A Smooth Finish

Sprecher Brewing Co. Uses Videojet Coders to Keep the Beer and Soda Flowing

In 1985, Randall Sprecher followed a Wisconsin brewing tradition by opening Sprecher Brewing Co. in Milwaukee. The goal was to focus on craft beers, emphasizing the highest quality and tradition of European-style brewing. Within three years, the company began making gourmet sodas as well. Today, the microbrewery offers 20 kinds of beer distributed in 18 states and nine kinds of soda found in 40 states. Root beer has become the brewery's most popular product.

To keep up with demand, Sprecher relies on continuous ink jet printers from Videojet Technologies Inc. to run smoothly and reliably on their bottling lines and provide crisp, consistent date and lot codes.

Smooth Operation

Despite the global recession, Sprecher has continued to grow with demand for specialty beers and sodas on the rise. To keep up with such demand, Sprecher maintains a high-capacity bottling process that runs 12 hours a day, five days a week. In the summer months when demand increases, Sprecher runs six 12-hour shifts. They produce approximately 3,000 cases in an eight-hour shift.

Without the smooth operation of its manufacturing and bottling processes, Sprecher would be unable to meet customer demand and continue their rising profitability.

In their early years, Sprecher experienced some line downtime because its ink jet coding systems often required maintenance and printhead cleaning, causing the line to be slowed or stopped for unplanned periods of time. Today, Sprecher uses a Videojet® 1710 small character continuous ink jet printer with pigmented yellow ink to code its bottles, and uptime has increased significantly.

"We can't afford to have something shut down the line," says Tom Bosch, brewery production manager at Sprecher Brewing Co. *"We have time constraints and many customers waiting for our products around the country. So we must be on time. With our new Videojet coder, we've had no maintenance problems, so it has been a great help to our operations."*

The Videojet 1710 features an innovative Clean Flow printhead design which reduces ink buildup that can

Clean Flow printhead coding amber bottle

cause traditional ink jet printers to shut down. It is designed to deliver longer runs without intervention and less maintenance.

"The supervisors on the line are grateful that we have a coder in which the maintenance staff doesn't have to regularly be over there trying to clean it out and get it running again," Bosch states.

For Sprecher, the Videojet 1710 printer can go a full week between printhead cleanings and twelve months or 4,000 production hours between scheduled maintenance. This minimal maintenance is a relief to bottling line supervisor Greg Fojtik. "I have other things to worry about in my job, and the printer is not one of them," he said. "It's great that I can just turn on the printer and don't have to worry about it so I can focus on other things."

Coding for Quality Control

For quality control purposes, Sprecher prints yellow pigmented codes on its amber and blue bottles that include the date and time of bottling, sequence number and expiration date. The Videojet 1710 printer has the unique ability to employ high-contrast, pigmented inks to create bright, clean codes on dark surfaces for which dye-based inks are not effective, such as colored glass.

The crispness and readability of these codes are extremely important to sprecher and Videojet's other bottling customers.

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"Without a clear code on the bottles, we are really running blind," says Jeff Hamilton, president of Sprecher Brewing Co. "It's important for us to give our customers assurance that we are carefully monitoring the quality of our products."

Quality is a priority for Sprecher, and that commitment is recognized nationwide. In 2010, Sprecher won second place in the United States Open Beer Championship. Eight individual Sprecher brews — such as its Dunkel Weiss, Black Bavarian and Sprecher Mai Bock — won medals within their categories.

Keeping codes readable for a longer period of time is also important because Sprecher ages some of its beers. Once beer is brewed, it ferments for about a week and then goes to an aging cellar for anywhere from three weeks to three months. Some specialty beers are aged for up to a year.

This means codes must remain readable even on a bottle that has been handled and stored for a long period of time.

"For taste-testing around the country, we take some of our aged beer samples along with newer batches for comparison," Bosch says. "There is a tendency for codes to wear off over time, but we don't have that problem. It's nice for consumers to see that some of our beers are easily aged for that long."

Taking it Easy

Sprecher's gourmet sodas, such as root beer, cream soda and Orange Dream, are manufactured, bottled and shipped out by the next day. Despite the occurrence of multiple product line changes every day, changeover for coding is as simple as selecting the new product in the printer interface. All of Sprecher's product codes are programmed into the system for operators to make quick changes when needed.

