RH Foster

At a glance

Application: CPG

Products: Intermec PF4i printer

Smart Printers Give RH Foster a Fresh Approach to Food Labeling

Not all the sandwiches RH Foster makes and sells at its chain of Exxon-Mobile convenience stores in Maine are triple deckers, but labeling them for sale was always a laborious three-step process. Once sandwiches were made and wrapped, the store clerk would apply a preprinted label that identified the sandwiches and its ingredients. The clerk would then grab a labeling gun to set and produce the price label. Finally, the clerk would take a separate labeling gun and set the date to make a "use by" freshness label. That's three separate steps, and the final product wasn't even bar coded, resulting in an extra manual step to ring up the sandwich at the point of sale.

The process also created support requirements at headquarters, where the sandwich and other food product labels were printed. The foodservice manager would personally print all the labels and either ship or deliver them to retail locations, and was responsible for ensuring each store had enough of the dozens of different product labels that were used. Stores would sometimes run out of preprinted labels and would have to create handwritten ones until a new supply arrived, or end up throwing away labels when ingredients changed or sandwiches were discontinued.

RH Foster wanted to find a smarter way to label its Freshies®- brand products, which are made fresh in each of the company's 12 retail locations each day. What it found was a smart labeling process that takes advantage of intelligence embedded in an in-store label printer to

take time, steps, guesswork and errors out of preparing product labels. RH Foster credits the system for saving at least 130 labor hours per store, per year.

"We were looking for something that would be extremely simple for the operator and would help us present our products in a more professional way," said Kathleen Williamson, foodservice manager for RH Foster. "We're growing and wanted a more professional label instead of a mom-and-pop look, and we wanted a labeling system that could grow with us."

Making a product label sounds simple, but RH Foster was faced with several challenges to creating an efficient process:

- The printers had to be extremely easy to use and reliable, because they would be operated by store clerks, not IT administrators, with no on-site support available.
- Safeguards needed to be in place to ensure each item was labeled accurately. When preprinted labels were used, deli associates sometimes applied them to the wrong products. Misidentified products lead to inaccurate inventory and make it difficult to track sales.
- Convenience stores are crowded, and every inch of counter space that is taken up by computers and printers cannot be used to display products. RH Foster wanted a small printer, and ideally one that could run without a PC. However, the printers should support network connectivity so they could be monitored, updated and managed remotely.

Intermec
by Honeywell

Most compact printers can't support multiple label formats with variable price, ingredient and use-by data without being connected to a PC, which was an expense and potential point of failure that RH Foster did not want to build into its printing processes. It worked with Matrix Systems & Solutions of Sanborn, NY, a packaging automation specialist, to evaluate products and processes to meet its needs.

When Products Are Made Fresh, So Are Their Labels

RH Foster replaced its multi-step process that relied on sticker guns and preprinted labels with in-store printers that produce each label on demand when the sandwich is made. The PF2 Smart Printers from Intermec store predefined label templates that identify and list the ingredients for more than 50 different types of sandwiches made in RH Foster stores, and have an onboard application that Matrix-SSI developed that automatically calculates and applies variable information (including the use-by date) to each label.

After deli associates make an item, they use an application running directly on the printer to create the needed label. The associate uses the printer's control panel to enter a numeric product code, and visually verifies the code on the printer's LCD screen. Without connecting to a computer, the application – which was created in Intermec's Fingerprint programming language and runs inside the printer – processes the product ID code, calls up the appropriate label template from printer memory, gets the price from an onboard database, calculates the use-by date (which varies depending on the ingredients) and automatically produces a sandwich label. The label includes a clear, legible product name, the Freshies brand logo, ingredient listing, use-by date and U.P.C. bar code. The

entire process is completed within seconds. "All our deli associate has to do is enter the product code and the printer takes care of the rest," said Williamson. "Our users don't even have to look up and enter a price, or calculate the use-by date. Having intelligence on the printer takes all the guesswork out of the process and makes our labels more accurate."

The Intermec PF4i printer has a numeric keypad and function keys, plus an LCD screen to guide users through operations. It has an all-metal case for ruggedness and reliability, but measures only 15.9 by 7 by 9.6 inches, so RH Foster could easily fit a printer into its crowded stores. Sixteen megabytes of Flash memory is standard, expandable to 32MB, which is plenty of memory to store RH Foster's label templates and ingredient lists.

The PF4i supports multiple interfaces, including both USB host and client, serial, parallel, RS-232 and secure 802.11b/g-standard wireless. RH Foster interfaced its printers to an Ethernet connection at each store, which provides a link to company headquarters in Hampden, Maine. The connection allows Williamson to support the printers remotely, either from her desk at headquarters or through her laptop wherever she can get Internet connectivity. That is an important feature, because Williamson spends a lot of time crisscrossing the state to visit stores. All Williamson needs is a network connection to upload new label formats to stores, update price or ingredient files, and even monitor label media availability and perform troubleshooting.

"That's very important to us because of how we work," said Williamson. "Just the other day I was visiting a store in the middle of the state, and got a call from a store near the Canadian border. I got on the PC at the

store I was in and updated the printer at the other location, which was many miles way. Without remote access it would have taken at least another day to resolve the issue."

RH Foster also subscribes to Intermec's Gold Medallion service plan, so if a printer ever needs replacement or hands-on repair, RH Foster is assured of having a functioning unit in place within two days. "I'd recommend the service program to anyone. It really pays for itself," Williamson said.

RH Foster uses the printers in direct thermal mode, which produces an image by having the printhead apply heat directly to the media, which means there are no ribbons or ink cartridges to replace. Users can easily load new label rolls when needed, which takes much less effort than when preprinted labels were used.

The Taste of Success

"The smart printing process has been a great labor savings for us. We estimate that we have save approximately 10 seconds per item by using these printers, for a labor savings of approximately 2.5 hours per week per site. This can equate to 130 hours annually per site," said Williamson. "The system makes us better in how we use our labor, and that's where we get our ROI."

Because fresh products are now bar coded, they can be rung up more quickly and easily at the point of sale. Saving time there has an intangible customer service benefit, since convenience store shoppers do not want to stand in line. Even more important, including a bar code on the product label helps RH Foster extend the benefits of its POS and inventory management systems, and know specifically what it sells. Before, the system only recorded that an item was sold. Now, it records the specific type, which helps RH Foster plan its merchandise assortment and manage ingredients.

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