

TECHNOLOGY SPOTLIGHT

FIRST U.S. PRINTER PROVES UNSTOPPABLE

The very first Hitachi printer sold in America has operated 24/7 for more than five years, with hardly any maintenance.

When BestSweet, a manufacturer of hard candies and throat lozenges, was having a problem with one of its coders, a distributor left a demo model from Hitachi America Ltd. as a temporary replacement.

That model demonstrated something, all right: the dependability of Hitachi printers.

The distributor, Pak-Tec, left the Hitachi PX small-character continuous ink jet unit at BestSweet's plant in Mooresville, N.C., in October, 2003. BestSweet liked it so much that it ended up buying it—the first installation and sale of a Hitachi printer in the U.S. Since then, the printer has had a maintenance history that would make the Maytag Repairman look overworked: It has operated 24 hours a day with only two downtime incidents, and no in-house scheduled maintenance, in those five and a half years.

“At that point we had been supplying and servicing their Nordson adhesive application equipment for several years, so when BestSweet told of this coding requirement it was the ideal opportunity to expand our relationship to include our marking and coding expertise, which is spearheaded by the Hitachi product line,” says Rob Manchester, general manager of Pak-Tec. “The Hitachi ink jet printers have now proven to be the finest and most dependable small character ink jet printer in the world.”

The Hitachi unit was a hit with BestSweet because of a quirk of the packaging line it was assigned to. The horizontal form-fill-seal system pulls film for two bags at a time, sending them through the printer for date and lot codes before they get filled and sealed. The old printer, which used a ribbon and a backplate, couldn't keep up with that pace, but the Hitachi had no problem.

“We had to have it print twice on the move, and our other printer didn't want to do that,” says Tim Beaver, engineering supervisor. “It was OK with a single bag, but when it went to a duplex, it didn't like that. So they purchased this ink jet printer to get through that part of it. It was able to print on the fly, twice in one pull.”

The PX has several features that make it especially dependable and suitable to fast lines: relatively few moving



parts, a unique and innovative ink circulation system that helps reduce fluid evaporation, self-cleaning nozzles and gutters, and an IP55-rated stainless steel enclosure for protection against dust and moisture. These features also contributed to the BestSweet unit's stellar maintenance record.

That unit has run 24/7 since it was installed, with only two stoppages. At least one of those couldn't be blamed on the unit itself, Beaver says.

“I've only had to mess with that printer myself twice, and one of the times probably was because of something one of our mechanics did wrong when he was servicing it,” he says. “So really, we haven't had any problems to amount to anything, that I know of, with the printer since we've had it.” More astonishingly, BestSweet hasn't been doing preventive maintenance (although Pak-Tec did some on the two occasions it came to troubleshoot), and the unit seems none the worse for wear.

The unit at BestSweet was the first in Hitachi's PX series of small-character continuous ink jet printers. The latest version is the PXR series, which features a screen with significantly higher brightness and contrast. The PXR also complies with European environmental regulations that prohibit certain heavy metals and other substances in electrical equipment. **F&BP**



This Hitachi PX unit, on a hard-candy packing line, has run for more than five years with minimal maintenance.

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