



KAWEAH'S DIGITAL JOURNEY

AS AN EARLY ADOPTER OF DIGITAL PRE-PRINT, THE CALIFORNIA INDEPENDENT IS LEARNING VERY QUICKLY THE PAIN POINTS AS WELL AS THE VALUE THE NEW TECHNOLOGY OFFERS.

BY JACKIE SCHULTZ

ABOVE: SPORTING KC + HP POLO SHIRTS, THE KAWEAH TEAM INCLUDES (FROM LEFT) SALES MANAGER TIM WILSON, PRESIDENT ROB REEVES, DIGITAL PRINTING SUPERVISOR REG PHILLIPS, PLANT MANAGER DOUG LORENZO, VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS ERIN JENNINGS, CORRUGATOR SUPERVISOR JIMMY HAZE AND T400S OPERATOR ENRIQUE SOTELO.

When HP unveiled its new digital pre-print solution for corrugated Rob Reeves, President of Kaweah Container, Inc. was intrigued. Reeves had been mulling over the concept for several years. "In my mind that was something that would really be a game changer," he says.

A year ago he attended a demonstration of HP's new PageWide Web Press T400S. Not entirely convinced that it would be the right fit for Kaweah, Reeves met with an HP representative and shared his vision. He says the representative sat back and exclaimed, 'My God, you get it. You want to do with this what should be done instead of wanting to pigeon hole it into a pre-print machine like everyone else.' "I wanted to use it in a box plant," Reeves says.

Kaweah was one of the first North American corrugated facilities to install the T400S. The machine began full production in October at the company's corrugator plant in Visalia, Calif. The independent family-owned manufacturer serves



THE NEW HP PAGEWIDE WEB PRESS T400S IS THE FIRST OF ITS KIND FOR CORRUGATED PACKAGING.

the food, wine, industrial, agricultural, and software industries. It has four facilities in California, a corrugator plant and a sheet plant in Visalia and two distribution centers in Stockton and Ontario. Combined square footage is more than 500,000 and the total work force is 250.

Like many independents, it has built its reputation on high quality, exceptional service and fast turnaround. The new HP press offers an opportunity to differentiate and approach the process of making a box from an entirely different direction.

42-inch Conundrum

The T400S is located in an enclosed room near the 98-inch MarquipWardUnited corrugator. The high-speed, simplex color inkjet web press is the first of its kind for corrugated packaging. It can print at speeds up to 600 ft/minute or 125,000 sq ft/hour. Featuring HP's print engine technology, it produces near-offset quality and 100% variable printing at production speeds on 42-inch wide rolls of linerboard.

It's understandable why Reeves

was drawn to digital pre-print. The advantages are extensive and include no tooling, short setups, versioning, quick turnaround, and almost limitless color possibilities. It is designed to compete with high-end direct print flexo, traditional pre-print, laminated singleface, and litho lamination.

While digital printing is often associated with smaller quantities, the T400S can easily accommodate higher volume orders. "If we ran the press three shifts a day, it would run enough linerboard to produce between nine and 11 truckloads of product," he says.



THE 42-INCH ROLLS OF DIGITALLY PRINTED LINERBOARD ARE RUN ON THE COMPANY'S 98-INCH CORRUGATOR.

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"Right now we're limiting our sales offering because we want to fill a roll. Having to trim into a roll just adds a whole expert degree of difficulty, especially for the corrugator that we don't want to play with right now. A roll is about a third of a truckload — 15 to 20 pallets. That's what we're considering our minimum at this point."

As an early adopter of digital pre-print, Reeves knew that there was going to be a significant amount of trial and error. "It's a journey and it is not over," he says. "Fortunately, I've got a great team that's entrepreneurial thinking and says, 'Why not?' instead of 'Why?' when you ask them if we can do something."

Reconciling the web differences between the T400S and the corrugator required a number of modifications on the corrugator. The company continues to experiment with proprietary configurations to accommodate the narrow width rolls. "What we lack in resources we have to make up in creativity," Reeves says. "But we actually expect that we're going to be able to do something that I don't think has been done in a box plant."

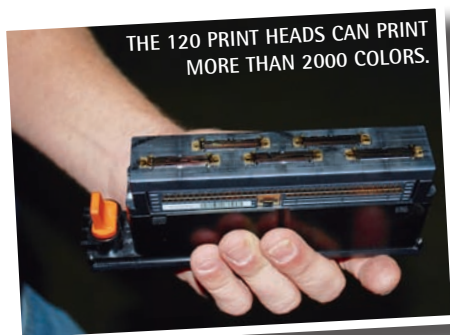
Corrugator Manager Jimmy Haze says the narrow digital printed rolls are treated just like any other roll on the corrugator, although special guides had to be developed to control web weave. The corrugator runs C-, B- and E-flute.

"I'm proud of my crew. There's a noticeable improvement every time we run it. It's exciting and a morale booster," Reeves says.

Erin Jennings, Vice President of Operations, adds, "This is how we do things around here. We come up with insanity and then we figure out how to make it reality."

Paradigm Shift

The digital press can print process images on mottled white linerboard on a range of thicknesses from 12 to 72# (60 to 350 gsm). It has two Harris & Bruno coaters, a ColorGate color management system, and a Weko paper conditioner. Digital Printing Supervisor Reg Phillips says the machine has 120 print heads and can print more than 2000 colors.



THE DIGITAL PRESS CAN PRINT PROCESS IMAGES ON MOTTLED WHITE LINERBOARD ON A RANGE OF THICKNESSES FROM 12 TO 72#.



