

The Impact of Digital Packaging Innovation



By [Cory Francer](#)

For the modern consumer, the shopping experience is far more meaningful than simply acquiring products, explains brand packaging consultant Mike Ferrari, founder of Ferrari Innovation Solutions. Instead, Ferrari explains that today's consumers live in the moment, seeking out unique experiences — even when browsing store aisles.

“That will be more interesting to them, rather than something that is generic,” says Ferrari, who spent 32 years with Procter & Gamble. “Sameness is gone and consumers are looking at their products as something that speaks to them, not something that is institutional for the masses.”

Because of this shift in consumer behaviors and preference, Ferrari explains that the advantages digital printing brings to the packaging industry are becoming more prominent than ever. Brands are seeking out ways to create packaging that speaks to consumers as individuals, and using digital printing to customize and tailor content to individual consumers can create that connection.

Customization Drives Consumption

Not only are today's consumers looking for different experiences from the brands they interact with, they have a new tool that is shaping the way they interact with products. Ferrari explains that nearly 70% of the world's population has mobile connectivity, and can therefore connect with social media at any time.



The Lay's Summer Days campaign featured customization and earned a Gold Award in the 2016 Flexible Packaging Association Achievement Awards. Image via FPA.

Ferrari points out that through the use of digital printing, brands have been able to use packaging to enter new communication channels, with social media being at the forefront. For example, Ferrari says that a campaign from Frito-Lay demonstrated an excellent strategy of using digital printing to engage consumers via social media. The “Lay's Summer Days” campaign allowed consumers of Lay's potato chips to upload a summer-themed image through an interactive tool on the Lay's website. Then, according to a press release from Frito-Lay, the first 10,000 submissions approved by the brand would receive a custom bag of Lay's chips personalized with their photo.

“Because it had a cool factor, you’re more likely to push this through social media and tell 10 friends about this,” Ferrari says. “Perhaps Frito-Lay gains additional Facebook friends, which is always good for marketing.”

While social media is changing the way people shop for products in stores, the growth of ecommerce has also created a variety of opportunities for digital printing to add customization to packaging. Coinciding with the customization and personalization capabilities, the rapid technological advancements in digital printing for corrugated are providing brands with the opportunity to connect with consumers on a visual and personal level.

In direct-to-consumer channel strategies, such as catalog and internet retailing, companies have been challenged to develop effective packaging strategies, says Jeff Wettersten, president of industry consulting and market research firm, Karstedt Partners.

Because corrugated shipping containers are typically the product of choice to manage these shipments, Wettersten says brands must make difficult choices about this packaging. Since the product is already sold, should the brand add graphics to the shipping container to further the connection between the brand and consumer? If so, can this be done in a way that doesn’t reveal the contents of the package when it is left at the consumer’s door?

Wettersten explains that consumers can react negatively to packaging that does not align with their perception of the product, or the company selling the product. He says implementing labels onto a shipping container can be negatively perceived when used to communicate content information and product descriptions, unless the label is consistent with what the consumer experiences through traditional retail channels. The key, Wettersten says, is for the brand to convey the same brand engagement through its packaging regardless of channel.

For example, Wettersten says he is familiar with an online retailer that has been successful with the use of digital printing for personalization, but has also leveraged its ability to decorate the interior of a shipping box around certain holidays and events.

“Around key holidays like Valentine’s Day, or if you wanted to preorder for birthdays, you could do that,” Wettersten says. “That would be printed with flexo. Then they would take the same blanks and run those through a digital operation for custom print on the inside with personalization.”

Beyond CPG Brands

While digital printing has provided several opportunities for brands to explore personalization and package versioning, it has also opened the door to other new users of packaging, away from the traditional CPG world.



Distinct Packaging provides custom digitially printed packaging. Image via Distinct Packaging.

Distinct Packaging, a custom packaging company specializing in digitally-printed folding cartons and corrugated boxes, has found that its business model is beneficial to any brand seeking short runs of packaging, but has also opened up opportunities with new customers that may not be typical packaging customers.

For example, General Manager Dwight Blaha explains that there are multiple Distinct Packaging customers that have been able to enhance their marketing materials through the power of digital printing.

