

# It's All Clear!

• *by Huston Keith* ●●●●●●●●●●

The nationwide rollout of clear labels for Bud Light's glass bottles has opened up new vistas. Clearly, Anheuser Busch sees new opportunities in revealing more of America's leading beer brand. It's investing mega-millions in new labeling equipment and is paying a hefty premium for clear labels over current metallized paper labels.

It hopes to see the benefits of clear labels in spurring sales long enjoyed by liquor, wine and premium-priced popular beverages such as Sobe and Frappucino. Dan McHugh, senior director, Bud Light Marketing, Anheuser-Busch, Inc. states, "The clear label is a major image enhancement. Bud Light drinkers told us it makes Bud Light appear contemporary, fresher and more sophisticated."

## PEEKING PAST APPEARANCES

But there's more than meets the eye, declares Dan Muenzer, Marketing Director of Spear Label in Mason, OH, a long-time major supplier of the clear pressure-sensitive labels. These labels offer greater productivity and eliminate glue costs and mess, he claims.

Start-ups are virtually instantaneous, he claims, and changeovers take half the time. There is no need to wait half an hour for glue to warm-up, nor any need to clean up afterwards. Plus these labels are easier to apply straight and without wrinkles. At the end, the beer behemoth is looking at more cases labeled and a narrow cost gap versus paper.

Faster equipment from Spear and Kronos (Franklin, WI) also opens up use for beer and other high volume beverages. Only in the past two years have machines been able to apply pressure-sensitive labels at speeds acceptable to the beer industry. According to Dave Niemuth, Division Manager - Labeling Technology, Kronos' new modular stations allow easy changeovers to cut and stack or wraparound labels, providing the flexibility to use different labels on the same line.

## SEEING THROUGH NEW OPTIONS

But new materials are also helping realize packagers' dreams of clear labels. Until recently, the only option was higher cost pressure-sensitive labels, which also required different equipment than glue applied opaque paper labels. But now two cost effective clear plastic materials now offer replacements without major equipment changes.

AET Films of New Castle, DE introduced its ToppCure™ system in 2003. It includes economical oriented polypropylene (OPP) film labels, special adhesives and an ultraviolet glue curing station to be added to a traditional cut and stack labeling machine. The low cost OPP enables a short term payback for the additional investment. According to Terce Henriquez, Vice President of Global Sales, it is being commercialized with Tecate and dos Equis beers in Mexico.

Films made from Cargill Dow's (Minnetonka, MN) new NatureWorks™ poly lactic acid (PLA) are may be a dream come true for clear cut and stack labels, states Brian Glasbrenner, Director of Business Development - NatureWorks™ Films and Bottles. With high clarity, stiffness and moisture transmission, it is seen as a direct replacement for paper labels. Even without modification, cut and stack labeling machines run PLA labels at commercial speeds. As a bonus for the environment, PLA is made from corn and can be safely composted when discarded.

## **MORE WAYS TO HIDE THE LABEL**

Traditionally, achieving the “no-label” look is done by applying the graphic directly to the bottle with applied ceramic labeling (ACL). However, it requires the bottle to be annealed at 1200°F after application, resulting in high energy costs. Thus its use in packaging is limited to specialties.

However, newer ultraviolet-cured inks have eliminated the need for high heat curing. Bottles can now even be screen-printed in a filling plant, although speeds are far short of that required for high volume beverages.

For plastic bottles the “no-label” look can also be obtained with heat transfer and in-mold labeling. Heat transfer labels are used for Folgers' new plastic canisters for ground coffee, which received a prestigious DuPont award. In-mold labels are very popular with a wide variety of personal care and industrial products and are beginning to make inroads into beverages. As both of these techniques incorporate heat in label application, the label essentially fuses with the container and “disappears” from the consumer's view.

Since ACL, screen-printing, heat transfer and in-mold are all applied before filling, decorating can even be done outside the filling plant, freeing the processor from the hassle of applying labels. However, greater care must be taken to prevent damage and inventories must be more carefully managed.

## **CONCLUSION**

It's very clear - consumers want to see what they are buying. Sometimes even a small label clouds the view too much. But with new techniques and materials, the beauty of more products can be seen.

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