"The printer allows all the different Sprecher brand coding specs to be preprogrammed, which saves a lot of time when operators are setting up in the morning," Bosch adds. "It allows them to restart the codes between brands very easily without having to reprogram the printer. It has been a big time-saving tool when we do brand changeovers and bottle line changeovers. The operator just touches the button on the interface, runs a couple bottles through to make sure it's printing fine, and away we go."

Tom Bosch
Brewery Production Manager

Some customers require special codes on their Sprecher bottles. For example, to sell products in Florida, Sprecher must include the letters FL after the sequential number coded on each container. Using the Videojet printer to add this information instead of printing separate labels has been a cost savings for Sprecher.

Videojet 1710

In addition to numerical codes, the Videojet 1710 printer can apply a variety of fonts in multiple languages, as well as linear bar codes, 2D DataMatrix codes, custom logos and graphics at speeds up to 888 feet per minute.

Like the other coders within the 1000 Line of continuous ink jet printers, the Videojet 1710 leverages the exclusive Smart Cartridge™ fluid system. By reading the embedded microchip, the printer identifies whether compatible fluid has been installed. This prevents, errors in ink types or the switching of make-up and ink fluids, saving time and money. The Smart Cartridge fluid system is designed to drain completely, wasting no residual fluids. The needle-and-septum design eliminates the need for operators to pour ink, thereby preventing fluid spillage and waste.

Videojet 1710 on-line at Sprecher Brewing Company

"The ink cartridges are easy to use," Bosch says. "We're not fumbling with containers; there are no spills, no messes and no accidents. We just plug and play."

Brewing a Partnership

Throughout its operation, Sprecher takes advantage of the latest technology available. They even custom engineer some of their own equipment like a new brew kettle recently installed. But when it was time to add a new coding solution, Sprecher turned to Videojet as the expert in coding technology. Bosch notes that Videojet has helped Sprecher keep its line running by providing equipment on time and getting it online quickly. "It has been a great relationship," he says. "It's not always easy to say that about other companies and their technical service. Videojet answers our calls 24/7. We don't always see that from other companies, especially since we are a smaller operation. It's nice to get the best service from a company like Videojet."

> "Videojet has always taken good care of us, so it was a natural decision to go with Videojet when we needed another coder"

Jeff Hamilton
President - Sprecher Brewing Co.

"Videojet has been a wonderful partner," adds Jeff Hamilton, president of Sprecher Brewery. "They will always help us and take care of our needs. That's what we look for in our equipment suppliers."

See the video at: www.videojet.com/beverage

Transitioning to Cans

After exclusively using bottles for its products for the last 26 years, Sprecher has introduced a new aluminum canning line for its special amber beer and root beer products. The choice to use cans was driven by environmental, cost and quality factors.

"Cans are the premier container — much better for the environment," Hamilton says. "Most aluminum cans get recycled and turned back into something useful. You can't say that about glass."

The lighter weight of aluminum also reduces shipping weight, which reduces fuel consumption and shipping costs. In addition, cans prevent light and air from contaminating beer and soda. Oxygen and light can get into a bottle, but cans are dark and hermetically sealed for ultimate freshness.

For its new can line, Sprecher chose the Videojet 1510 ink jet printer to apply standard black codes to the concave underside of aluminum cans. "Videojet has always taken good care of us, so it was a natural decision to go with Videojet when we needed another coder," Hamilton says.

Looking Ahead

Hamilton foresees further growth for Sprecher in the coming years.

"Craft brewing is growing at double digits. Gourmet sodas are also growing," Hamilton says. "We are fortunate to be in a part of the economy that is on an upward swing. We expect that to continue over the next five years."

Sprecher anticipates adding more manufacturing capacity in that period, and perhaps increase its canning capabilities.

"When that happens, we will certainly need great coding equipment and we'll be looking to Videojet to help us achieve that."

By: Drew Weightman, Beverage Vertical Marketing Manager, Videojet Technologies Inc.

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Uptime Peace of Mind®

800-843-3610 / www.videojet.com / info@videojet.com

Videojet Technologies Inc. / 1500 Mittel Blvd. / Wood Dale IL 60191-1073 / USA
Phone 630-860-7300 **Fax** 800-582-1343

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