

- Products: Diagraph PEL, Linx, PA/150
- Industry: Beverage

Marking for the millennium

Y2K compliance, cost cuts and improved print quality top the list of reasons why a Kentucky soft drink bottler changed to a new coding system for its glass bottles.

For the maker of Ale-8-One, a ginger ale-like beverage, the freshness date marked on the neck of its bottles is an important function in the bottling process.

So when its 12-year-old coding system started to fall short on print quality, and most of all, when Dale Arrowood, Assistant Plant Manager, realized the system was not Y2K-compliant, he quickly began hunting for a new coder.

Ready for 2000

The initial push for a new coding system came a year ago when the company tested its old ink-jet printer for Y2K compliance. Arrowood says Ale-8-One Bottling was told by the makers of the old printer that the system was Y2K-compliant.

“But whenever we programmed the 2000 date in, [the coder] had some problems. It would print the wrong date and time,” Arrowood says.

He says nothing catastrophic would happen to the bottling line without Y2K compliance; the coder wouldn't shut down on New Year's Day, 2000. But the chance that the machine might print the wrong freshness date convinced Arrowood to look for another coder.

Arrowood tested the 6000 Series Linx ink-jet coder from Diagraph (St. Louis, MO) about a year ago and found that it had no problem with the 2000 date. In fact, Arrowood says the Linx's purchase contract guarantees it will be Y2K-compliant.

Other benefits

In addition to being Y2K-compliant, Arrowood says the Linx delivers a much better print quality than the previous machine. The coder prints one line of text (the date and military time), with characters about 1/4" tall.

“The characters it prints are more visible than with any other coder we've had as far as print quality goes,” Arrowood says. He adds that the Linx uses removable ink, which was a requirement for Ale-8-One. The company uses both returnable and nonreturnable glass bottles. In order for the returnable bottles to be reused, the ink has to come off the neck in a caustic wash. The



The ink-jet coder prints the date and the military time on the bottle's neck.

green bottles, which hold 12 oz of the beverage, are supplied by Vitro Packaging (Dallas, TX).

After bottles are washed, they are sent by conveyor through a filler/capper at fill speeds to 438 bottles/min. Capped bottles continue past the coder. A SmartEye sensor from Banner Engineering (Minneapolis, MN)

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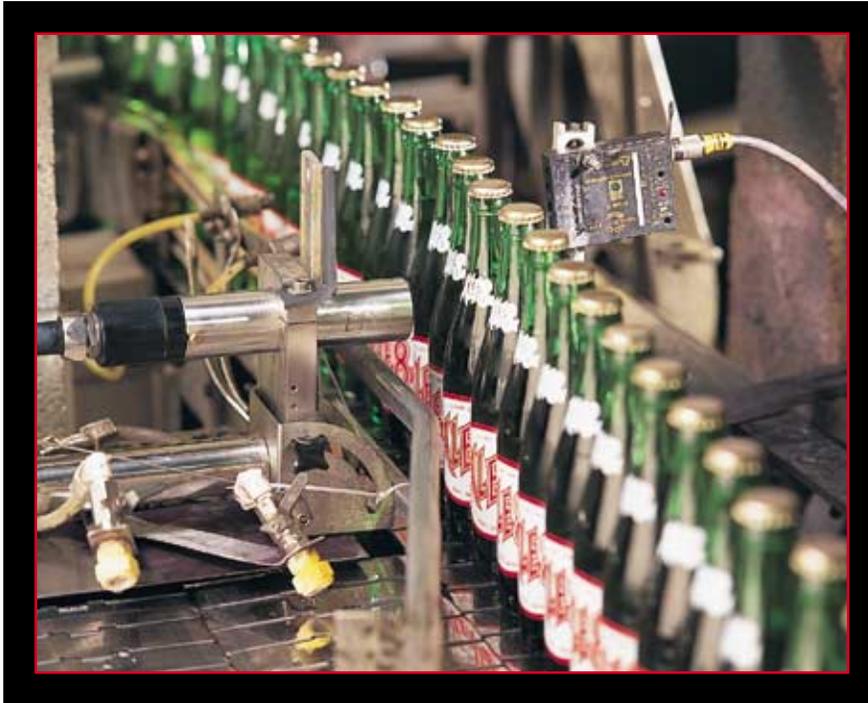
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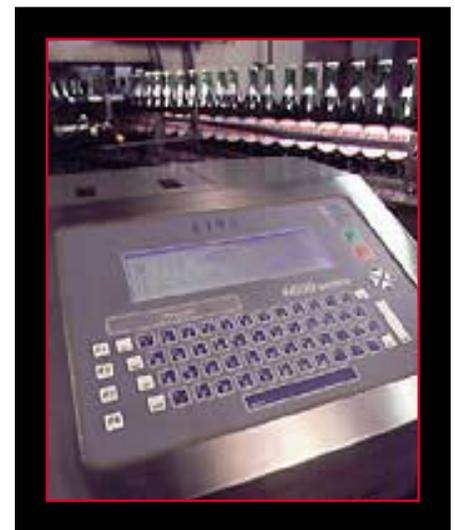
A sensor placed directly across from the coder communicates to the coder when a bottle passes in front of it.

placed directly across from the coder communicates to the coder when a bottle passes in front of it. "The Linx keeps accurate count as well as printing a consistent, well-placed mark on every bottle," Arrowood says.

The Linx is also less costly to maintain than the previous coder. Arrowood says Ale-8-One has cut its costs in half. "On our old machine, we had downtime when we had to rebuild the ink pump and buy pump replacement parts. We were having to do that two or three times a year because the print quality would fade," he says.

Arrowood adds that the amount of ink consumption has been cut by

one-third because there is no ink overflow. The previous printer had to be cleaned daily, sometimes twice a day, he says, to remove excess ink. The Linx's printhead is only cleaned once a week. The success of the coder on the bottling line has Ale-8-One considering its use for



The Linx Controller

promotional graphics. For example, the company is planning on using the Linx coder to print customized graphics like turkeys or Santa Claus for the holidays. (LB) ‡

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