An Introduction to Product Labeling

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Labeling my Products – Where do I Start?

The process of bringing new products to market is a very complicated one and can be quite confusing to the uninitiated. The purpose of this discussion document is to introduce you to the various steps involved in this process – particularly in relation to the labeling part of the equation. After all, attractive labels that reflect the image you wish to portray about your company (and its products) are a very important factor in their ultimate acceptance in the marketplace. How many times have you bought products because one "looked better" than its neighbors? – this is a very common (and very human) approach to purchasing, so professional labels can make or break a product.

Okay, I have an idea for a new product – what next?

The answer depends on what the product is. If you want to produce bath-and-body products (shampoos, creams, scrubs etc) the first step is probably to formulate and test them – this is often done in the "kitchen sink" by start-up entrepreneurs, but it is also frequently performed in consultation with professional formulators. These are companies who specialize in mixing and packaging the products to your specification, and they bring lots of experience and knowledge to the table – but we also have many customers who have done it the "hard way" and sourced all the components themselves (for example in the food and condiments market, where family recipes are often jealously guarded). Which direction you should take depends on how complex the products are, how confident you are about the process, and how much time (and money) you have to get the product to the marketing stage.

It's also important to recognize that many products have governmental regulations that need to be observed – particularly anything related to the "health and/or wellbeing" of customers – so consider these carefully before going too far, and you may find that a professional formulator can offer valuable guidance in this area.

What about Packaging?

Before labeling can be realistically considered, you need to decide what your products will be contained in – whether it be bottles, jars, packets, tubes, pump dispensers etc. There is an enormous variety of options available to you – but you need to consider how the packaging will affect the customer's "ease of use" and whether there are any special requirements associated with your particular products. For example, some formulations can deteriorate quickly unless they are kept out of direct light – in which case clear containers would not be a good choice. Similarly, many food products are kept under refrigeration for lengthy periods – which may also affect the choice of container. These packaging decisions can have long-term implications for your products, so consider them carefully – you may also be required to purchase the containers in bulk, so it makes sense to make the right choice before getting in too deeply.

I have the product, I have containers – what's next?

Now we get into labeling – which is after all the main purpose of this document, and we will therefore go into it in more detail. When it comes to labeling, it's important to remember that the label is the "face" of your product – and it makes no sense to take shortcuts in this crucial step. What your product looks like will undoubtedly affect its marketability – so take your time and carefully consider the image you want to portray.

How big should the labels be?

Only you can decide the answer to that question. Take each container and try to visualize the finished product – indeed, it's useful to hand-cut some blanks from ordinary paper and experiment with various sizes before deciding what looks good to you. Some useful tips to consider….

1.   Depending on the size and shape of the container, you may need more than one label – many products have a "marketing label" on the front (with nice images and/or marketing material) and a "back label" that contains all the ingredients or other supporting data like regulatory information. Alternatively, it's often possible to combine those two styles into a single design – it's completely up to you. Also consult your label printer to see which approach is more cost-effective – while cost might not ultimately be the deciding factor, you should at least know the impact your decision will have on the overall cost-to-market.

- Tip – if you do decide to go with two labels, it's usually more cost-effective to keep them the same size if you can (particularly if you're using a Digital print-shop, which is discussed later in this document). By using the same size and shape, it's often possible to "gang" multiple designs into a single print-run, thereby achieving substantial cost savings.

- Another factor in the "label size" decision is whether your label printer already has a cutting "die" of that particular size. A die is a metal device that cuts the labels after printing (similar to a cookie-cutter in concept) – if your label printer needs to get a special die made to cater to your need, that can add some hundreds of dollars to the overall cost. Hence, you may decide to accept a slightly different size if it will still work with your packaging and label design. Consult your label printer for sizes already in stock.

- Tip – don't get too far into the design phase until you have chosen the label size(s). While designers can re-size artwork if necessary, this frequently incurs extra time and cost – and may even affect the layout to such an extent that the design needs to be started again.

2.   The shape of the label is also important to consider. While most label printers have an array of common shapes and sizes (circles, rectangles, ovals etc), your product or container may benefit from a unique shape. For instance, a regular rectangular label may not work on a "tapered" container – so once again experiment with hand-cut blanks to achieve the fit you require. If your label printer doesn't have a die already made to that specific size/shape, you should ask for a quote to have the die made and factor that cost into your decision whether or not to pursue that approach. Keep in mind that die costs vary widely depending on the cutting equipment being used by the printer – so don't assume that all printers will quote the same die costs.

