

THE INDISPENSABLE TOOL FOR CONVERTERS & PRINTERS OF FLEXIBLE PACKAGING

FLEXIBLE PACKAGING

Tom Michalsen, marketing director (left), and Glenn Gilly, president and chief executive officer at Weber Marking Systems.



Weber Marking Systems

LIMITLESS IN LABELING



W eber Marking: Limitless in labeling

Well established in RFID and now digging into digital printing, Weber Marking Systems is proving it's more than your father's label maker.

When Joseph Weber Sr. founded Weber Addressing Machine Co. in 1932, the economy was dragging along a murky bottom. Regardless, the entrepreneur forged ahead, ultimately building a successful company rooted in all things labeling, including printer-applicators.

Fast forward 78 years, and yet again, the economy is trudging through economic doldrums. Like the company's formative years, the company—now called Weber Marking Systems—is again faced with the challenge of developing, improving and growing labeling solutions in a lackluster economy.

Through the years, the company's commitment to labeling solutions has remained solid over eight decades, although the players on Weber's roster have certainly changed in that time. Stencil printing gave way to flexographic printing years ago. Weber's hand-crank (and later electromechanical) label printers—considered revolutionary technology in their time—pale in comparison to some innovations that currently drive Weber's success: digital printing, radio frequency identification (RFID) and sustainable production practices.

GONE DIGITAL

Flexographic printing first came to Weber in 1974, and since, the company has grown to operate 76 flexographic presses in five worldwide converting operations. Firmly entrenched in nearly every label market imaginable—from medical to retail;

plastics to automotive; and food to pharmaceutical—Weber's work in flexo shows no signs of stopping.

However, the growing trend toward seasonal and time-sensitive labels, regionally focused products and multiple SKU (stock keeping unit) entries has created a mismatch of short-run orders and high-volume flexo printing capacities. To effectively address this challenge, Weber installed a Hewlett-Packard Indigo ws4500 digital press at its Arlington Heights, Ill., location in November 2008.

"We see digital printing as a huge benefit to our business," says Tom Michalsen, Weber's marketing director. Michalsen explains that shorter runs of pressure-sensitive labels reduce customers' inventory costs and keep them more flexible in the marketing of their products. But the benefits of digital don't stop with label storage and inventory.

"If you try to set an 8- to 10-color job with rotary flexo, you're going to spend three or four hours setting that job up before you start sending anything through the press," says Michalsen. "And for 5,000 to 10,000 feet, you might run 45 minutes and you're done.

"We've found with digital that there is no scrap and there is no setup. You start printing immediately."

Linda Roser, media coordinator for digital print, indicates that the digital press has brought big changes and opportunities to Weber by fulfilling a unique niche.

"With the digital press, we're not running jobs with a

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half million labels,” says Roser. “We’re running smaller jobs from 5,000 and up to 100,000 labels. It really is for short runs and quick turnaround.”

Roser explains that the digital press excels in producing labels for clients who may be testing a new product in the marketplace and require just a few thousand labels. “Instead of having to go with our standard flexographic presses where our minimums might be higher for the amount of labels required, we can print either a couple labels or a few thousand and let them test the market before they make a commitment to buy a larger quantity of labels,” notes Roser.

Whether a specific job goes to the HP press or one of 38 flexo presses at Weber’s Arlington Heights plant isn’t an indiscriminate choice, but instead a conscious decision to optimize several variables beside job size. The digital press

features a printable area or “frame” of 12 x 17 inches. Michalsen explains that jobs reach an optimal point when nine labels can be ganged within this frame and use three or more colors.

“Generally, with runs under the 5,000 or 6,000 linear feet mark, digital starts looking pretty attractive,” says Michalsen. “The crossover seems to come around there, and after that, you’re doing flexo.”

Weber’s digital capabilities have attracted both new and existing clients. While benefits of the printing form are usually immediate and recognizable, some existing clients have initially required some extra attention and effort to transition completely.

“We have to rationalize things when transitioning some of our existing business,” says Michalsen. “If you take a file and produce it digitally, the printed

image is going to be an exact output of that file. If customers have requested PMS [Pantone Matching System] color shifts on current flexo-printed labels, it can be difficult to match the color shifts when printing in a 4-color process, digital format.”

As with any introduction of new technology, Weber has experienced a learning curve, and small but steadily increasing successes.

“We’re still in a learning curve with digital,” says Michalsen. “At this point, we’ve transitioned about 5% of our current business, but we’ve earned a lot of new business as well.”

The Indigo press allows Weber to work in variable data printing, but the converter regularly turns to another new installation—a high-speed variable imprint system—to further capitalize on the variable data trend.



Weber’s latest addition to its printing capabilities includes this Hewlett-Packard Indigo w4500 digital press. Left to right: John O’Leary, manufacturing director; Linda Roser, digital media coordinator; and Todd Peterson, digital press operator.

Weber introduced a new Jetrion on-press UV ink jet system in January on one of its flexo presses. Used to apply any number of bar codes (one- and two-dimensional), text, sequential numbers or expiration dates, the Jetrion system operates at up to 250 feet per minute and provides more than nine inches of potential print width. The system has a maximum print resolution of 316 x 526 dots per inch (dpi) and every bar code is verified prior to shipping.

