

Almost 800 million personalised Coca-Cola® labels printed on HP Indigo digital presses across Europe



At a glance

Industry: Labels & Packaging
Business names: Eshuis BV
Headquarters: Dalfsen, the Netherlands
Websites: eshuis.nl



Business names: The Coca-Cola Company, Europe
Headquarters: Brussels, Belgium
Websites: coca-cola.com

Challenge

- Print hundreds of millions of personalised bottle labels for Coca-Cola®, Coca-Cola Zero®, and Coca-Cola® light, within a four-month lead time.
- Match iconic Coca-Cola red colour and ensure colour consistency across multiple label converters and digital presses.
- Combine digital and conventional printing on ultra-thin adhesive film with completely consistent print quality and colour.
- Ensure the technical specifications of the HP Indigo-digitally printed personalised labels would be identical to standard, conventionally printed labels to meet the bottling plants' requirements.

Solution

- Multi-country network spanning eight digital label converters printing variable data areas and 10 printing the static areas conventionally, with Eshuis managing the entire project and handling part of the digital printing.
- A total of twelve HP Indigo digital presses including WS6600 and WS6000 dedicated to the 'Share a Coke' campaign ran 24/7 to 24/5 across three months.
- Special ink, pre-mixed by HP Indigo, developed to match Coca-Cola red.
- Integrated support from Eshuis to maximise productivity and print consistency across all print sites and presses.

Results

- Almost 800 million personalised labels were printed at a cumulative rate of 36,000 per hour across 12 presses in eight different locations. The personalisation featured the top 150 names in each of more than 32 countries, in 15 languages and five different alphabets.
- Finished labels perfectly matched Coca-Cola standard printed labels' weight, surface tension and web tension. This enabled bottling plants to continue running at their regular high speeds.
- Outstanding colour match accuracy of the HP-developed red ink prompted Coca-Cola to use it as the standard for the conventionally printed part of the labels. The HP-developed red ink has also been adopted by Coca-Cola as the new reference colour for future production of Coca-Cola packaging in Europe.
- Eshuis set a new record for production volume on an HP Indigo WS6000 Digital Press – 8.2 million impressions per month versus the previous record of 4.7 million.

“This project shows that you can use HP Indigo digital printing technology for higher volume campaigns. It’s not just for runs up to 2,000 metres. It’s a very mature technology that can produce very high quality and higher volumes.”

– Peter Overbeek, CEO, Eshuis



At Eshuis, a leading Dutch label converter, production challenges are viewed as opportunities – to find new ways to add innovation to packaging and to achieve ever-greater impact for its customers.

With its ‘can-do’ attitude and deep knowledge of packaging production techniques, Eshuis was chosen as the primary printing partner and printing project manager for The Coca-Cola Company’s ambitious Europe-wide ‘Share a Coke’ personalised marketing campaign.

Coke® gets personal, using its bottle labels

The basic campaign concept was to print the top 150 names for teenagers in specific European countries on labels for Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola Zero and Coca-Cola light. The bottles would be placed on store shelves, enabling young people to find a bottle with their friend’s name and buy their friend a Coke. Social media and electronic media would be integrated to help drive excitement and coverage.

Eshuis became involved at the outset, when Coca-Cola was investigating if it would even be possible to implement such a campaign on a pan-European scale. It would require 150 top names for each of more than 32 different countries to be printed on labels for three different Coca-Cola products, in 15 different languages, using five alphabets. Although this would be a variable data-based campaign, Coca-Cola knew that the enormous volume of personalised labels and the need to provide its bottlers with labels precisely tuned to their existing production lines meant that neither conventional nor digital printing could handle it alone.

Out of the box thinking about packaging

“The project started with questions from Coca-Cola about the feasibility of a label printed in a combination of conventional and digital printing,” recalls Peter Overbeek, CEO of Eshuis. “The conventional printing was needed to produce part of the labels with static information, and digital printing was needed to add the names as variable information.”

As an experienced label converter with a versatile platform of flexo, offset and digital printing lines, along with comprehensive design and finishing capabilities, Overbeek knew it was possible; the only question was how.

Together with The Coca-Cola Company’s European Packaging Innovator, Gregory Bentley, and his team, Eshuis investigated possible approaches and solutions, including testing how the personalised labels would perform on the production lines at the bottling plants – a crucial requirement for the project. Another potential show-stopper was the requirement to perfectly match the iconic Coca-Cola red colour.

HP Indigo technology offers unique solution

Very quickly, it became obvious that HP Indigo digital printing technology was the only option for printing the variable part of the project.

Gregory Bentley explains: “When we looked at the technical criteria and deliverables that we had as a project brief, it became clear that the HP Indigo digital technology was the answer. The ink weight, colour matching, print quality and consistency, and the installed base of the HP Indigo press in Europe made it the only option for this volume.”

