

Conference report

AWA INTERNATIONAL SLEEVE LABEL CONFERENCE:
Documenting a dynamic industry

The ninth AWA International Sleeve Label Conference and Exhibition 2015, held in Miami, Florida at the end of April, provided strong evidence that, in just a few short years, sleeve labeling has become a core technology for product decoration and identification. Sleeving's unique top-to-toe labeling capability, which provides additional tamper-evidence, plus its ability to protect the user from splinter injury due to breakage of glass or other rigid containers, deliver additional functionalities. The different film substrates employed, plus the special shrink/stretch, sealing, and application processing equipment, come together with the printed sleeves to create a whole, dynamic industry.

Opening the conference program on the first day, AWA's Dr William Llewellyn set the sleeving market in the context of the global label market, by region, by demand, and by label format. He highlighted growth trends; and, he said, 'although growth remains strongest in the Chinese and Indian markets, it does show a slowing from historical highs.' He noted that pressure-sensitive labels have returned to growth levels – at ± 4% globally -- above those of the general market -- and glue-applied label volumes are continuing to grow in emerging markets but declining in developed markets to show a global growth rate of 2.5-3%. However, he showed, 'Sleeve labels offer the greatest growth potential, with a global level of 5-5.5%.'

Global sleeve label demand

Dr Llewellyn went on to detail sleeve labeling demand across the regions – where Asia commands the largest share, 64% -- and by format, where heat shrink TD sleeves take the lion's share of 87%. Reel-fed shrink MD sleeves, the newest format, are, he added, 'also the most rapidly growing, at more than 12% per annum, as they become available from a broadening range of suppliers.'

It was then time to look at the business aspects of the industry, and Thomas Blaige, Chairman and CEO of Blaige & Company, provided expert insights into M&A activity, recording that, in packaging in 2014, there were 536 transactions, of which 51% were international – a strong indication of changing strategic direction within the industry.

Challenges and solutions

Short-run shrink sleeve challenges and solutions, were the topics addressed by ActionPak Inc's VP, Sales, Ben Smith. He looked at short-run sleeving uses, and barriers to entry; compared the costs of in-house production and outsourcing; identified short-run marketing strategies to deliver success; and detailed an impressive case study on 'how to turn trash into cash' which ActionPak had achieved with an energy drink.

Ink and curing technology are key factors in producing successful shrink sleeves, and Flint Group Narrow Web are innovating in low-maintenance water-based, self-crosslinking ink systems; in UV inks that will not distort the substrate and, of course, leading-edge energy-saving UV-LED inks, as Tom Hammer, Product Manager North America explained. UV-LED inks 'will greatly change our industry FOREVER', he said, emphasizing that, despite the high initial cost, 'the payback is so fast that the investment has to be really worthwhile.'

Complementary technologies

Are the MDO and TDO sleeve technologies competitive or complementary? Klöckner Pentaplast's Bob Schantz, Business Manager, North America – Labeling, showed clearly that, depending on volumes, capital expenditure, and container design, they are complementary. The benefits of MDO sleeving – including reduced label costs, lightweighting, fewer reel changes -- were discussed at length by Sidel's Business Manager, Labeling, Yann Renard. Raul F Matos, VP Sales and Marketing for Karlville Development, covered shrink sleeve converting and application for high-volume beverage labeling and HP Indigo digitally-printed labels, with particular reference to light-blocking films to eliminate UV/visible light damage to beverage ingredients, and outlined the scope of the plant tour of the Karlville facility

nearby to which delegates were invited following his presentation, and which closed the first day's formal proceedings.

Recycling and sustainability

Next day, AWA's Dr William Llewellyn introduced Holli Alexander, Global Market Development Manager, Sustainability, for Eastman Chemical Company, who discussed innovative recycling solutions for shrink film labeled containers.

'Sustainable solutions', she said, 'must focus on the needs of the full value chain. There is no single solution or "silver bullet"; and the power of collaboration is necessary to create innovative solutions that address complex problems.' She introduced the benefits – for brand owners, converters, and recyclers -- of de-seaming, which allows shrink sleeve-labeled PET bottles to be much more easily processed by PET recyclers with whole-bottle-wash systems.

Will Schretzman, VP Packaging, Verst Group Logistics – who offer a 'one stop shop' for contract packaging, warehousing, distribution, and transportation, expanded on this theme, showing how the company's in-house sleeve removal team and bottle grinding facility are contributing significantly to the process of recycling PET bottles and perforated shrink sleeve labels for a positive environmental impact.

Dr Pascal F. Chapon, Research, Industrialization and Customer Development Director of Sleever International outlined the company's innovation in waste recovery -- the use of LDPET for shrink sleeves to enable the recovery of used PET bottles for bottle-to-bottle recycling.

New choices other than sleeving

Today, there are leading-edge choices other than sleeving available for product decoration – and the increasingly-popular stand-up pouch, as Steve Coulson, Director Takigawa Corporation Japan, can be described in this context as both 'competitor and companion'. Offering considerable savings over rigid containers, pouches also contribute practical benefits such as reduced moisture/air ingress and attractive on-shelf presence. Yet another alternative to sleeving and traditional labels is digital direct print to the body of a container -- an innovation which Kronos Inc now support within their advanced labeling technology base. PET, PP, or PE

containers – both cylindrical and specially-shaped -- can be accommodated for direct decorative printing and variable data using high-performance UV inks. Dave Niemuth, Director, Labeling Technology, Kronos, explained why this innovative and flexible solution is attracting interest, especially for shorter runs and multi-versions.

Mind over matter

Completing a wide-ranging program of presentations on all the physical aspects of today's leading-edge product decoration processes, Dr Joel Weinberger, owner of Implicit Strategies and Professor of Psychology at Adelphi University, examined a different and important area of relevance: 'what goes on in the minds of consumers' in relation to packaging. Most of our mental functioning, he said, is unconscious; and while conscious awareness plays a role, it is only part of the picture. Dr Weinberger led delegates through a journey of discovery that provided a fascinating glimpse into the way that good packaging can prime consumer acceptance. 'The design of packaging tends to be intuitive and creative. Some are better at it than others. It is more art than science.' His message to delegates was that, today, unconscious measurement needs to become a standard tool of marketing and of designing packaging.

High attendance and sponsorship

The AWA International Sleeve Label Conference and Exhibition 2015 attracted over 150 delegates for a program that reflected virtually every aspect of the marketplace, and gained sponsorship from many leading companies in the industry, including Platinum Sponsors Accraply, Karlville, and Verst Group Logistics. Next year's AWA International Sleeve Label Conference and Exhibition will take place in Denver, CO, USA on March 3-4, 2016.

Sleeve Label Awards

As well as featuring a lively tabletop exhibition, the event also hosted the presentation of the first-ever International Sleeve Label Awards – inaugurated by AWA Alexander Watson Associates to recognize the multiplicity of creative and technological achievements in sleeve labeling applications today. Full details of the award winners are available at www.awa-bv.com.

Parallel workshops in July

The international conference is partnered with two parallel professional events related to sleeve labeling technologies, the popular interactive Introduction to Heat Shrink Sleeve Label Technologies Workshops, on 21-22 July and 23-24 July, in Plymouth (Minneapolis), Minnesota (the second of which is in simultaneous Spanish translation). www.awa-bv.com.

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