

Short Run Box Making

A UNIQUE MARKET SEGMENT THAT CAN LEAD TO HEALTHY BOTTOM LINE CONTRIBUTIONS.

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Much of our industry is focused on high speed and high volume box converting. Box plants are set up to serve big accounts that swallow huge volumes of corrugated every month, but are there other hidden-gem opportunities that offer plants a way to diversify, without losing focus on the main day-to-day bread and butter? Diversification that can lead to very healthy bottom line contributions? One such opportunity that refuses to go away is the short run sector. Short run has always been a bit of an unsung hero but there's no doubt that it is becoming increasingly important to the modern day box plant owner, particularly with the onset of digital print technologies.

Usually, box plants fall into four areas when dealing with short run:

- The order volume is not big enough so the plant declines the order — This is just turning dollars away, especially if it is coming to you and you are still ignoring it. What if satisfying that order had led to other opportunities within the account? Farming it out might work for all concerned but then you are in the hands of another supplier and lose control of the product, not to mention a huge cut in margins.
- The order is recognized as valuable so you try to produce it on traditional converting equipment or sample CAD tables — This is valiant but ultimately inefficient. Not only is it disruptive to the regular work meant for the high speed machines, but it is also inefficient due to long setup times, and therefore margins per unit are low or may

even end up costing money. Producing runs on CAD tables is simply not scalable without large investment in multiple tables — not the right tool for the job.

- Since short runs are often awkward in size or style, plants have no choice but to turn the work away as they don't have the right equipment mix to physically produce the required boxes.
- Work is produced on dedicated short run equipment — This is the right tool for the right job. Machines are used for the appropriate markets and much profit is made.

Market Growth

Consider that short run is typically applied to box orders ranging from one sample to 2000 pieces. This run size covers a growing number of markets. For example, there has been an explosion in online retailing — just look at the Black Friday results that indicated online sales growth of between 10 and 25% in 2014 over 2013 (depending on the source). Regardless of the actual percentage, it is growing and is fuelled by the increasing numbers of smaller niche product (boutique) eBay and Amazon sellers and manufacturers who do not need, or cannot stock, large quantities of boxes.

In general consumption too, buyers are becoming more savvy and do not want to stock so many boxes, instead preferring a just-in-time service. When you consider the impending FedEx and UPS shipping rate increases that will hugely affect the short run consumers, custom box requirements are only going to become more critical to a box plant owner.

So how do you set up to take advantage of this sector?

Firstly you need to empower your sales force to go looking for this profitable work — jumbo printed boxes, wraps and OPF's, heavy duty bulk container boxes, small parts boxes – anything that is usually awkward to run or expensive to produce.

You then need to invest in a dedicated short run manufacturing area in your plant. It needn't take a huge footprint and it can share some existing ancillary equipment, but the key is a quick setup, short run box maker versatile enough to cover a large range of sheet sizes that requires no additional tooling to satisfy any brown box order, and is easy enough to operate by one or two people. This machinery must be quick setup, otherwise you will not unlock the margin within short run orders.

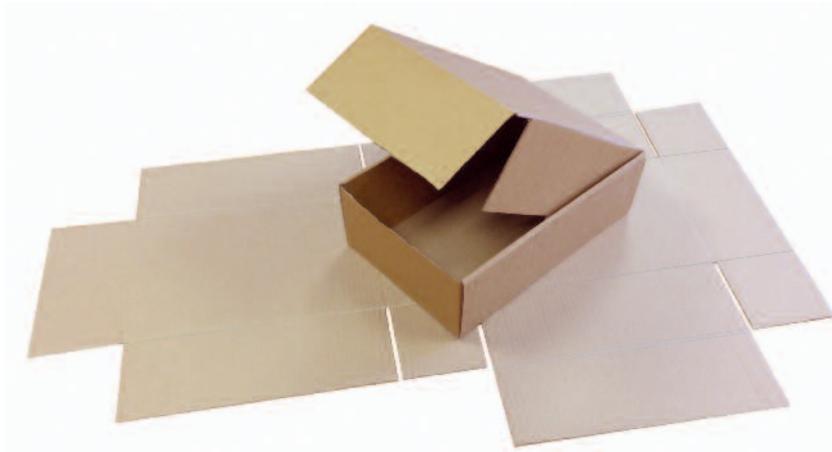
Done properly, the ROI can be

astonishing, not only directly by producing short orders in the most efficient way, but also indirectly too by giving the sales team a foot in the door to potentially larger opportunities in an account more suited to the traditional equipment in the plant. Not only that, but today's short run box makers are sufficiently rugged to support the traditional converting machinery as backup for main production whenever called upon, and with the right machine selection, adaptable enough to convert simple diecut boxes, such as OPF's without any tooling whatsoever, where traditional equipment would.

