



With Asahi Photoproducts' sales manager EMEA, Philip Mattelaer (centre), are Heidelberg Southern Africa's MD, Marc Lotter, and business driver-Africa, Gordon Smith.

Clean future for flexo platemaking

SINCE Asahi Photoproducts cemented a distribution agreement with Heidelberg Southern Africa at Labelexpo Europe 2019, two converging flexo printing trends have led to steady growth in Asahi's CleanPrint plate sales in the region.

The first trend is brand owners' continuing drive for ever-faster time to market combined with improved quality packaging that stands out on shelves – all at an ever-lower price point. Increasingly, too, they seek suppliers who can produce packaging with a reduced environmental footprint.

Secondly, packaging printers/converters need to find ways to improve efficiencies to meet these demands while increasing quality to address the growing use of photographic images on packaging. In addition to meeting the sustainability demands of brand owners, they recognise that less waste and a cleaner work environment represent operational benefits.

Heidelberg's Africa business driver, Gordon Smith, reports that Southern African packaging converters are changing from solvent- to water-based plates to achieve major time savings (an average processing time of 30 minutes compared to the usual two to 2.5 hours). 'It's becoming standard for operations serious about improving their environmental footprint to invest

in equipment that enables a change from solvent- to water-based technologies,' he adds.

Asahi's CleanPrint flexo plates – which easily fit into existing prepress environments without requiring additional equipment investment – enable converters to meet brand owners' quality and sustainability needs, while improving productivity, sustainability and profitability.

Productivity improvements

Asahi's chemical engineers have engineered the plates to facilitate kiss-touch printing pressure, with lower surface energy to transfer all remaining ink to the printed substrate, even after 100 000 to 200 000 linear metres.

This lighter printing impression results in reduced dot gain and consistently reproduces highlight dot sizes smaller than the thickness of a human hair, enabling precise, reproduction of photographic images throughout the production run.

'CleanPrint plates come up to colour faster, reducing ink filling in at the mid-tone area during the run, and requires fewer cleaning intervals than conventional digital solvent plates. This is possible thanks to the pinned contact angle that prevents ink from travelling down the shoulder,' Gordon explains.

Board applications



WITH the growing global use of corrugated board packaging, brands and retailers are increasingly seeking ways to simultaneously improve the quality of the board's appearance and level of protection.

According to Dieter Niederstadt, Asahi Photoproducts' technical marketing manager, Asahi's AFP-Leggero CleanPrint plates have been specifically designed for 'simple brown-box' corrugated applications such as fruit trays and single-colour logo type printing.

'With AFP-Leggero's soft-touch kiss printing, not only is the historical problem of board crush and washboarding virtually eliminated due to the softness of this plate, but there's also virtually no dot bridging and good ink laydown. It means that solid colour and highlight areas are clean and crisp, as are fine lines and smaller type,' he points out. 'This is the ideal plate for corrugated board post-print and will enable converters to broaden the range of applications they can produce for customers, especially those not willing to sacrifice quality.'

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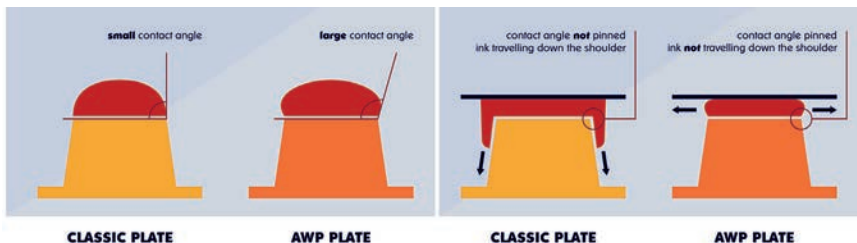
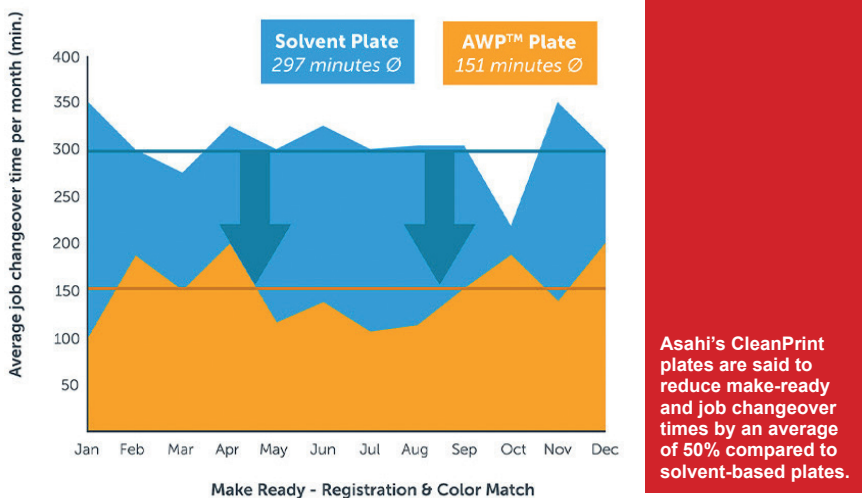
Sustainability enhancements

Owing to fewer plate cleaning press stops, reduced make-ready waste and substrate waste is achieved, improving environmental performance, while more efficient throughput means less energy consumption.

CleanPrint plates also emit fewer VOCs, while studies show that these water-washable plates have the smallest cradle-to-grave carbon footprint compared to solvent or thermal systems. Not only does this help with regulatory compliance, but also creates a safer, cleaner work environment for employees and results in process cost reductions.

Equipment effectiveness booster

Asahi also reports that CleanPrint plates deliver an improvement in overall equipment effectiveness of at least 30% and reduce make-ready time by up to 50%. This means that packaging converters can produce more work per shift, increasing press uptime, reducing waste and driving cost improvements that enhance the bottom line or savings that can be passed on to customers.



Extended colour gamut printing

With the precise and predictable performance of Asahi CleanPrint plates, ECG (extended colour gamut printing) – which has a proven track record in offset printing – is now viable for flexo printing, using a fixed sequence of colours on press. An ECG ink palette also makes it easier to gang jobs for more efficient use of plates and substrates, improving time to market.

Asahi recommends implementing ECG with a seven-colour range of inks, typically CMYK/OGV, to achieve more than 90% of Pantone colours. The company also maintains that experience has repeatedly demonstrated that this technique can increase efficiency from 50% to 85% by eliminating wash-ups between jobs.

Ticking many boxes

CleanPrint has now migrated beyond Asahi water-washable plates to other plate families, ensuring that the plates will be available for the widest possible variety of printing needs.

Most recently, Asahi introduced AFP-BFT digital flexo plates that feature built-in flat-top dot and CleanPrint technologies for kiss-touch printing with consistent printing quality and no need for special workflow or equipment.

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