

Stand out labels

Labelling cans, rather than printing them conventionally, is a key option for flexible filling, from shorter product runs through to corrections, and more. Daniel Searle reports

Labels have long been the go-to solution for smaller beverage manufacturers looking for a way to decorate their cans in an eye-catching way, without needing to meet the high minimum order quantities that conventional can printing typically requires.

The latest label technologies allow for a wide range of decorative options, which can be combined to give products the necessary shelf stand-out: high-resolution graphics, matte or metallic effects, and tactile finishes are amongst the possibilities.

The craft beer sector, which has grown hugely in recent years, has also adopted cans as the packaging of choice – which means there's a lot of competition amongst brewers to ensure that their can labels attract the attention of consumers.

Baxter Brewing Company, based in Maine, US, worked with label manufacturer Amherst Label to produce a strong look for its canned beer, and was rewarded with a 'best in class' prize in the alcoholic beverage category at last year's TLMi (Tag and Labels Manufacturers Institute) Printing Excellence Awards.

The label, used for the brewer's '13 Below' Cold IPA beer, was praised for the

sharp contrast of the high-opacity white print against the metallised film, and the tactile, three-dimensional feel provided by the rough-textured matte UV varnish.

Baxter Brewing and Amherst Label have been working together since 2022, when the brewery was searching for a new print supplier for its short runs of labels. Amherst now prints almost all the labels for Baxter's limited-edition beers, for both 12oz and 16oz cans, which total more than half a million labels annually.

"For our 13th-anniversary '13 Below' Cold IPA, I was thinking of the sky on a cold winter night," says Devin Smith, sales marketing manager at Baxter Brewing. "Someone suggested including the Northern Lights, which was a perfect idea. Adding the Northern Lights above the ridgeline and tree silhouettes into the foreground, it all came together.

"This label turned out way better than I could have imagined. The reflective film, the printed gradient and the tactile coating that we add to all labels – it all worked well together."

Shane Beaton, account executive at Amherst Label, adds: "The matte UV textured varnish definitely enhances the



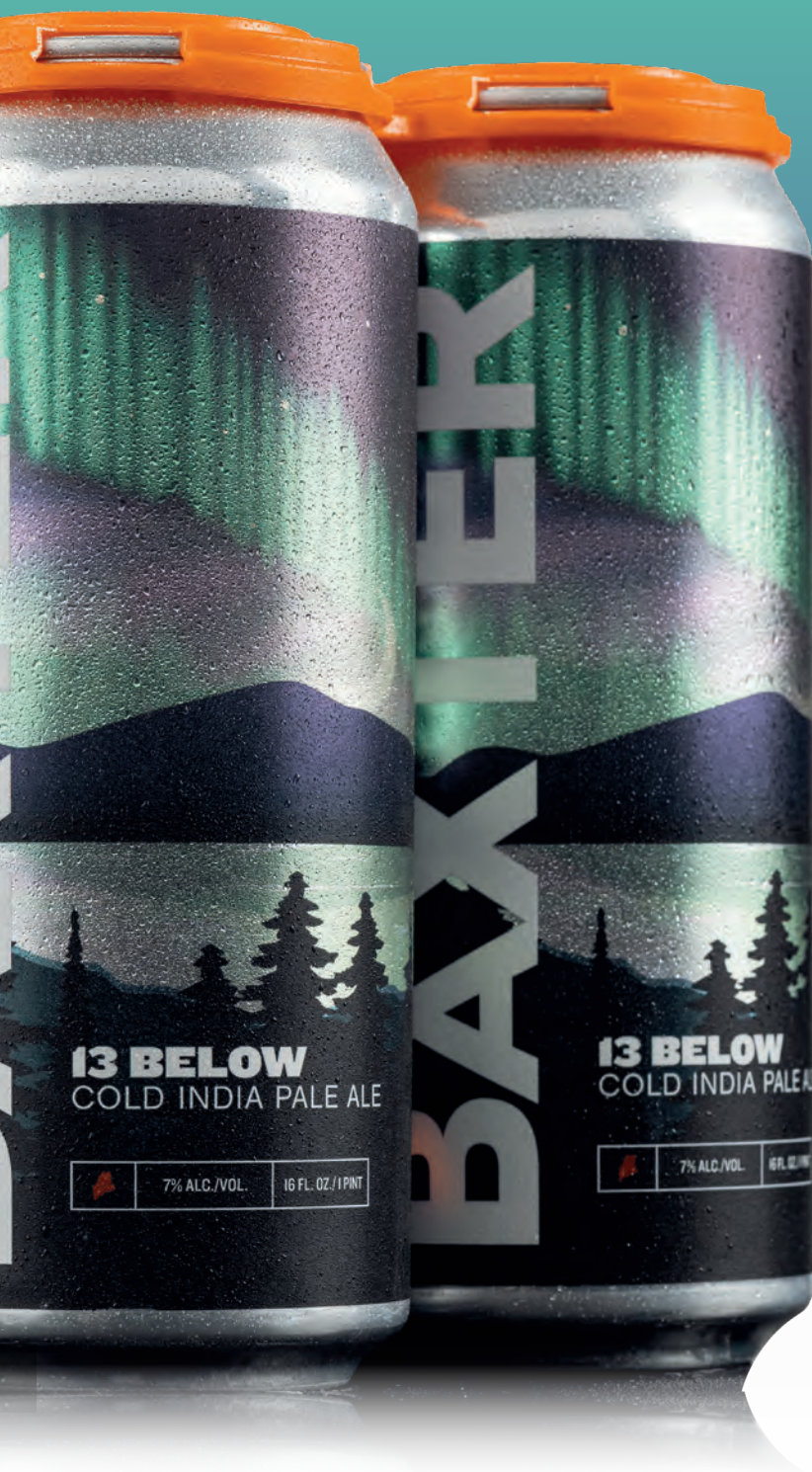
US-based Baxter Brewing Company won an award for this can label, produced by Amherst Label

