AJS Labels adopts HP SmartStream Labels & Packaging Workflow Suite to deliver efficiencies on color management process

At a glance

Industry: Labels & Packaging
Business name: AJS Labels
Headquarters: Littlehampton, UK
Website: ajslabels.com

AJSlabels

Challenge

- AJS Labels is growing its digital business, particularly with color-critical jobs for retail customers. Before investing in new digital machinery it wanted to improve capacity of its existing hardware, optimizing its production and workflow processes.

Solution

- The HP Indigo WS4000 Digital Press and the WS6000 Digital Press for versatile and cost-effective production of high-quality labels.

- The HP SmartStream Labels & Packaging Workflow Suite Powered by Esko, version 4.0. to boost capacity.

Results

- Saved time on color management process, reduced by 75 percent on creation of new spot colors.

- Simplified input of variable data, running offline and parallel to DFE, means faster time to production.

- Greater capacity across digital print improves ability to take on new business.

- More accurate color management provides greater assurance for customers.

> "HP Workflow Suite means the science behind our color management is more accurate, which is important to a lot of our customers. Their branding is vital and they like things to be as automated, as machine-controlled as possible."
>
> – Phil Smith, operations director, AJS Labels

AJS Labels is a labels manufacturer with two sites in the UK that employ around 60 staff serving the cosmetics, food & beverage and paint sectors, among others. It was one of the first companies in England to move to digital label printing and today, just under 30 percent of its production is digital.

"The more digital capacity we put in, the more business we generate," says Phil Smith, operations director, AJS Labels. "Digital print is all about service. Proving you can meet the deadlines consistently wins business. If you can turn jobs around that little bit faster than the competition, you win new customers. Additionally, digital helps us demonstrate our quality."

Smith says the print market in general is shifting toward shorter lead times, and he expects the digital share to grow accordingly. "Decisions are being made later and later in the supply chain, particularly on branding and marketing. Customers want to wait as long as possible, to gather as much retail data as possible, before committing. If we can allow our customers a little longer, it works to everyone's advantage."

Improving workflow, optimizing hardware

An HP Indigo customer since 2005, AJS currently uses the HP Indigo WS4000 Digital Press and the WS6000 Digital Press. Smith says the business is planning to invest in new HP digital equipment, but is keen to maximize the current presses. He is working with the HP Indigo team to review and optimize every step of the production process.

One element of this is beta testing the new HP SmartStream Labels & Packaging Workflow Suite, Powered by Esko, version 4.0. AJS does a large amount of color-critical work on digital, particularly with one client, a leading paint supplier. This client currently has 400-plus different spot colors, all of which need to be accurately rendered by AJS's prepress team. The new color engine (in the HP SmartStream Labels & Packaging Workflow Suite) automates many of the common, time-consuming processes. Fewer manual steps help reduce the risk of errors and ensure more consistent accuracy.

"When you are loading 400 colors into a color management system, you're looking for accuracy as quick as possible," says AJS prepress manager, Craig Howe. "With the new HP SmartStream Label & Packaging Workflow Suite, the time spent is reduced by 75 percent and the first automatic refinement is perfect."

Faster, simpler data input

"The advances in HP SmartStream Label & Packaging Workflow Suite are not just with color management," says Howe. "Improvements in the inputting of variable data for each new job have saved additional time. The new plug-ins make this process much easier; now, we can create a job offline, which means we're not slowing down the DFE.

"We typically run large jobs with up to one million codes. With the new standalone tools, I can now prepare all the files offline, which means I'm not slowing the RIP process or the operator," explains Howe.

The Adobe® RIP has been specially optimized for HP Indigo press. "To date, the RIP process is quicker and there have no reliability issues," say Howe.

More accurate science

Since installation in June, the Workflow Suite has undergone three upgrades within two months. Smith says the initial implementation and each subsequent upgrade has gone smoothly: "It's been totally stress-free. There have been no issues, no downtime."

Smith says capacity is up 5 to 10 percent across the board since the HP Indigo team project. Though he admits it is difficult to attribute broader gains to just one element, he says color workflow improvements mean it is now quicker to move to full production. "Anything that helps the customer get to production quicker is a good thing.

"We've employed a designated digital manager to look at increasing efficiencies and throughput on all projects. We do want to invest in new capacity, but the immediate priority is to optimize what we've got. The HP SmartStream Labels & Packaging Workflow Suite, Powered by Esko, is a major part of that."

He expects digital to expand into all aspects of the business as the market demands more complex, shorter runs and digital adapts to enable larger print runs. "Digital is easier to manage and easier to control the quality," says Smith. "It's a simpler business model than conventional print."