

Why Switching From Litho Labels to Direct Color Printing Worked for Sutherland Packaging



Sutherland Packaging made the switch from litho labels to direct printing.

By Eric Stanton

Several years ago my company, [Sutherland Packaging](#), decided the time was right to make a dedicated investment in the technology, processes and personnel necessary to produce high-impact direct color printing on corrugated packaging. Although direct color printing had fallen into disfavor back in the 1990s, we were convinced that, thanks to recent technological improvements, our customers could reap significant economic and organizational benefits from forgoing the use of traditional lithographic labels.

Direct print technology removes the need for litho labels to be applied over corrugated substrates, effectively replacing litho dollars with just a few cents of ink. The five-color printing method brings several key advantages, and is particularly suited for the sort of supermarket, big box retailer and club store displays utilized by the food and beverage and consumer packaged goods sectors. Of these benefits, cost and speed to market stand out as the two most relevant to companies whose products exist in these markets.

It took some time to make it all happen. A top-down makeover from one printing process to another requires years of R&D, as proper protocol and people are gradually acquired, tested, improved upon, etc. A fair amount of educated guessing was involved, as was time-intensive trial and error, all toward one goal: a direct-to-corrugated printing process that could truly compete with label-based printing in terms of quality, cost and overall efficiency.

At Sutherland, this meant capitalizing on the combined talents and disciplines of design, prepress, ink, tooling, material and operations teams. It also meant significant capital investments in equipment and technician training, as well as the time and temperament to radically overhaul sales and marketing efforts.



Pallet skirts are one application with which Sutherland Packaging found success with direct printing.

Following is an overview of three important areas in which direct printing can, through the right processes, compare favorably against the more common practice of lithographic label mounting.

Speed to Market

Relative expedience to market is a significant selling point for direct print technology. Direct print requires fewer steps than litho printing simply because there are fewer "moving parts."

Whereas litho printing necessitates the ordering and mounting of label materials prior to diecutting, facilities utilizing direct print must simply set up print plates, print and diecut. The time savings can be substantial. For example, a litho job that would typically take two to four weeks may, with direct print, require as few as five to seven days.

And of course, repeat jobs are turned around more quickly since materials don't need to be reordered, allowing direct print operators to be on press within two to three days rather than five to seven days.

Cost

Materials cost reduction is another key benefit. The ability to forgo label printing allows customers to quickly recoup their initial short-term investment, so long as they are planning on multiple runs.

Direct print occupies a sort of "Goldilocks Zone" of printing economics. With direct print, the upfront plate cost is by far the largest expense involved. That said, if companies are only planning to run one small campaign, litho might be more cost-effective. However, as runs get longer and multiply in number, the pendulum quickly starts to swing toward direct print.

The sweet spot is quite wide: direct print will generally be cheaper than litho for run totals between 2,000 and 20,000 pieces — a range occupied by most point-of-purchase display jobs.

Cost savings vary by quantity, repeatability and, of course, how complex the job would be if performed via traditional litho printing techniques. Sutherland has some clients whose savings are as modest (yet significant) as a few thousand dollars per run, and others that have saved as much as \$500,000 over a three-year period.

Litho also has size limitations. Once the printing parameters approach the 58" x 80" range, multiple labels must typically be produced, making the process more laborious and time-consuming. Since direct print can extend beyond the size limitations of a label, it limits the need for multi-piece items. Direct print can run a job upwards of 65" x 124", meaning even snack towers and pallet wraps can be produced in this one-and-done fashion. And by greatly reducing seams, stitching, and gluing, customers achieve lower production costs while all but eliminating the potential for in-store assembly complications.

The "Quality Gap" is Smaller Than You Think

Twenty years ago direct print had, understandably, a marred reputation. The technology simply hadn't reached the stage where the process could consistently contend with the colors and overall crispness of litho printing. This quality gap, however, has closed in recent years, especially for companies with a vested interest in circumventing direct printing's limitations.

Sutherland takes pride in being among a handful of printers on the cutting edge of this practice. Why just a handful? Because for a print production company, making the switch from litho to direct print takes complete buy-in involving a multi-year R&D commitment spanning equipment, protocol and, perhaps most crucially, the right technicians. Indeed, direct print can produce an acceptable alternative to litho printing in terms of quality, but you really have to know what you're doing to achieve this heightened standard.

In particular, ink technicians must be hyper-knowledgeable to replicate brand colors originally designed with litho printing in mind, and press operators need to be trained on the unique quality control characteristics of a direct print line.

And of course, the buy-in must come from the customer side as well. To showcase our advanced five-color technology, Sutherland develops mockups to provide proof of its advantages over four-color printing. Brand managers are understandably protective when it comes to, for example, the colors in their logos. Only a reassuring show-and-tell process can allay concerns that direct print will reproduce their brand colors closely enough to justify the practice's time and monetary advantages.

Let's look at an example of how this played out for one of my company's customers, a provider of plants and plant trays. When we were asked to provide a quote on a job for 2,500 flower trays, we provided the cost estimate based on our new high-impact direct color print method. We indicated pricing for quantities of 2,500, 5,000 and 10,000 pieces — pricing that, true to the aforementioned economy of scale discussion, showed savings that mounted exponentially as runs became larger.

On this particular job, we were able to show the customer that direct print would save more than \$5,000 from the very first run. What's more, the figures showed that just one re-order would result in a winning scenario comparative to the cost of a litho printing job. By not having any plate costs on the second run, the customer would save an additional \$13,000 on top of the original \$5,000, for a total of \$18,000 for just two runs.

Armed with that knowledge, our happy customer increased the original 2,500-piece order to 5,000 pieces. Direct print saved sufficient money to encourage reinvestment of part of that savings into an increased order — a win-win for both printer and customer.

About the Author

Eric Stanton is a senior sales manager at Sutherland Packaging, a leader in corrugated displays and packaging for retail and club storages. The company's specialties include custom packaging, structural and graphic design, five-color direct-print point-of-purchase displays, fulfillment, and on-box marketing.