to on-demand printing system provides more operational flexibility, less waste

By Rick Gurin

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Fetzer Vineyards in Upland, CA, produces a variety of wines for a range of consumers. Last year the wine maker was shipping 3.6 million cases of wine. Keeping track of what was being sent where was key. Each case of wine leaving the vineyard requires a specific label with governmental and internal data to ensure successful delivery.

At first, Fetzer used a combination of pre-printed shipping cases, a wine bottle label and ink-jet printing system to mark each case of wine. Given the company's shipping volume, this was thought to be the most cost-effective way to handle its needs.

Overcoming difficulties

Although the ink-jet system seemed to be a relatively inexpensive choice, Sean Bennett, bottling manager at Fetzer, soon realized a change needed to be made. States regulate the shipment of wine differently, so Fetzer had to label its cases differently depending on the destination. The relative ease and low cost of adding an ink-jet printer and labels was outstripped by the need to buy inks/solvents, arrange for special labor to handle the hazardous waste, and additional maintenance personnel to handle the increased equipment repairs as demand rose. Ink-jet coding also presented quality issues with the addition of bar codes to the required case information.



On-demand labels contain varying information based on shipment destination and other factors.

The solution: A print-and-apply labeling system

In 1997, Fetzer was approached by Labeltronix Sales Manager Graham Rushall with a proposal for a new labeling system. "They literally knocked on our door and said they had a system they thought could work for us," Bennett says. After evaluating several other competitors, Fetzer decided to give the contract to Labeltronix. "We knew it was a gamble, since Labeltronix was a smaller operation at that time, but we took the chance," Bennett says.

The gamble paid off. Fetzer went operational with a print-and-apply system, and saw an improvement in operations efficiency. When Fetzer's three-year contract with Labeltronix expired in 2000, Bennett again evaluated other possible systems integrators. But based on the previous track record, Fetzer decided to sign another three-year contract with Labeltronix, which included upgrading from its previous print-and-apply units to new models from Label-Aire which are running Zebra Technologies PAX print engines.

How the system works

Three Label-Aire 2138 print/apply systems (one at the end of each production line) are used to affix color-coded case labels to



Print-and-apply systems are set up at the end of each production line.

the shipping boxes. Fetzer also has a system running in its warehouse, which Bennett says is used to custom-label shipments for customers as needed.

A switch from rolls of labels to a fanfold configuration reduced printer downtime even further. Bar code integration software from Teklynx International and a print controller eliminated the need for a computer at each labeling station.

According to Bennett, the new printer/applicators place labels using a combination tamp/blow method, which replaced a blow-on application system. "The advantage of the tamp/blow is that we don't have to place cases quite as accurately on the conveyor," Bennett says. Since Fetzer labels anywhere from 8 to 22 cases per minute, this becomes a significant time savings. Label data is entered into a print controller attached to the printer/applicator before each production run begins. So if five different products are scheduled to move along a given line, the conveyors stop at the end of each bottling run to allow



Fetzer technician Billy Edgar ensures the new units run like clockwork.

new data to be downloaded.

Once cases have been labeled at the end of the production line, they move into the warehouse. There, product is stored in a first-in, last-out set-up. Nearly 36,000 cases a day are shipped throughout the U.S. and Canada. In addition, a portion of the warehouse space is used to store unlabeled bottles of wine, which are aged for a period of time before relabeling.

System benefits

Although Bennett says the savings from

the system cannot be translated into hard dollar figures for Fetzer, he wouldn't be surprised if a similar system installed elsewhere would pay for itself within a year. The key benefits, according to Bennett, are system flexibility and environmental friendliness.

"With the print-and-apply system, we can apply 2-by-2, 4-by- or 6-by-6 labels to our cases, depending on our need," he says. "For example, we will use the 6-by-6 labels on shipments going to Canada, because they require more government regulatory information."

The system can be easily manipulated to handle the different sizes.

The print-and-apply system is also much friendlier to the environment than the former ink-jet system. "Those inks and solvents were poison," Bennett says. "They weren't a good thing for our workers to be around."

Bennett adds Labeltronix helps recycle as much of the label backings as possible.

Improved accuracy and less environmental strain. Fetzer couldn't have asked for anything more. **FS**

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