“There are opportunities in the space that haven’t been thought of or haven’t been fully realized by folks,” Blaha says. “There are activities that companies participate in, such as a welcome kit for new students that have been accepted to a university. You are sending a customized box to those students, which is something that hasn’t been done in the past, but is something we’ve seen as a little bit of a trend recently. Or, we’ve seen marketing events where people are doing giveaways that would have been done with bags & are now being done with boxes.”

According to Randy Barron, Distinct Packaging’s director of product innovation and business development, a key part of digital packaging’s appeal is that it enhances the “unboxing experience,” and extends the brand’s reach beyond just the product inside.

“People we never would have thought of contacting us want to do some kind of promotion to their key top 500 customers or launch a new brand product,” Barron says. “They don’t just want to say, ‘here’s my product.’ The packaging becomes part of that product extension and part of that branding.”

In some instances however, digital printing technology can help brands and organizations decorate products while bypassing packaging altogether. Jim Lambert, VP and GM of INX International, explains that direct object printing is poised to take product décor to unprecedented levels of customization and accessibility.

Through its JetINX drive and ink recirculation system, INX International has been among the pioneers of direct digital object printing, and has even launched its own cylindrical printing system, the INX CP 100 UV Digital Cylindrical Printer. Lambert explains that this technology has made the customizability advantages of digital printing a reality for a variety of end users.

“We’re seeing people now wanting to print on everything from beverage cans to packages to baseball bats — you name it,” Lambert says. “Anything they can fixture and then print on, that’s what people will do. Even consumer products — if you look at an aerosol can that’s typically printed with dry offset, they’re wanting to do regionalized or localized campaigns that will allow them to print, instead of 500,000 of one thing, they can print 100,000 and make it specific to one geographic market.”

Embracing the ‘All Digital Workflow’

Despite the many advantages that digital printing technology can bring to packaging, package printers should be aware that getting the most out of digital often requires more than simply adding a new press. For example, Ferrari explains that digital finishing and packaging embellishment platforms can both streamline the packaging production process and create new ways for brands to enhance their packaging to make it stand out on shelf.

Then, through the use of software, digital printing and finishing platforms can communicate with each other, allowing the technology to reach its full potential.



These folding cartons from Tap Packaging Solutions are an example of versioning with digital printing.

“There are new doors that have been opened as the result of an all digital workflow,” Ferrari says. “It’s software that is touching and connecting all of the machines. So you have digital printing, you’ve got digital decoration and you’ve got digital diecutting and finishing. ... A design group can now use fancy cuts as part of the decoration that they could never do before because a platen die that is stamping cannot stamp those tiny pieces out very nicely. And it costs so much money and time to go and make a die.”

Lambert explains that because digital printing’s print speeds are often slower than that of conventional, some may see it as a disadvantage of the technology. However, because the digital workflow is far more streamlined and does not require making and changing plates, there are significant efficiency advantages.

“When I look at things & describe things to people, the disadvantage is not that it’s slower in speed,” he says. “You have to look at throughput from the beginning to the end of a job and that’s what a lot of people tend to ignore.”

Making the Digital Decision

When making the decision on how to implement digital printing into a package printing workflow, printers and converters need to consider their overall strategy for the technology, Wettersten says. In particular, he says that as a printer’s digital output volume increases, the more important it becomes to streamline the entire process from end to end.

“Some converters look at digital printing and say ‘I want to use it as a disruptor in the market place,’” Wettersten says. “Or, ‘I want to attack multiple points of inefficiency that exist in the market and utilize my digital asset to do that.’ The same equipment can be employed under multiple different business models. It’s a question of how far do you want to extend your strategy and what your strategy is.”

Ferrari explains that when deciding on which digital asset to acquire, package printers should focus on the solutions they aim to provide for their customers, and not get bogged down in using what he refers to as “legacy metrics” to calculate a return on investment.

For example, Ferrari explains that just because a digital press may print slower than a conventional press and the price per piece may be higher, it does not mean the technology is not ready. Instead, package printers should focus on how the technology can alleviate problems for customers and use that information to measure value.

“Because the business is changing, the strategy shouldn’t be using legacy metrics and using a straight ROI,” he says. “Instead, ask yourself, ‘What new services or goods can I offer my clients? What brand challenges can I solve for my clients?’ If you are solving somebody’s problem, that’s worth a lot of money. And that’s not in a straight ROI.”