“We were very pleased with the very high level of accuracy of colour matching that HP Indigo was able to deliver through its press. Now we are using the red that HP developed throughout Europe to standardise our red colours on all of the conventional labels that we print.”

— Gregory Bentley, European packaging innovator, Coca-Cola Services SA



The technical requirements created by the 38-micron ExxonMobil film used for Coca-Cola bottle labels was another reason that only HP Indigo technology fit the bill. Overbeek explains: “Because of the web tension and the fragility of the film, it’s not possible to use cycle presses. As far as I know, HP Indigo presses are the only ones today that can handle it.”

Having solved the major feasibility questions, the focus turned to project size challenges. “Coca-Cola was concerned about how we would overcome potential issues and reduce risk,” says Overbeek. “One of their biggest questions was ‘do we have enough capacity to deliver the project?’, and I was telling them, yes, yes and yes, again and again.”

A Europe-wide network of HP Indigo presses

Overbeek’s confidence regarding capacity was based on a plan to share the workload with partner companies that would all work together as a coordinated, Eshuis-managed team.

To this end, Eshuis set up a Europe-wide network of eight digital label converters (including Eshuis) and 10 conventional label converters.

As the project manager and also one of the digital label converters, Eshuis was responsible for supporting all the digital providers. Eshuis created ready-made print files and distributed them to all the digital printers, helped the print partners get their digital presses in optimised condition for the project, and educated them on how to ensure consistent and high-quality printed results matching Coca-Cola standards, particularly for its special red colour. As part of this, Eshuis developed a powerful web tool specifically for the project to enable efficient project management and consistent quality across the network.

To help Eshuis ensure colour consistency across all the digital printing companies, HP provided specially pre-mixed ink supplies matching the Coca-Cola special red colour.

The conventional label converters printed the multi-colour static areas of the labels and then shipped them to the digital providers, who used their HP Indigo Digital Presses to print the personalised names. After that, the labels were shipped back to the analogue label converters for varnishing and delivery to the bottlers.

All HP Indigo, all the time

A total of 12 HP Indigo Digital Presses spread across the digital network were dedicated to the ‘Share a Coke’ project for three months, working five to seven days a week, three shifts a day. Cumulatively, they printed 36,000 labels per hour, enabling them to complete the almost 800 million labels required in time for the campaign launch.

Eshuis spread its portion of printing over four months as it was the first to get started. Even so, it broke the record for production volume on an HP Indigo WS6000 Digital Press – not just within the network, but across the worldwide press installed base. Eshuis’ peak production of 8.2 million impressions a month on the campaign outstripped the previous record of 4.7 million.

“I think we printed something like eight to nine million linear metres on the HP Indigo press and that’s absolutely not typical for a digital press,” says Overbeek.

“We’ve broken all the daily, weekly or monthly records. If you talk about a monthly record on the HP Indigo WS6000 Digital Press, I think the old record was 4.7 million. The new record is 8.2 million impressions a month.”

– Marit Kroon, marketing manager, Coca-Cola Europe



Outstanding results in every respect

This process resulted in personalised print labels that were identical in all physical specifications to the Coca-Cola regular labels – which had been a crucial requirement from the outset of the project. The bottling lines successfully used the special labels in their production lines at their usual high speed, without system adjustments or delays.

The pre-mixed red HP Indigo ink, developed specially for this project by HP Indigo, was so successful that Coca-Cola Europe is now using it to standardise the red colour on all conventionally printed labels.

“Colour is critical for Coca-Cola and we have very strict standards for our colour matching with all of our suppliers,” says Bentley. “We were very pleased with the very high level of accuracy of colour matching that HP Indigo was able to deliver through its press. Now we are using the red that HP developed throughout Europe to standardise our red colours on all of the conventional labels that we print. So when this project’s finished, we will still be reaping the benefits of it from that.” In addition, Bentley reports that as a result of the project, he has begun looking at full-colour digital technology as the next step for Coca-Cola packaging.

Marit Kroon, marketing manager, Coca-Cola Europe, emphasises the positive impact of the hybrid-printed labels: “We are completely happy with the way our labels turned out. The quality and the look are absolutely great. This project has increased the standards against which we measure the quality of all our labels on the market.”

Aiming big with HP Indigo technology

With this monumental printing project for Coca-Cola now successfully completed, Peter Overbeek, at Eshuis, has had time to reflect on what the ‘Share a Coke’ campaign means to the role of digital printing marketing campaigns. “I think this project shows that you can use HP Indigo digital printing technology for higher volume campaigns. It’s not just for runs up to 2,000 metres. It’s a very mature technology that can produce very high quality and higher volumes.”

Overbeek also sees a future for leveraging two technologies to do more than would be possible with just one. “The combination of conventional and digital has not been done before on this scale and it opens a completely different kind of market to digital printing. I think it would be very beneficial for a lot of brand owners to use conventional and digital combined to address markets they did not address before.”

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