What about label design?

Now we're getting to the "fun" part – but it can also be fraught with frustration. Depending on your own technical skills, you may choose to do the design yourself – but unless you have excellent familiarity with professional design tools (e.g. Adobe Illustrator or Photoshop), do not assume that the label printer can work with what you spent countless hours creating. Commercial printers have specific needs in order to produce quality products, so consult your printer BEFORE starting the design – otherwise you may be forced to start again. Most printers will have a page on their website devoted to "Artwork Specs" or something similar – this is where they explain all sorts of technical data that will make the job run more smoothly from start to finish, so it's always wise to invest the time to understand the requirements and follow the instructions.

Given that most customers don't have the professional design tools and skills required to take the "DIY" approach, you can either use an experienced graphic designer or you may find that your printer has a design staff available to you – just ask. By all means shop around and ask friends and associates whether they know somebody they can recommend – but be cautious about going too far into the design before checking that your printer's needs are being properly addressed. If you do use "Bob's sister's nephew in high school who's a computer whiz", you should feel free to pass an initial draft piece of artwork to your printer and ask them to check the approach. It makes much more sense to do this up front than have your designer produce a whole range of label designs only to be told the printer can't work with the files. If your printer doesn't want to check the artwork (or wants to charge for the privilege), find another printer. It makes good business sense for the printer to help in this process up front, rather than having to deal with unusable artwork when it comes to print time. Having said that, don't expect your printer to act as an unpaid design service – checking an initial approach is one thing, but adjusting and "fixing" an endless supply of badly-engineered artwork files is certain to strain the relationship.

So, let's assume you now have a designer to work with. It's important to remember that the design phase is where your personality and vision can often clash with reality and/or a designer's personal preferences. We can't offer any "silver bullet" to this challenge – it's a matter of experimentation and seeing whether the relationship "gels". If you do use a professional designer, also keep in mind that they may know all sorts of things about what actually "works" in reality (as opposed to being a "neat idea"), and you may need to accept that some of your vision is impractical. As stated earlier, this phase can be both lots of fun AND/OR enormously frustrating – and it's unfortunately not uncommon to have some false-starts before getting into a workable groove. Have patience – rushing the design is an absolute guarantee of dissatisfaction with the end result.

How do I know what the colors will print like?

Ouch! – this is an area that is worthy of a 500-page novel all on its own, but we'll try to paraphrase it here. The first thing that many people don't understand is that computer screens, desktop printers and commercial printing presses use very different technologies to produce colors. A computer monitor uses an approach known as "RGB" (which stands for Red/Green/Blue) and the colors you see on the screen are all made up of various proportions of those three primary colors.

Desktop printers (like the one probably connected to your computer) have their own variations – but most work with a system called "CMYK" (which loosely translates to Cyan/Magenta/Yellow/Black) – yes, the K actually means Black. What this means is that the colors you print are made up of various proportions of those four colors – NOT the same 3 colors your monitor uses to represent the same values. Sound confusing? – welcome to the world of challenges faced by all commercial printers. To compound this problem even further, there are often (very often in fact) substantial differences between monitors and printers (even of the same make and model). It's quite likely that if you displayed the same file on 10 identical monitors, you would see some variations – and the same applies to 10 printers of the same model. In essence, it's vitally important to understand that what you see at home (or even at your designer's office) is NO guarantee of what will come off the printing press.

What's more (and just when you thought this was already difficult enough), printing presses also use various approaches to producing colors. The traditional large mechanical presses that you've probably seen in the movies (commonly known as "flexographic" presses or "flexo" for short) use pre-mixed inks and "plates" to apply the various layers of ink to the material. Conversely, there is a growing family of newer "digital" presses being used that adopt the CMYK approach described above (known as "4-color process" in the printing industry) – each color is made up automatically from the 4 prime colors as it's printed. Accordingly, there can be substantial disparity between a "flat color" and its 4-color process equivalent. If you've heard of Pantone (or PMS) colors, you may think that a single PMS color will always reproduce the same way, but in fact each PMS color actually has two versions – the flat (single ink) version and its 4-color (mixed) cousin. Often, the two versions are very close to identical, but some flat colors cannot be closely matched using the 4-color process and the differences are quite noticeable.

