DIGITAL LABELS

Press gang

Are digital labels the darling of the shelf for consumers and producers?
Dominique Huret talks to key industry players in France, to find out

B rand packaging is becoming increasingly uniform, and the same is true for most labels. With similar consumer tests, sources of inspiration, methodologies and processes, we get uniform design across the vast majority of packaging.

In an age of standardisation – be it in design, typography, graphics or colour codes – brand owners and designers need to think differently in order to stand out. For Raphael Riffé, associate director at French design agency Register, it's vital for brands to "build their charisma".

Yet, despite the obvious challenges, the French label sector is coping fairly well in these troubled times. Axel Lamotte, vice president of the French National Union of Adhesive Label Manufacturers (UNFEA), says that his members have avoided a significant drop in activity, posting a loss of 2.53 per cent from January to August 2020 but growth of 4.2 per cent between August and December. Buoyant markets such as pharmaceuticals, hygiene, food processing and logistics have compensated for other struggling sectors.

As for labelstock sales, volumes fell by 2.2 per cent from January to August before recovering by 1.3 per cent from August to December.

"The sector has effectively been spared the economic crisis because of the health crisis," comments Lamotte, who is also chief executive of Azur Adhésifs.
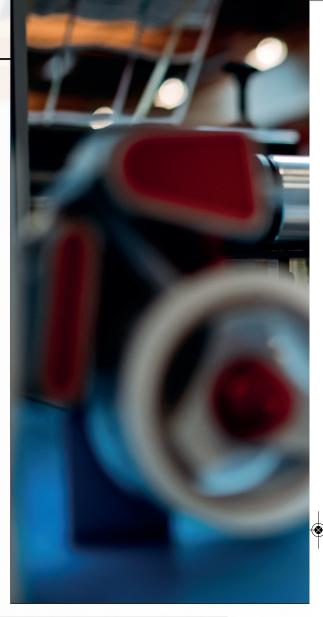
For many in the label sector, one key question is how can they benefit from digital technology without losing money, and French printer Ballouhey Imprimeurs, for one, is happy with its digital offering. Sébastien Albanet, responsible for prepress service at the company, explains: "We are equipped with a Mark Andy digital press. Our client base, which consists of 4,000 small food producers, is expanding, so we have just invested in a new Digital One press, capable of 23m/min. This digital equipment has enabled us to obtain new markets for labels for processed meats, for example, where we are seeing good growth."

Romuald Huée, industrial printing markets director for Konica Minolta, reminds new entrants to the sector that his company's entry-level press, the Label 230, also allows for printing speeds of 23m/min, and this is true even for a sequence of simple jobs.
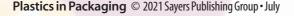
Elsewhere, Séverine Falque-Vert, who works in sales for Epson France, is keen to develop the digital press label market. "Epson has been doing inkjet since 2014, and this technology allows us to differentiate ourselves, thanks to the whites and the varnish that give texture," she explains. "We were doing a lot of proofing equipment and came to labels later, thanks to our reputation for quality and reliability."

Epson talks about an entry-level digital press costing between €200,000 ($244,000) and €300,000 ($365,000), with a top-of-the-range system commanding nearer to €500,000 ($609,000).

Occupying a different niche, Japanese-owned Oki has expanded its portfolio to cope with losses in its core toner market during the last seven years.

Photo credit: Xeikon

Referring to the technology as the 'new normal', some equipment makers have asked whether it should even be called 'digital' printing any more

"We looked for growth elsewhere and created new equipment, notably the Prodis 40 and Prodis 50 for labels," explains Daniel Morassut, vice president for France at Oki.

Oki quotes the figure of €15,000 ($18,000) for a basic press likely to require additional equipment.

"But be aware of the right economic calculation," advises Albanet at Ballouhey, "as the purchase price of the equipment only accounts for one third of the hourly cost of production. Raw materials, personnel and maintenance must be included in the calculation. For us, producing digital labels is no more expensive than conventional printing."