RFID IN THE REAL WORLD

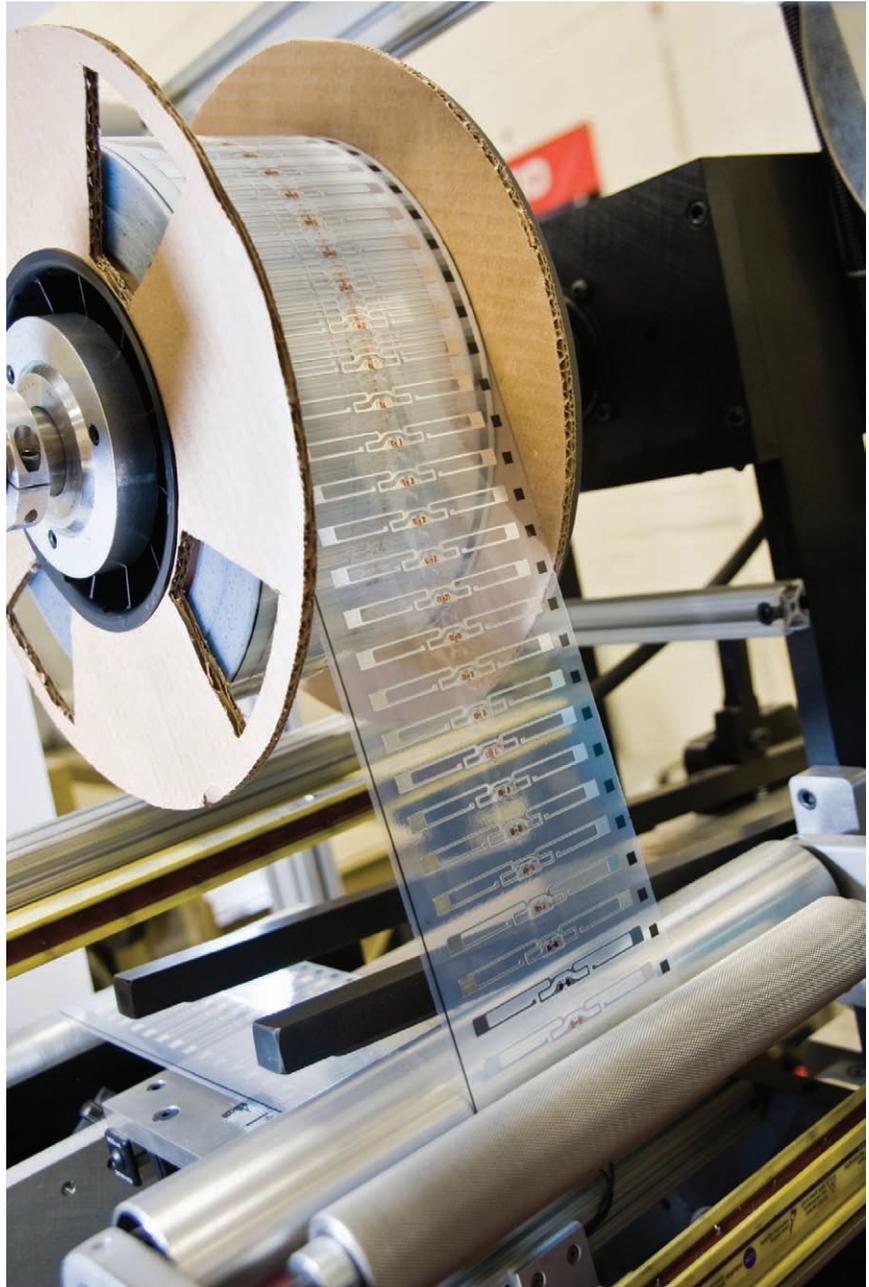
Weber Marking Systems numbers itself a leading label manufacturer and, considering the technical quality of its flexo and digital labels, that's a reasonable statement. But if you're looking for some of Weber's additional expertise and innovations, head 'round to the back—of the label, that is.

Branded SmartTrak, RFID inlays applied to the back of pressure-sensitive labels allow Weber's retailer and government agency clients to track products through their supply chains.

Michalsen explains that Weber has been actively involved in the RFID market for three years and already has seen shifts in RFID's growth and direction.

"The RFID trend started out with the consumer packaged goods (CPG) groups—that was the whole initiative a few years ago with Wal-Mart," says Michalsen. He notes the growth of RFID in CPGs has leveled out, though some initiatives with Sam's Club remain strong. "Now, more of the work that we are getting is in closed-loop systems where people can track their goods within their network and distribution."

One industry-wide challenge facing RFID labels concerns the fragility of the tiny chips and antennas. Virtually every step of the conversion process, from initial assembly, through application of the inlay and winding of the rollstock, presents the potential for damage, including physical breakage or damage from static electricity inherent in the



converting process.

