NAME A SOFT DRINK and there’s a very good chance Laurel Packaging handles it. *Pepsi-Cola, Mountain Dew,* and *Dr. Pepper* are among the 42 brands, which leave the Johnstown, Penn., premises of the company, founded in 1968 and 90% owned by PepsiCo. The key to Laurel’s continued success has been its ongoing commitment to improved efficiencies, and one example of this was the installation of a product identification system, which was recently integrated into operations at this Pepsi distributor. Instead of continuing to use a manual process of identifying pallets of soda, Laurel Packaging has quenched its thirst for automation with a new labeling solution.

Each shrinkwrapped pallet which leaves Laurel Packaging is identified with information on required shipping dates and freshness dates. Until now, this information was handwritten and applied to each pallet. The line operator would take a 8.5 x 11 in. letter-size sheet of paper, cut it in half, and make tags for two different pallets. On these tags were handwritten a three-stage cycle of expiration dates.

Then, the operator would photocopy and tape the information to each pallet. In some cases, an additional step was added to the mix if the forklift driver was labeling the pallets. He would have to spend time getting on and off the forklift, taking him away from his other duties. But with some 42 various beverage products that are produced at Laurel Packaging, this method was obviously labor intensive.

To improve this process and decrease production time, Laurel Packaging installed Diagraph’s PA/4000 Label Printer/Applicators this past December on two production lines. Now, the procedure for labeling the pallets is automatic and on-line. Each PA/4000 unit prints and tamp applies a 4 x 6 in. direct thermal, pressure-sensitive label onto one side of the pallets of soda after they are shrinkwrapped. Products being identified include six, 12, and 24 packs of 12 oz cans, and molded trays holding two and three litre bottles. The standard auto-retract feature of the PA/4000, with sensors located on the tamp pad assembly, assures that once contact is made to the shrinkwrapped soda, the tamp arm immediately retracts to the home position.

It is designed for precise, accurate label placement and adhesion, yet the tamp action is gentle enough not to damage the beverage containers. Both of the PA/4000 units that Laurel Packaging is using are equipped with tamp cylinders that are 18 in. long. This extra-long cylinder length, coupled with the auto retract, ensure proper label placement on the moving pallets, even if the pallets vary in distance from the applicator as they move along the conveyor. Compact, durable, and easily...
portable if need be, Laurel Packaging’s new labeling system is built for demanding industrial environments. “The PA/4000 units run three shifts, 24 hours around the clock, five to six days per week,” observes John Schellhammer, production team manager at Laurel Packaging. And, during the summer rush, Schellhammer says the printer/applicators are operating on the same three shift schedule, seven days a week. The system is designed for simple set up, ease of operation, low maintenance, and efficiencies of process, all of which are critical at Laurel Packaging.

Just as critical as the method of labeling the pallets, is the accuracy of the information on the label. At the top of each label, the Manufacturing Ship By Date indicates the latest date product should leave Laurel Packaging’s plant. Underneath that, is the Satellite Warehouse Ship To Trade Date, the latest date that Laurel’s distributor should ship product to the retailer. Lastly, the Freshness Date indicates the latest date for maximum freshness that the consumer should drink the product. Pepsi-Cola, for example, is given a total of 39 weeks, from the day it is produced to the last day it should be consumed.

Driving the labeling system is Diagraph’s performance series software for Windows. For maximum efficiency, one PC is placed in between the two production lines, controlling both of the PA/4000 label printer/applicators. Schellhammer describes the system as “goof proof.” “It’s very easy to use and I can’t tell you how much time it has saved us,” he says. The performance series software uses a WYSIWYG (What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get) display, which allows the operator to view the label format on the monitor, exactly as it appears on the printed label. This allows for quick and easy change of variable information and on-demand creation or modification of label formats. The software also has smooth font capabilities for delivering the pre-printed label look that Laurel Packaging enjoys.

The beverage producer likes the label because it provides a better looking, more appealing package with a clean-cut look, as well as offering consistent, legible text. “We stack our pallets three high, and from the floor we can read the label on the top pallet. This helps for taking inventory and stock rotation,” notes Schellhammer.‡

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