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**BUSTING
THE MYTH
AROUND INKJET
BARCODE
PRINTING ON
CASES**

Introduction

Every so often big box retailers issue a new requirement for suppliers outlining what is acceptable when it comes to the presentation of variable information on case-level packaging. Retailers push for standardization to minimize disruptions in how they move products from their distribution centers all the way to their store shelves. The waste and inefficiencies caused by poor case coding practices are real, but the suggested solutions put forth by retailers that discourage print-on-demand inkjet misses the mark with suppliers in several big ways.

The big myth that retailers have bought into is that “industrial inkjet cannot easily produce scannable barcodes.” This lack of confidence in industrial inkjet technology is misplaced and can be easily rectified if manufacturers large and small make some minor adjustments to how they approach their coding on case-level packaging.

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Scannable barcodes start with capable inkjet printers

Not all inkjet printers are created equal. If manufacturers need to print barcodes on their cases in addition to other variable information like lot codes, batch codes, and best by dates, it is in their best interest to select a high resolution inkjet printing technology that is robust enough to produce high quality prints consistently over long periods of time.

Inkjet printers that are up to the task need to be able to maintain themselves. Manufacturers should look for inkjet printers that have auto-cleaning printheads and can be easily repaired to extend the useable life of the system. The actual printing power behind the inkjet printer needs to be robust enough to throw the ink at long distances as well as maintain top-notch print quality at increasingly faster speeds. This guards against common print irregularities when faced with overfilled or skewed cases and ensures the technology can adapt and grow with the business as production throughput and line speeds increase.



Scannable barcodes require a practical approach to material handling

It is easy to produce scannable barcodes in a lab environment because material handling conditions are always perfect. The same cannot be said for production environments. Operating within sterile, lab-like conditions isn't realistic which is why extra attention needs to be paid to the material handling strategy paired with industrial inkjet technology. Material handling is usually the failure point when it comes to barcode quality.

When looking at material handling in relation to inkjet printers, considerations need to be made for the level of vibration on the conveyor line as well as how the case is presented in front of the inkjet printer. Both vibration as well as case presentation are key to printing high quality barcodes. Some strategies like mounting inkjet printers to a floor stand as opposed to the conveyor line can reduce print irregularities caused by excessive vibration. Additionally, choosing an inkjet printer that has built in material guidance capabilities like slide rollers or linear retraction helps cut down on corrugate dust as well as helps maintain the proper distance between the printhead and the case.

Nearly 100% scannable barcodes can be achieved

Manufacturers that require scannable and verifiable barcodes to meet retailer requirements can easily guarantee that their barcodes are acceptable by incorporating a verification step into their case coding operation. A verification system can scan each barcode after being printed to confirm readability and flag or reject prints that are less than acceptable. This prevents any cases with problematic prints from ever leaving the facility. Additionally, manufacturers working with particularly exacting retailers can opt for white corrugate cases to achieve maximum barcode contrast.



Print-on-demand inkjet technology saves money and cuts down on complexity

Industrial inkjet as a barcode and variable information printing solution will continue to be an acceptable strategy. It is by far the most cost-effective case coding strategy – as much as four times more affordable than pressure sensitive labeling and ten times more affordable than using preprinted cases. There is always a time and a place for these alternative case coding methods, but they come at a high cost for manufacturers that are operating with thin margins.

In addition to the cost saving advantages, print-on-demand inkjet is one of the simplest ways to accomplish case coding. Fluids for inkjet printers can be replenished while the printer is running, requiring minimal touchpoints throughout the day. This is in direct contrast to the many adjustments and label stock changeovers that require a stop in production when opting for a labeling-based solution. An approach utilizing preprinted cases introduces the added cost and complexity of having to manage and store inventory for every unique SKU – not to mention accounting for the starts and stops in production involved with the constant loading and unloading of case erectors.

Retailers have every right to demand better barcode quality from their suppliers. In many instances, manufacturers have become too lax with their case coding standards. With careful planning and the right inkjet technology, any manufacturer can meet retailer barcode quality requirements without the need to adopt an entirely new approach to coding on case-level packaging. Industrial inkjet can get the job done.

About Abbott Company

Since 1923, Abbott Company has been providing quality industrial case coding and product identification solutions to our customers with hundreds of product identification systems installed throughout the Midwest. Quality is the most important ingredient in all of Abbott Company's products and services. From our low cost HP Inkjet case coding solutions to the full, four inch high print height of a ProSeries 768e print head, the industrial inkjet and labeling equipment sold by Abbott Company is proven and reliable. And Abbott Company's service technicians are factory trained and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Abbott Company serves manufacturers in Wisconsin and surrounding states, specializing in the food, beverage, pharmaceutical, paper and converting industries. Other industries, such as, auto, wire, medical and co-packaging often find our products to provide cost savings and improved efficiencies.



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