



X-Label: Investing heavily in combination printing capacities

Over the past two years, X-Label has added several Gallus EM 410 S, EM 280 and RCS 330 presses to its range of machinery.

X-label GmbH has consistently achieved above-average growth in the label industry. In just 15 years, the group has established a reputation as one of the top European suppliers. This rapid expansion is reflected in investment levels – the production facilities were recently equipped with the latest models from Gallus. In the past two years alone, the company has acquired four printing lines from the EM 410S range, three type EM 280 presses and an RCS 330 for offset-based combination printing with twelve print stations.

In 1996, the company's current Managing Directors, Jan Oberbeck and Tim Fiedler, and the Schürfeld Group from Hamburg took over X-label, which had been founded in Erfurt five years earlier. Since then, the supplier of adhesive labels, sleeves, tube laminates and decorative promotional packaging products has established a strong position in the European market. By expanding its operations and taking over rival firms such as EK-Print Etiketten GmbH, based in Lübbecke, Manz GmbH & Co. KG, based in Solingen, and Knaup GmbH, based in Kirchlingern, the group has continuously expanded its capacity.



The takeover of Knaup was particularly effective in boosting the group's success. This additional production capacity proved crucial in satisfying last year's higher-than-average demand in some sectors. The company was able to distribute orders more efficiently and provided a faster and more cost-effective service as a result. In 2006, X-label achieved total sales of over Euro 60 million with a workforce of approximately 300 employees. The company's strategy is to develop locations to be more specialised, group together offerings and focus on its core skills.

Capacity on a European scale

X-label's most important customers operate in the cosmetics, cleaning and

washing product, and premium food and beverage sectors. The company has found that businesses in these sectors tend to bundle packaging and label production orders for branded products with as few suppliers as possible. In some instances, X-label has been approached with enquiries covering the whole of Europe. When it comes to properly processing orders of this magnitude, high-performance manufacturing capacities are essential. That is why, over the past two years, the X-label Group has invested heavily in a range of cutting-edge Gallus presses. Equally important, however, is a highly skilled workforce with the right technical skills, logistics know-how and foreign language abilities.



The company recently received a query regarding a lavishly designed adhesive label that involved a high degree of finishing work. The design involved ten-colour printing with silver embossing and all-over opaque white. An additional vignette in white was also needed and the entire process used a combination of frequency-modulated screens and a calendered varnishing. The end-customer also wanted gloss levels of 95 points. To meet extreme requirements such as these, which are commonplace in the cosmetics sector and also apply for some high-quality beverage packaging jobs, X-label Managing Directors Jan Oberbeck and Tim Fiedler primarily intend to use their recently installed Gallus RCS 330.

The ideal combination for every application

As the job described above shows, a single printing method is no longer sufficient for the production of complex labels. There are very few products in X-label's job structure that do not integrate screenprinting with one or two colours. That is why the various presses operated at X-label are designed for combination printing. This applies both to the Gallus RCS 330, which is usually used for offset printing, and to the various EM series, which are primarily used for flexographic printing. According to Fiedler, when these two presses are in action, it quickly becomes clear that they have been designed by a manufacturer that is extremely familiar with the specific requirements of the sector. "For reasons of cost efficiency alone, we make sure that each and every press is being used to its maximum potential," adds Oberbeck. "Experience tells us that labels can be produced much more cost-effectively when a manufacturing line has been optimally configured for the order requirements related to a specific area of application. After all, the individual market segments where X-label operates differ in terms of key factors such as colour, format, finishing, design of front and reverse sides, etc.



“A press that aims to cover just about everything in an attempt to satisfy requirements that customers may have in future is a lame-duck investment because it will never be used to its full potential,” comments Oberbeck. That is why the various printing lines in X-label’s pressrooms have been custom-designed for their relevant market segments. For example, the three EM 280 presses installed by the company over the past two years are used for cosmetics and beverage labels. They manufacture self-adhesive materials almost exclusively. In contrast, the four Gallus EM 410 S presses that were recently installed are also used to print monofoils for sleeve labelling, for example.

This approach also means that machine operators can work extremely efficiently on their presses because they can acquire an in-depth understanding of the intricate quality requirements specific to their area of application. In contrast, a broader-based approach to order management is less efficient as printers then need to change between different sets of quality specifications on a much more frequent basis.

Making even more of strengths

Oberbeck and Fiedler believe that the EM 280 series represents the most advanced technology for flexographic combination printing currently available on the narrow web market. But earlier models, some of which X-label uses, were also seen as highly efficient production facilities within the company. Feedback from production staff at X-label indicates that the latest generation of these models provides even better performance in terms of productivity and waste minimisation.

A particularly popular feature among machine operators is the decoupled impression cylinder that Gallus introduced for the EM 280 at Labelexpo 2005. Oberbeck is also fond of the web thickness monitoring system available for the RCS 330. This technology helps to avoid press downtimes by automatically raising the forme from the web at the flawed areas of the substrate during screenprinting.



When selecting technical equipment, X-label also takes into account the availability of identical machine configurations in different web widths. For example, each EM 280 series press (web width = 280 mm) at X-label is matched by an equivalent from the EM 410 series (web width = 410 mm) with the same number of print and finishing stations. This helps to ensure cost-effective production because jobs with an inefficient repeat pattern or label sizes can be shifted to a wider press. Using identical technical configurations ensures, for example, that labels of different sizes for a single product range exhibit identical print quality.

Number of print stations increases

Most of the newly installed flexographic presses comprise ten stations that for the most part are fully utilised within the current production structure. A recent audit at X-label revealed that, on average, 8.8 print stations are used per order for flexographic printing, screen printing and foil embossing. This average is set to grow. It is entirely conceivable that orders from the cosmetics industry in particular will push even the twelve-colour RCS 330 to its limits in some instances, making a second run with inseting necessary.

The increase in the number of colours opens up a whole range of production opportunities, but Fiedler points out the flip-side of this development: Besides extra investment, more space needs to be provided to house the presses, which are growing ever longer. That also has a negative impact on waste levels. This is why, when evaluating an investment, he believes that waste reduction is just as important as factors such as short setup times and high productivity. And indeed these were the precise Gallus press features that most impressed X-label.

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