

Printer's Devils

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Gary Vogt

Last month, I talked to a packaging converter that found the benefits of the Hexachrome process to be compelling. This month, I looked at a company using another Hi-Fi process, Opaltone. Kraft Foods, one of the technology leaders in the packaging industry, is just beginning its conversion of some of its SKUs to Opaltone as part of a larger conversion from gravure to flexography. For this column, I spoke to Gary Vogt, group manager for prepress and print quality, Chicago, New York, and New Jersey, for Kraft Foods. This group produces packaging for beverages, cereals, meats and cheeses, enhancers (like mayonnaise), biscuits, snacks, and confection.

IM: How long have you been using Opaltone?

Vogt: We ran extensive testing last year and now have converted five SKUs. Eventually, we'll likely do more, but we're rolling it out gently. [In February, 2004], our printer [ran] those five SKUs as live jobs for the first time.

IM: What were your primary reasons for investigating Opaltone?

Vogt: The color gamut is interesting, and I think there are subtle enhancements that can be achieved with it, but to me, the really interesting aspects are the improved repeatability and potential for productivity increases. It is important to understand that Opaltone is part of our larger conversion from gravure to flexo. When we ran the tests, we found that Opaltone jobs run on flexographic presses were of equal if not better quality than the same jobs run on gravure presses. Some of this was due to the Opaltone, but some of it was the switch to flexo.

IM: Why make the Opaltone conversion and the flexo conversion at the same time?

Vogt: Opaltone was brought to my attention in late 2002. In early 2003, I got a better understanding of it and became interested in exploring the possibilities. Opaltone runs very well on flexo presses, and once we decided to start the conversion process to flexo, I determined that if we could find a Kraft printer willing to test Opaltone, I'd put up a couple of our jobs toward it. One of our larger printers was interested because they'd just bought 10 new flexo presses, so that's the printer we began testing with. Now, they have several presses dedicated to Opaltone, which is really the only way to run this process economically (otherwise, you'd have to wash up the press each time).

IM: Eventually, how many SKUs would you like to convert to Opaltone?

Vogt: Right now, we are focusing only on this particular line, which has 50-60 SKUs.

IM: You mentioned productivity as one of the other factors involved in testing Opaltone. Can you elaborate?

Vogt: Each of the SKUs uses eight colors each, but only three or four of those colors are common to each SKU. As a result, the press had to be washed up in between jobs. Now, with Opaltone, we can create all of the colors with a single set of ink, so there are no wash-ups. You just hang the plates and print.

IM: Another big factor is repeatability?

Vogt: Yes, we found that, with Opaltone, the color consistency from job to job was greater. Plus, we use less ink. Not only are we using the same set of inks consistently, but we are running them in the same rotation, with the same plates, and the viscosity is set. We don't have to re-engineer the job every time. During our testing, the printer ran the job on three different presses in three different plants. The newer presses had better register, but overall, the color was right where we wanted it to be.

IM: Can you elaborate on your point about using less ink?

Vogt: With Opaltone, we are consistently running less ink on the press. Instead of hitting the substrate with coarser anilox rollers with deep cell volume, we are now able to use much finer line aniloxes with lighter cell depth. This allows us to control our inks better and use less ink. Then there is the elimination of press wash-ups. Every time you wash up a press, you waste a lot of ink.

IM: I'd imagine there are some real time savings, as well?

Vogt: Yes, we figure there is a 70% savings in makeready time.

IM: Going back to the reduction in ink volume for a minute, do you think this reduction is going to be substantial?

Vogt: It's not insignificant. Before, our printer had to manage all these special colors. Now, instead of managing hundreds or thousands of colors, he only has to manage seven (plus white, of course). Plus, with the lighter anilox volume and elimination of wash-ups, the amount of ink is down, as well. Overall, his ink inventory and space requirements are down.

IM: Is there cost savings for you?

Vogt: On the production side, there are huge cost savings for the printer. They are using less ink, they don't have the wash-ups or makereadies, there is reduced anilox and ink inventory, and there is less substrate waste as the presses get up to color. Printers can also run faster press speeds because they are running less color.

As far as cost savings to us [are concerned], since we are just embarking on this transition, we don't know exactly what the savings will be. What I like, though, is that I can run combination forms, because instead of having different press makereadies for each of the different SKUs, I can run them all together. That opens the door to real plate savings, too. All of a sudden, we can start thinking outside the box with what we want to do.

IM: Why did you choose Opaltone as opposed to Hexachrome?

Vogt: At Kraft, we standardized our CMYK colors three years ago. The color densities and things that we run have been established. The Hexachrome gamut relies on specially formulated CMYK, as well as orange and green; and I was not going to change something I'd been printing for the last eight years. With Opaltone, the only change I made was the addition of the Opaltone RGB colors.

IM: Do you feel that, with Opaltone, you also get a wider gamut or a different look than you did previously?

Vogt: Yes, we do get a different look. Plus, the copy is sharper because we are printing lighter; the reverse copy doesn't fill in as much. The flexo print quality is particularly outstanding. Even on some of the gravure work, the extra copy stands out a little more. There are few areas where it picks up that "little extra" we did not have before. Some of these differences are subtle and some are remarkable. Plus, we expect the extra crispness of the package to draw more attention. Customers won't notice why it's different; just that it's different.

IM: To what extent do you think that Hi-Fi processes will affect the way packaging companies and their converters look at color?

Vogt: I think they will affect it a lot, but digital printing will affect the industry more. By that time, I'll probably be retired; but once digital presses get fast enough to compete with traditional presses, I suspect that there won't be much traditional printing anymore.

—Heidi Tolliver-Nigro

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