way the label feels. It also helps when applying the labels to the cans in their high-speed canning line. It runs a lot smoother than other finishes, ensuring the labels are applied securely."

Press to impress

Amherst operates three Domino N610i presses – two hybrids and one roll-to-roll press – enabling it to offer a range of different printing services.

"Although much of our growth in recent years has been driven by our digital capabilities, it's important for us and for our customers to have access to both digital and



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Shane Beaton, Amherst Label

enabled us to hit the neon green of the Northern Lights much more accurately. Greens can be hard to get right."

Baxter Brewing is one of many craft canners supplied by Amherst Label. The company supports the Maine Brewers' Guild, an organisation that oversees all the breweries in the state of Maine, USA, explains Beaton: "This helps us to connect with lots of different breweries; we probably work with 80% of the breweries in the state of Maine. The craft brewers, like Baxter, are all great people and fun to work with. We work together and develop ideas – like we did with the label that won the award."

Sleeving option

UK-based Prism eLogistics offers a range of services, including shrink sleeving of cans, as well as storage, fulfilment, pick-and-pack, and distribution.

Shrink sleeves offer full coverage of cans, and a range of benefits including low minimum order quantities, speed and flexibility, and a range of decorative options. As a result, says managing director Ian Wright, it's a popular option for beverage brand owners.

"Currently, shrink sleeves are being widely used across several key beverage sectors," he says. "Functional and performance drinks are a major area, as brands in this space often need speed and flexibility due to frequent innovation and changes. Shrink sleeves are particularly well-suited for new product launches, especially when volumes are under 100,000 cans or when lead times for printed cans are too long."

"They're one of the most efficient packaging options where agility is key. They allow for fast design changes and don't require large-volume commitments like printed cans. This makes them ideal for market testing, early-stage brand launches, or SKUs where changes to formulation or messaging may still occur."

flexo technologies. Every scenario is different, and flexo has its place," says Beaton.

"For the label in question, it would have been possible to produce the design on one of our flexo presses, but as we were producing a small run of labels, this would have worked out more expensive, considering the set-up and cost of creating plates for every colour."

The run totalled 7,000 labels, which was paired with 3,000 labels for another SKU.

"It's a 5x8-inch label, and we ran it two across, which came out to about 4,500 feet, running roughly around 97 feet per minute," adds Beaton.

The colour capabilities of the Domino printer contributed to the end result, says Smith: "We were able to make those whites appear on the metallised film with a similar look and contrast to knocking out the text on a white substrate, and we incorporated different gradients and screens of white – like the ice and water reflection – into the label design. Domino's high opacity white ink helped make those gradients more defined."

Beaton adds: "Having the additional colour capabilities helps with projects like this. Having the luxury of running that extended gamut over standard CMYK

Labels & Labelling

“Even larger runs – up to 550,000 cans – still make economic sense with sleeves due to their speed and adaptability. They’re also a go-to solution for export markets, where different regions (such as Ireland, Austria, and Germany) now require specific artwork due to deposit return schemes or regulatory variations. Sleeving gives brands the flexibility to adjust ingredients or claims without waste, and is often used when formulas aren’t fully locked in.”

