Rethinking the supply chain reaction

Simon Edwards, VP Sales and Marketing at Tonejet

Can you unlock the full potential of digital print for packaging without reinventing the supply chain?

Digital adoptions continue to disrupt package printing as we know it and many packaging converters have already introduced digital technologies into their operations. However, simply adding digital print is not the answer. Greater flexibility and more simple supply chains will mean even faster time-to-market for brands.

The expectation

Over many years, the expectations of what digital print can deliver continue to grow. However, are these expectations aligned with reality? Correctly aligned with the true value that digital offers? End users are expecting digital to match the performance of current analogue solutions along with a view that digital is for more complex print requirements. There are also high expectations when we talk about personalisation and customisation. To add to this, there is some assumption that this can all be delivered by replacing an analogue printer with a digital printer within the supply chain, in some cases precisely where the analogue printer is/was located.

Fillers and packers expect to be able to replace traditional print converters by installing digital solutions, either in-line or very close to the filling and packing lines.

The reality

What's the reality? Digital printing is different and complementary to analogue performance, filling a gap where analogue just isn't effective. Digital solutions should be used in a way that leverages the agile ability of the process, removing the need for costly and time-consuming set ups. The focus of digital print runs should be short to medium, with high marketing value and a quick turnaround, there is an economical crossover for profitable short to medium run jobs.

There is a great deal of tension between existing incumbents of printing equipment and the ultimate customer of the printed package. Packers and fillers would like to bring printing into the factories but do not have the skills required to operate a printer. When considering digital, some believe that operator skill level is much lower than a conventional press which isn't necessarily true. Traditional press skills also apply to a digital press, particularly image and colour management as well as ink consumables and general maintenance.

The supply chain

To be truly successful and reap the benefits of digital, it's evident that digital equipment would benefit from being located further down the supply chain where print can be added to the package as late as possible. Outsourced services would be required from traditional printers and converters to leverage their knowledge and continue to manage digital printers within the operations of their customers. There are numerous examples in other industries where this model has not only been successful but also resulted in strong collaboration between suppliers and customers.

The supply chain requires new thinking as to where digital workflows should be located, who should own equipment, who should manage it and how other innovative technologies could be implemented. The winners will be those who work together to reshape the current supply chain, adopt new technologies beyond the digital printer itself and look at new business models. Who owns the infrastructure and who operates it?

The future

Online ordering and increased availability of web-to-pack type portals reduce and sometimes eliminate costs associated with design and pre-press and the cost of producing print-ready files. A [recent market study from Smithers Pira](#) predicts that by 2020 this type of online ordering may become the preferred method even for medium runs. The report also suggests that online orders and the declining cost of digital presses will be a threat to traditional print service providers, stating that it will become increasingly possible to fit and remote-control printers at manufacturer's facilities, distribution centres or even retail outlets. Thus, providing a more responsive business model, producing bespoke packaging for promotional purposes on site.

The Tonejet Cyclone is a prime example of a digital production system that could be installed at a converter and just as easily at a brewery wanting to diversify or an entrepreneur looking for a new business opportunity. Consumers want things quickly and traditional processes with lengthy supply chains slow the process. We need a quick and responsive, adaptable supply chain to meet consumer requirements. Supply and demand or demand and supply? This new breed of supply chain is more connected, intelligent, scalable and rapid than traditional supply chain management.

Ultimately the winners will be those who work together to reshape the supply chain, work closely with marketing, adopt new technology beyond the digital printer and implement new business models.

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About Tonejet:
Tonejet is a powerful digital print technology designed exclusively to meet these needs and is leading the way in digital printing innovation. The business is particularly proud of its ground-breaking electrostatic drop-on-demand print head, which can produce cost-effective, high-quality images at high speeds on virtually any type of substrate without the need for pre-coating.

Tonejet Limited is part of TTP Group, Europe's leading technology development and licensing company. This means the company is perfectly placed to offer unrivalled industry expertise, combining a professional service with superior products.

Contacts:

Tonejet	**Bespoke**
Simon Edwards	Nicole O'Donoghue
simon.edwards@tonejet.com	nicole@bespoke.co.uk
Tel: +44(0) 1763 266566	Tel: +44 (0) 1737 215 200
www.tonejet.com	www.bespoke.co.uk