François Martin, global marketing director at machinery firm Bobst, is a firm believer in the urgent need for a switch to digital. "It's not a question of if, but of when," he claims. "Digital technology has created a tidal wave in a few years. Globally, in 2019, 30 per cent of the turnover in labels was digital, compared with 32 per cent in flexo and 14 per cent in offset. In digital, 60 per cent is from electro-photographic technology and 40 per cent from inkjet, according to Smithers Pira."

The four main reasons to change technology are obvious, explains Martin: fewer moving parts, ease of use, better print quality, and lower costs.

"The five basic market trends: compressed production times, quality and repeatability, agility with customisation and short runs, profitability, and market presence of new applications, are not about to change," he adds.

Digital and virtual are, therefore, shaping trends across all markets, Martin believes, and the label industry cannot afford to ignore this. Printers must plan for a digital future. And in the meantime, the question of cost no longer appears to be such a big issue.

"The price of machines and consumables has come down and will continue to do so," he concludes. "It's a question of volume, and digital also optimises overall production and therefore overall profitability."

One market where digital labels are not yet developed is the wine, champagne and spirits sector. Here, Arnaud Daphy, marketing consultant for French communication and marketing consultancy SoWine, notes an interesting statistic: 57 per cent of young consumers attach significant importance to the label, compared with 30 per cent of people over the age of 55.

"Variable data printing [VDP] also remains very limited, at just 1.6 per cent of volume and 2 per cent in value, to the point that some people have renamed VDP as 'very disappointing printing' because, except in the case of an iconic brand, consumers do not like to see too much alteration to the brand's look," admits Daphy. "In wine, brand recognition remains essential."

Meanwhile, for labelstock producer UPM Biofore, it is increasingly important to make coatings and primers as generic as possible, explains the company's technical sales manager, Thomas Leroy.

"This is essential to enable printers to comply with the different legislation," he warns. "In addition, consumer demand for sustainable packaging is growing every day, with ▶
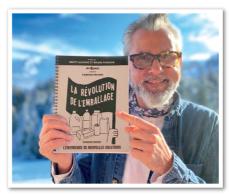
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79 per cent of consumers saying they include this criteria in their purchasing decisions."

Premiumisation is key, adds Victor Abergel, executive vice president and managing director of MGI Digital Technology. "The quality of a product can be presented in a luxurious way simply by using expensive-looking labels and packaging, without making any changes to the product itself," he points out. "On a super-market shelf, a brand's communication has 4.5 seconds of consumer attention. It is estimated that an enhanced label is twice as quickly identified by a consumer."

French designer and journalist Fabrice Peltier believes that we are now seeing the emergence of new solutions across all families of packaging. He recently published a book called The Packaging Revolution, where he positioned the label as part of the 'Rs' revolution: regulation, reduction, refusal, resources, recy-cling, reintegration, and reuse.

"Some new solutions are already on the market, in the process of industrialisation, while some are still at the prototype stage," he says. "We are finally seeing an awareness of the need to match the label and the pack-aging material, in order not to disrupt recycling streams. But my current crusade is to make the industry aware of the importance

French designer Fabrice Peltier says there is finally an awareness of the need to match the label with the packaging material

of reducing printing inks for the sake of the environment.

"The ink load, or amount of ink deposited on the substrate, varies depending on the printing process. For flexography, it is 3 microns (2-3g/m2), letterpress is 3 microns (about 5g/m2), gravure is 7 microns (8-10g/m2) and digital printing is between 3 and 10 microns. Optimising the inked surface is crucial. What is called 'eco-inking' allows for an average reduction of 15-25 per cent in the amount of ink needed to reproduce the

design, sometimes with a reduction in the number of colours."

A pragmatic Peltier advises brands and printers to minimise the inking of the labels by taking care of the fonts (certain typography being much more greedy than others in terms of consumption), evaluating four-colour versus special-colour print, and by studying the density of colours and the weakly-inked visual elements.

Citeo, a not-for-profit company founded from the merger of Eco-Emballages and Ecofolio, with a remit to reduce the environ-mental impact of packaging, has published a practical guide on eco-inking – but for the moment only in French. **P**

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