KAWEAH HANDED OUT THESE DIGITALLY PRINTED PROMOTIONAL SAMPLES AT PACKEXPO IN NOVEMBER.

One headwind has been customers' mindset about the print quality, especially on corrugated. "Buyers and designers are so accustomed to, 'It's just a box. It's corrugated.' So they design for that. We've already started a dialogue to explain, 'No you don't understand. You don't have to do that anymore,'" Jennings says.

"It's a complete paradigm shift with the sales department also," Tim Wilson, Sales Manager, says. "We don't even know what we should be selling or how we should be selling it. The application to the customer and what's available to them is just a whole new realm."

"We don't know what we don't know. The gamut of what is possible is huge. What is your imagination?" Jennings adds.

In November, Kaweah was preparing digitally printed promotional samples to take to PackExpo. There were 16 different 11 x 14 1/2 -inch samples. On one side were litho quality multi-color images. Printed on the other side was the company name, logo and web address on solid white and kraft blocks. What was noteworthy about the backside was that the kraft was printed

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on mottled white board, overcoming inkjet's inability to print white.

One customer ordered samples of a new display ready package for its PackExpo booth. The single piece design featured a tray hood with a small area for product information on the front of the tray. Kaweah digitally printed 21 different versions with images of different foods.

"They were excited about our ability to print the display information. You can have real photographs in a very small amount of space," Wilson says.

Reeves adds, "In order to get a high graphic image like that you're either going to have to run it traditional pre-print, which they didn't have the volume for, or you have to do high-end direct flexo on Kemi, but most of this box gets ripped off and thrown away. Our ability to print the high-graphic image on mottled white was a game changer for them."

Downstream Efficiencies

Plant Manager Doug Lorenzo says the new HP press is going to make the converting operation more efficient and alleviate significant bottlenecks. "Now we won't have those atrocious setups for four, five, and six-color jobs," he says.

Pointing to the printed samples for PackExpo, he says. "That would take us upwards of 14 hours on our flexo presses. We ran it digital in three and a half hours."

Kaweah has six flexo folder-glueers and two rotary diecutters. The machines range from two- to six-color, however, one- and two-color RSCs represent about 70% of business.

It is not the plan to convert existing flexo jobs to digital. "At the end of the day we're still going to be an industrial



"OUR GOAL FOR CONVERTING IS TO BUY EQUIPMENT THAT DOES THE BEST JOB RUNNING ONE- AND TWO-COLOR FLEXO JOBS AND PRODUCE AS QUICKLY AS WE CAN," ROB REEVES, PRESIDENT, SAYS.

box plant. That's what pays the bills," Reeves says. "Our goal for converting is to buy equipment that does the best job running one- and two-color flexo jobs and produce as quickly as we can. It becomes a throughput question as opposed to a print quality question."

Wilson adds, "This brings to the table customers who were having their high-graphic work done somewhere else, but it also gives us an opportunity to enter a new market with new customers who in the past perhaps didn't see a reason to take a phone call from Kaweah Container because they already know what we do."

Reeves says it's refreshing to bring something new to customers. "You call someone and say, 'Hey, I'd like to talk to you about your box business' and they hang up on you because you're the seventh guy that's called them that day. But you call somebody and say, 'I'd like to talk to you about this new digital printing technology that we have and most of the time it's, 'Let's see if we can find a time to get together and talk.'"

An Unusual Start

Kaweah was started by a family-owned farming business currently run by third and fourth generation owners Rob and Tommy Elliott. The business specializes in citrus, packing millions of cases of oranges annually. The Elliots established the box plant in the 1980s to support their farming operation. Today, only about 2% of Kaweah's business is internal and 15% of total sales is in agriculture. A lot of that was done by design. "We didn't want the box plant and the farming operation to have a bad year at the same time," Reeves says. More than 70% of the customer base is industrial food processing companies.

Reeves has almost 30 years of experience in the corrugated industry. He joined Kaweah in 2004 when the company had 15 employees and three machines. Wilson started about six months after Reeves. With some strategic positioning and capital equipment investments, the company expanded to the point where it added the MWU corrugator in 2013.

Jennings, who previously worked at Graphic Packaging and Georgia-Pacific, has been impressed with the constant investment in new technology. Since she joined the company 10 pieces of equipment have been installed "and these are not little pieces of equipment," she says.

Recent purchases include a new 50-inch two-color Apstar flexo folder-gluer from the Haire Group, a new pre-feeder from Alliance Machine Systems International and EFI's Corrugated Packaging Suite for inventory tracking, pricing and order management.

The investment in the T400S was significant. "We could have had a new corrugator, but from my perspective it was worth the investment. It puts us in a position to present something that we



ON THE BACK OF THE PACKEXPO SAMPLES WAS THE COMPANY NAME, LOGO, WEB ADDRESS AND KRAFT DIGITALLY PRINTED ON MOTTLED WHITE LINER.

were never going to be able to present," Reeves says.

"We do a lot of things very different than most box companies," he continues. "Our goal is to do everything

we can to say yes to the customer. I believe that if we just shut up for a minute and listen they'll tell us what we need to do in order to allow us to continue to grow."

"Rob likes to say that we're a service business that just happens to make boxes," Jennings says. In fact, that's the tag line on the company's web site.

Until recently, Kaweah has kept a very low profile. "The world doesn't know a whole lot about us and that's been by design," Reeves says. "If the big companies wanted they could just squash us. That's not the case anymore."

Indeed, as one of the first corrugated companies in the world to install a digital pre-print press, Kaweah has shined a spotlight on itself. ■

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