The appearance created by shrink sleeves also offers various benefits, including the potential for a seamless transition to lithographed cans should volumes grow to that level, says Wright.

“The printed can market is desirable – everybody wants a printed can,” he says. “But the minimum order quantities are high and lead times are relatively long.”

That means many brands and products start with labelled cans rather than printed cans.

“If your end goal is for your product to be in printed cans, then you want to start

with the printed can look. Shrink sleeves provide this, whereas pressure-sensitive labels do not, and leave a silver band.

“Many brands also prefer shrink sleeves because they provide denser colours, and a premium feel. Choosing a supplier with deep expertise and multiple sleeving lines ensures flexibility and smooth execution. In terms of design, the possibilities are extensive: gloss/matte hybrids, tactile effects, glow-in-the-dark, thermochromic inks, and even internal promotions (like hidden coupons) to aid engagement and ease of removal.”

That ease of removal is important to meet the recyclability demands of both forthcoming regulations, and consumers. By using the right material, and adding a perforation so the consumer can easily open and remove the sleeve, the strong sustainability credentials of metal packaging are maintained.

“There’s a misconception that sleeving adds waste or hinders can recycling. In fact, when using recyclable materials like EcoFloat, manufactured



Above Prism’s rotary feed sleeving line operates at 160 cans per minute

Below Some of Sneak Energy’s canned beverage range, in cans labelled by Prism eLogistics





Above The Sneak Energy labels being processed

by Innovia, part of CCL Industries, if the sleeve is separated, it can be recycled using established PP recycling schemes, says Wright, aligning with circular economy goals and new regulations from DEFRA coming into effect in 2026.”

Energy boost

With the functional drinks sector currently booming in the UK, Prism is increasingly working with manufacturers of these products such as energy drinks manufacturer Sneak Energy, based in Manchester.

“Over the past year, the functional drinks sector has become one of our most dynamic areas of growth, and our work with leading brands like Sneak Energy illustrates just how fast-paced and innovative this space has become,” says Wright.

“Since beginning our partnership, Prism has shipped over 2.2 million cans of Sneak across 47 countries, handling everything from ecommerce fulfilment and retail distribution to direct-to-store and event logistics. Our contribution isn’t limited to warehousing and shipping; we also provide the shrink-sleeving services that bring these products to life visually and help brands adapt fast to market change.”

With Sneak expanding its product portfolio, Prism’s two high-speed sleeving lines are helping the brand owner to meet increased demand. The company recently

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worked on sleeving 250,000 cans of various flavours such as Purple Storm, Raspberry Lemonade, and Blizzard, which shipped out in early May.

“Handling quick-turnaround projects has been key to the partnership as the recent introduction of ‘Brainberry’ into some of Sneak’s drinks – an extract formulated to enhance focus and cognitive performance – has shown,” says Wright. “Prism supported the ingredient addition by overseeing production adjustments and applying updated sleeves to existing cans. Its block-out sleeve service enabled Sneak to reuse existing stock, avoiding the cost and waste of discarding unused cans and sidestepping delays tied to sourcing new artwork.”

Prism’s sleeving line is a rotary feed (RF) system that operates at 160 cans a minute and also provides additional flexibility, such as handling different can sizes and formats.

“Application systems have evolved to keep pace with the increasing variety of can sizes and shapes,” says Wright. “Rotary Feed (RF) systems offer co-packers the flexibility to sleeve almost

any size with much lower tooling costs [around GBP3,000, or USD4,070], and even less [around GBP500] when adjusting from a previously used size. Compared to Vertical Feed (VF) systems, which can cost GBP6,000-8,000 per tool, RF systems are more economical and faster to adapt, giving brands and co-packers the flexibility they need at scale.”

Wright summarises the benefits of shrink sleeving: “It is one of the most powerful tools in the co-packing toolbox. It offers flexibility, speed and visual impact, all essential for success in the functional drinks category. More broadly, we see the growth in functional drinks as part of a wider trend in FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods]: brands want agility and adaptability. They need partners who can handle frequent changeovers, fluctuating volumes, and cross-channel distribution, and who can do so without compromising on speed or quality.”

More information:
domino-printing.com
prismelogs.co.uk