So, now that we recognize that color-matching is a nightmare waiting to happen, the smart approach is to see what the press is actually going to print before going into production – then you at least have the option to make adjustments in the artwork to achieve the look you're seeking. Ask your label printer for press proofs – depending on the technology they use, these may come at an additional cost but some printers willingly provide them free of charge. Companies with digital presses are far more likely to be accommodating here, as they print direct from the artwork rather than having to make plates.

The key point of this section is that if specific color rendition is an important part of your need, you are strongly advised to consult your label printer for options that will allow you to see the result before going into full-scale production. Print shops typically require you to "sign off" on proofs to limit their liability and exposure – which will come as no comfort to you if the resulting production run has different colors than expected. Always ask to see what the press will produce first.

What material should my labels be made of?

Again, this decision is an important one that should be made early in the design process. Label printers typically have a range of materials that will satisfy most needs, but some work better than others depending on the circumstances. For example, labels for bath and body products should be printed on polypropylene (or equivalent) material that will withstand constant exposure to moisture and oils – whereas labels printed on paper will not survive well in the shower or after repeated use. In addition, many label printers "over-laminate" the labels with a very thin layer of clear film, thereby protecting the inks and preventing scratches or other damage due to handling.

The reason it's important to consider the material early is that the design can often be affected by that decision. For instance, labels intended to be printed on clear (see through) materials may need a different design approach – particularly if the container or the contents have strong colors in them. To demonstrate this, try to visualize a clear label with yellow design elements. If you were to apply that label to a blue bottle, the yellow ink would suddenly assume a green color (when the blue background shows through the yellow ink). Clear labels can definitely provide a wonderful "no label" look in the right circumstances, but care should be taken to ensure that there are no color conflicts that will change the visual result.

Now I have my artwork designed – what next?

This is where the label printer normally comes into the equation. Very often, it's the first time they even know there's a job on the table. With your artwork in hand, contact your chosen printer and discuss how to proceed with them. Most often, that will start with getting quotes for the various sizes you've designed – so you need to have some quantities in mind for the printer to quote upon. As with most printing, the unit price (price per label) comes down as the volume goes up – so feel free to have a range of quantities that the printer can quote for. That way, you get to see the impact of a slightly larger order – it's not uncommon for twice the quantity to only cost a few dollars more.

Let's make a big assumption for the purposes of demonstrating pricing options. If you're reading this document and are still following along, then we'll assume you're somewhat new to the label-printing business. In that case, it's reasonable to assume that you're not looking to print tens of thousands of labels in the first run. Accordingly, you now have one of the BIG choices to make – and that is the selection of a printer…..

Should I use a Flexo or Digital printer for my labels?

As explained briefly earlier, flexo printers use the large mechanical presses (and plates) that many people are familiar with. Each color requires its own "plate" to be made to impart that particular ink in all the right spots – and these plates cost money. Hence, if you have a single label design with (say) four colors, the printer will need to make 4 plates before they can start printing. Plate charges vary widely, but an average market cost might be between $50 and $75 per plate (or $200 - $300 for the 4-plate set).

To properly justify this expense, it makes sense that you'd need to print a lot of labels AND be satisfied that nothing in the design will change in the short term (as you'd need to get new plates made in that case).

Digital printing, on the other hand, does not use plates – the artwork is printed directly on the press. Setup time is usually much less than for flexo presses – but digital presses are by nature much slower at doing the actual printing. So it becomes a trade-off – if the volume is large enough, flexo is the way to go, but if the volume is relatively small then digital wins hands-down. While it's extremely difficult to generalize, industry experience would seem to indicate that flexo printing starts to become more cost-effective once the quantity exceeds 10,000 labels (of a single design). This will vary somewhat according to size and other factors, but it's a reasonable rule of thumb that you can easily test by getting quotes from both kinds of printers – flexo and digital.

The other factor to consider is whether you have a single label design or multiple designs. Because there are no plates involved, digital printers can "gang" (or combine) many pieces of artwork into a single "run" – so long as the designs are all the same size and on the same material. So if you have a line of similar products – say body lotions for instance – where you have 10 different recipes, scents, flavors or whatever you might call them, you can combine those orders into a single job with a digital printer – thereby avoiding substantial plate costs (10 complete sets in this case) AND getting the price breaks associated with running a single job for the TOTAL quantity of all 10 designs.

In short, flexo and digital printers each have their "sweet spots" – flexo is an excellent solution for large-volume runs per design, whereas digital provides the best answer for customers with multiple variations of similar designs and/or smaller volumes. If in doubt, get quotes both ways and form your own conclusions.