



Read the label

Innovations in label and printing technology are taking on-package marketing to a whole new level

The old saying “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” is never truer than when it refers to food and beverage products. Often it is distinctive labelling that gives products the edge in the grocery aisle, prompting consumers to take that cursory first look, pluck it off the shelf and make a purchasing decision. That need for shelf appeal, combined with the availability of increasingly sophisticated printing and security technology, have meant labels are now earning greater attention from producers.

Just as food and beverage packaging is generally moving towards greater functionality, labels today do double duty, providing consumer information while helping market the brand. To compete in ever-widening sectors, producers are using new technology – temperature-sensitive labels that indicate food temperature and safety, antimicrobials released by package labelling to prolong shelf life, and time-strip labels that track product quality in perishable goods – as value-added features to attract consumers. “Labels today have multiple functions, as does packaging,” says Carol Zweep, manager of Packaging Services at the Guelph Food Technology Centre in Guelph, Ont. “They’re not only for enhancing the appearance of the products; they really are an additional marketing tool.”

Zweep points to holographic images, counterfeiting inks and even scratch and sniff technology as ways producers are both differentiating and adding value to their products through labelling technology. “This sort of active packaging uses label and packaging technology to convey a message to consumers,” she says, and, she notes, hopefully make the sale.

On the print side, Henry Laszutko, director of Sales for Toronto-based CCL Label, also believes technology is driving trends in labelling. “Printing presses, inks and label substrates have all seen tremendous change,” he says. “Film materials are coming down in price compared to paper, new digital presses are challenging the traditional print methods for short and medium runs, and the functionality of inks has increased dramatically.”

From a marketing viewpoint, Laszutko says shrink sleeves, with their ability to hold brighter, more expansive designs, are a growing trend within the food and beverage industry. “We have seen shrink sleeves become very popular due to the vibrant colours achieved through subsurface printing on gloss shrink films,” he says. “Shrink sleeves provide 360° de-

coration on odd-shaped containers that are challenges for traditional labels due to the compound curves involved.” Graphics in general, says Laszutko, have become more intricate. “The major brands have seen a dramatic increase in the number of colours used to create the brand image. Shelf appeal is more important today than 10 years ago thanks to new TV technology that allows viewers to bypass commercials. The store shelf has taken on a greater role in the battle for market share.”

Laszutko points to trends in other sectors that could eventually appear on food products, giving them the edge over the competition. “In the personal care market metallic inks are very hot right now,” he says. Security measures in the health-care market also protect the brand and offer an additional dose of reassurance for consumers. “For example, companies are utilizing covert features such as special microtaggants in the ink that are IR scannable or are colour coded and visible only under high magnification,” says Laszutko.

In terms of on-label content, food products must now offer more nutritional information, thanks to recent government regulations and growing consumer demand. As a result, there’s been an increase in the use of multiple panel labels, and, predicts Laszutko, “I see an increase in the use of multiple wrap, resealable and booklet-type label constructions to handle copy requirements.” He also notes that on-package promotions are becoming an increasingly popular way to entice consumers to buy. “Booklet labels, instant redeemable coupons and game pieces all take advantage of new inks that are light, heat or moisture sensitive to create innovative promotions,” he says. “Lenticular pieces have now become thin enough to be applied with the existing labelling equipment found in most manufacturing plants.”

But does the higher investment in unique labelling and printing really make a difference to product sales? “It really depends on the print technique or process involved,” says Laszutko, noting that RFID tags, and time and temperature labels are still cost prohibitive for most producers. “Using special inks, however, might add only a penny or two to the cost of the product. If the new look drives sales and profits up then it’s money well spent. Brand managers are forced to walk a fine line between packaging costs and brand image.”

carolyn.cooper@food.rogers.com

“Labels today have multiple functions, as does packaging.”