Coca-Cola® gets personal with HP Indigo digital technology

At a glance

Industry: Labels & Packaging
Business names: The Coca-Cola Company, Europe
Headquarters: Brussels, Belgium
Websites: coca-cola.com

Business names: Eshuis BV
Headquarters: Dalfsen, the Netherlands
Websites: eshuis.nl

Challenge

• Engage members of Generation Z with ‘Share a Coke®’ personalized marketing campaign leveraging product packaging and suited to today’s social media-saturated environment.

• Print hundreds of millions of personalized bottle labels for Coca-Cola®, Coca-Cola Zero®, and Coca-Cola® light, featuring the most common first names for each European country, while meeting stringent quality, technical and delivery requirements.

• Combine digital and conventional printing while delivering completely consistent print quality and color, including matching the iconic Coca-Cola corporate red.

Solution

• Combination of both digital and analog printing, with integrated support from Netherlands-based label converter Eshuis to maximize productivity and print consistency across all print sites and presses.

• Eshuis formed and managed a multi-country network of 18 label converters: eight digital label converters, including Eshuis, printing the variable data; and 10 conventional printers of static areas, plus priming and finishing.

• Eight HP Indigo WS6000 Digital Presses and four HP Indigo WS6600 Digital Presses, dedicated to the ‘Share a Coke’ campaign ran 24 hours 5 to 7 days a week across three months.

• Special ink, pre-mixed by HP Indigo, developed to match Coca-Cola red.

Results

• Successful, on-time launch of personalized packaging for European ‘Share a Coke’ campaign, amplified by an integrated social media and broadcast media campaign – the largest Coca-Cola campaign integrating personalized physical packaging with electronic media.

• Approximately 800 million personalized labels were printed with the top 150 names in each of more than 32 European countries, in 15 languages and five different alphabets, with total consistency across the eight digital printing sites.

• Outstanding color match accuracy of the HP-developed red ink prompted Coca-Cola to use it as the standard for the conventionally printed part of the labels. Coca-Cola is using the red that HP developed throughout Europe to standardize its red colors on all the conventional labels that the company prints.

• Finished labels were compatible with Coca-Cola standard printed labels’ weight and surface and web tension. This allowed bottling plants to continue running at regular speeds while integrating the digitally printed personalized labels.
“The ‘Share a Coke’ campaign is all about talking to the hearts of teenagers, and personalization is the very powerful tool for doing so. Packaging is key to marketing and the HP Indigo press made the packaging part of the campaign much more powerful.”

– Marit Kroon, marketing manager, Coca-Cola Europe

Generation Z is core to the ongoing success of Coca-Cola, but engaging with this market is becoming increasingly harder. With so many other brands all clamoring for their attention, Coca-Cola Europe looked for a way to transcend media channels and really get personal with young people.

Fewer things are more personal than a person’s name. So, Coca-Cola decided to use actual names on its products to address members of Generation Z directly and personally in the ‘Share a Coke’ campaign.

“Getting personal is something that helps us to win the hearts of teenagers, to start talking to them one-on-one and not generally or globally,” explains Marit Kroon, marketing manager, Coca-Cola Europe. “We invited teens to start sharing bottles of Coca-Cola by printing names on bottle labels. You could buy a bottle with the name of your best friend, and this created a cute trigger for you to start sharing a bottle of Coke® with your friend.

“It really starts with the key hero of the campaign, which is the bottle in the store. Then it travels to social media and digital media, while getting empowerment via TV and other strong mediums, and from there it goes back to the store, back to the bottle.”

From Down Under to all over Europe

The original idea came from an Australian promotion in which common names were printed (using conventional technology) on Coca-Cola bottle labels. But, translating the campaign that had run Down Under to the larger and exponentially more complex, multi-lingual and multi-alphabet European market brought with it huge challenges, particularly in the areas of printing and distribution.

Gregory Bentley, European packaging innovator, Coca-Cola Services SA, explains: “We were very interested in what they’d done in Australia. They’d really pushed the boundaries of what our system is able to do and what we’re willing to do with our brand. At the same time, our European technical team realized that there would be entirely different technical challenges in Europe. So we immediately started investigating the supply chain routes that we might be able to use.”

Enormous volume and challenges

While the original Australian campaign had run in a single country and language and for a single product, in Europe it had to run in multiple markets and on three products: regular Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola Zero and Coca-Cola light.

“Not only did we have more than 32 European countries, each with a different set of the 150 most common names, 15 languages, five alphabets, and in excess of six bottling groups, we also had to deal with multiple label designs, including red, two versions of silver labels, and black labels with red text,” recalls Bentley.