"We need to make sure nothing has happened to the antenna and the chip while we're making it," says Michalsen. "So we use a system to mark bad tags, ones that are non-responsive and remove those defective inlays" before they hit Weber's thermal-transfer RFID printer-encoders and applicators. Weber's

Ultra-thin radio frequency identification (RFID) inlays prepare to be embedded on the backside of SmartTrak labels in the making. RFID inlays allow retailers and other clients to track product data throughout supply chains.

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Production on Weber's presses includes automatic in-line video inspection of many labels, but pharmaceutical, nutraceutical and medical device labels receive an additional video or human-eye inspection.

inspection process, in addition to certifications by the inlay manufacturer, supports the converter's guarantee that 100% of smart labels are tested and verified prior to shipping.

SUSTAINABILITY FOR BUSINESS

After digital printing and RFID inlays, can there be any more room left in Weber's 320,000 square foot Arlington Heights plant for the latest flexible packaging trends? Absolutely.

"Recently, sustainability is the big buzzword around here," says Michalsen. "There's more interest in that, I think, because of the Wal-Mart scorecard."

As Weber immersed itself more

and more in the sustainability trend, however, it encountered a large question mark more and more: "A lot of people were saying, 'Give me a green label,' but not really knowing where it will end up going," says Michalsen. With this challenge, though, Weber saw an opportunity and called it Weber GreenWise.

"Weber GreenWise is a way we can help people and provide products for sustainability," says Randy Stake, marketing communications manager. Such products might include post-consumer waste (PCW) paper labels, soy-based inks or thinner films. "But it's not only about the materials we offer:

We can consult on those things, too."

The Weber GreenWise effort includes a significant amount of external programs and practices and is supported by considerable internal initiatives as well. Over the past year, Weber gradually converted all of its Tier 5 and Tier 8 in-plant lighting through a local utility program. The conversion ultimately earned an environmental stewardship award from the utility company, Commonwealth Edison. In addition to the award and realized energy savings, the investment reduced the converter's carbon footprint by the equivalent of 14,900 tons of airborne pollutants or 1.4 million gallons of

gasoline over the life span of the new lighting system.

While Weber has certainly done its homework in sustainability, to some degree the Weber GreenWise initiative still takes the learning curve right alongside its clients, too. For example, Weber is interested in and uses corn-based PLA (polylactic acid) film, a 100% earth-to-earth product, where practical.

“But we recently had someone who was interested in PLA and said, ‘We like the idea of that film and want to use it on HDPE bottles that will be recycled,’” remembers Michalsen. “Well, guess what? If it’s not compatible with the grind of HDPE, you can’t use PLA. So that’s what we have to overcome, including education at the end-user level.”

While the Weber GreenWise program is the most recent culmination of direct service and presenting a customer with a complete package, such a mindset has been around nearly as long as the company.

“We found real early that we don’t succeed unless we’re selling what we call our complete system,” says Michalsen. “We win when we’re able to do a turnkey for the whole product and scope, including label printers and automatic label applicators. In this economy, we recognize that we need to treat our customers with the utmost skill level and responsiveness—you just have to over-serve them.”

While many flexible packaging

converters are inclined to diversify product portfolios and reach out to myriad markets to ensure success, Michalsen explains that one of Weber’s strongest traits and keys to success in the varied business climates it has encountered over eight decades is the company’s ability to stay the course.

“We do pressure-sensitive labeling and we don’t take it lightly,” asserts Michalsen. “We know the customers rely on our expertise and not to take them down avenues that they could fail in. So, do we ever go down an in-mold path? No, we looked at it, but it didn’t fit our core. Do we go down the shrink labeling path? We might one day, but again, it’s really not our core.”

Besides knowing its core to ensure success, Weber sustains success by drilling down to core costs, maximizing efficiency and reducing material usage and scrap production throughout its manufacturing lines. “In these times, especially with an economy that’s this tough, you’ve got to take care of your material costs and make sure that your material estimates are as close as possible to your actual numbers,” he says.

Currently, Weber uses a custom estimating platform and an Oracle capture system to account for actual production costs. While the systems may work alongside each other, they may disagree from time to time as Michalsen explains.

“When we output a job and we

finish that job, and we look at the Oracle simulation system, which said we were going to have scrap at 20%; and we had 20% scrap,” says Michalsen. “Then we look back to the estimating system and it said we were only going to have 8% scrap. That sort of a spread on a more costly material becomes expensive and you’re in trouble from the get-go.”

In response, Weber formed a task force that meets twice weekly and includes all facets of the production process, including manufacturing, production control, estimators, product managers and information technology (IT) personnel.

Whether organizing a task force or maintaining its ISO 9001 quality rating, Weber joins a relentless pursuit of improvement and a solid sense of commitment to pressure-sensitive labeling, a practice that Michalsen offers to other companies in the converting industry.

“Other converters need to stick with the markets they do best in and keep getting better all the time,” says Michalsen. “And if you’re not ISO, you better be. It makes you look at everything you do, every step of the way, and weed out the bad steps, document the good ones and prove they’re the good ones.” ■

Weber Marking Systems

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