“The biggest challenge was finding a digital printing platform that would allow us to produce personalized labels with the volume, quality, variety and geographic spread that we required.”

What’s more, the bottling companies would only accept labels perfectly tuned to their equipment, so matching the standard conventional labels in terms of weight, surface tension and other specifications was crucial. Another potential game stopper was matching the iconic red color of Coca-Cola.
Digital printing with HP Indigo technology proved crucial to the campaign. Without it, Coca-Cola Europe may not have been able to use its product packaging to address so many people in such a personal way.

“When we looked at the technical criteria and deliverables that we had as a project brief, it became clear that the HP Indigo digital technology was the answer,” says Bentley. “The ink weight, color matching, print quality and consistency, and the installed base of the HP Indigo press in Europe made it the only option for this volume.”

Eshuis BV, a leading Dutch label converter with extensive expertise in project management and 10 years’ experience in digital printing with HP technology, was called in to manage everything around the printing of the labels for the campaign. It also handled part of the digital printing, using its own two HP Indigo WS6000 Digital Presses.

Eshuis played an important role in exploring and defining the right technical solutions in combining conventional and digital technology. Eshuis and Coca-Cola performed many trials, labels were tested at some bottler sites and all possible options were researched. Finally the best proposition was to only print two hits of color Red or Black to achieve the highest digital output. The digital printing process was therefore defined as a bypass process of the conventional printing process. The finishing and slitting into end reels for the bottler is done by the conventional printers, so the usual bottler in the supply chain did not change.

Leveraging the best of two worlds – digital and analog

“The high volumes could not be delivered in the time available with digital alone,” says Peter Overbeek, CEO, Eshuis. “We needed to combine conventional printing and HP Indigo digital printing so that digital could be used for the variable data.”

Using digital and analog printing on the same label was a first for Coca-Cola Europe. But, with Eshuis managing the entire printing process across all suppliers, the combination came together smoothly and with outstanding results.

Eshuis assembled a Europe-wide network of eight HP Indigo label converters and 10 conventional label converters. As project manager and also a printer of millions of the Coca-Cola labels, Eshuis was responsible for providing ready-made print files to all the digital printers. It developed a powerful web tool specifically for the project, which enabled efficient project management across the entire network.

The HP Indigo digital printing technology used for the Coca-Cola project is based on 20 years of digital printing experience and evolving development. Used by many of the world’s top brands for their marketing campaigns, labels and packaging, as well as for transactional and commercial printing, HP Indigo digital printing technology is widely recognized for its high-quality, color accuracy and media versatility. As with many campaigns for different types of brands, these attributes made HP Indigo technology ideal for Coca-Cola’s requirements.
“We are completely happy with the way our labels turned out. The quality and the look are absolutely great. This project has increased the standards against which we measure the quality of all our labels on the market.”

— Marit Kroon, marketing manager, Coca-Cola Europe

Color and brand reinforcement

A key element in the success of the project was the ability of the HP Indigo presses to match Coca-Cola’s iconic red color. HP provided the digital label converters with pre-mixed Coca-Cola red ink, ensuring they would all be printing the exact same color. Bentley says: “This was a critical milestone in the project. Without the Coca-Cola red ink, we wouldn’t be where we are today launching this project.”

The pre-mixed red HP Indigo ink was so successful that Coca-Cola is now using it to standardize the red color on all conventionally printed labels. Marit Kroon notes: “We are completely happy with the way our labels turned out. The quality and the look are absolutely great. This project has increased the standards against which we measure the quality of all our labels on the market.”

Bentley adds: “Now we are using the red that the HP Indigo team developed throughout Europe to standardize our red colors on all of the conventional labels that we print. So when this project’s finished, we will still be reaping the benefits of it from that.”

One campaign; many groundbreaking achievements

On many other levels, and even before its official market launch, the ‘Share a Coke’ campaign proved to be a groundbreaker.

The ‘Share a Coke’ promotion became the largest ever personalized marketing campaign combining Coca-Cola product packaging with electronic and social media in a single, integrated campaign.

This campaign not only broke new ground in the annals of Coca-Cola marketing, it also created a new model for integrated marketing in which physical product advertising is combined with online media.

On the color level, Bentley is now looking at ways that digital printing can enhance the use of color by Coca-Cola: “Full-color digital technology is really the next step for us and we’re seeing now how we can embrace that change.”

Likewise, the ‘Share a Coke’ campaign has illuminated new directions for the role of digital printing. Bentley explains: “With this project, we showed that digital printing can be used in large-volume marketing campaigns. And, with HP Indigo, it can be done with superb high quality. Once you consider the many ways that digital and analog can be combined, well, the possibilities just go up and up.”