A Perfect Match

The emerging and much discussed technology that perfectly complements this short run manufacturing 'cell' is digital printing. Why? Because, like the dedicated short run converting machinery, it is quick setup and without the need to change tooling or print plates. Suddenly, you can now offer personalization, prototyping, branding, regional variations, simple labelling, cert stamps and more all from one quick turnaround manufacturing center within the plant.

While on the face of it an in-line system of digital printer with a box maker might seem desirable for this sector, it could be argued as ill advisable when considering digital print specifically for corrugated. There are two reasons why: 1) When you start diecutting corrugated board, dust and larger fiber particles are put into the local atmosphere, which can severely affect print quality, especially if it enters the digital print heads. Print quality will deteriorate even with the smallest amount of contamination. 2) Having a digital press inline ties it to that very



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setup folder-glueers designed to run at speeds of 3000 boxes per hour but with setup times ranging from just a matter of minutes. You are now in a position to digitally print, slot, diecut, score, fold and glue a finished box.

While the short run box making machinery is proven, the challenge facing converting machinery manufacturers is to produce digital printers that can provide a satisfactory return on investment for small to medium sheet plants. With the rapidly evolving technology, this is not far away. In today's market, as a box plant owner or manager, you are looking for maximum return on investment from all your machinery. You are looking for rapid reaction time for producing short orders to satisfy customer demand. By investing in digital print with true short run box making capabilities, you will set yourself apart from your 'analog' competitors and carve yourself a niche.

So, if your short run inquiries are growing, or you're struggling to meet the demands with your existing converting equipment, or indeed you want to grow your sales opportunity, consider investing in a dedicated short run setup and get involved in this growth sector — there really isn't a down side. ■

THERE ARE QUICK SETUP FOLDER-GLUERS DESIGNED TO RUN AT SPEEDS OF 3000 BOXES PER HOUR.

LARGER SHEETS OR CUT TO SIZE BLANKS CAN BE AUTOMATICALLY FED FOR SHORT AND MEDIUM RUNS.

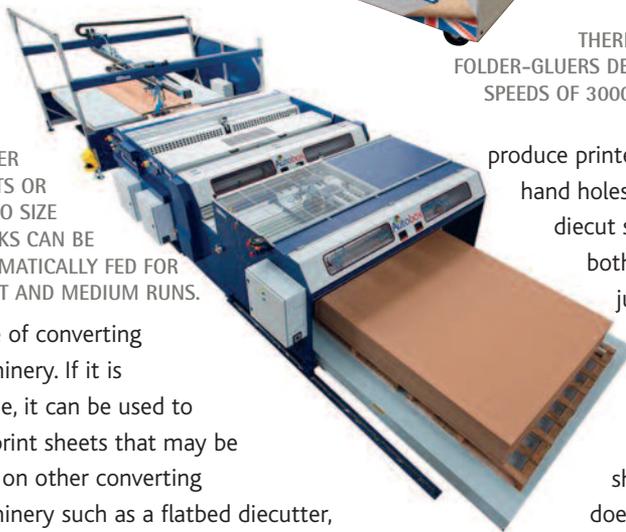
piece of converting machinery. If it is offline, it can be used to pre-print sheets that may be used on other converting machinery such as a flatbed diecutter, for example.

Therefore, the best solution might be to have a downstream converting capability in the same vicinity of a digital press, and not directly in-line.

In this scenario for short run work, the digital print system together with the associated quick set box maker and ancillary equipment can be situated in a separate room, away from the main converting lines — your dedicated short run cell. Now you can convert up to 1000 printed and branded boxes per hour with a fully automatic setup and without the need to change any tooling in the printer or the box maker. You can

produce printed boxes with hand holes, slots, basic diecut shapes, scoring in both directions, jumbo sized or small, all with a quick time to market.

Finishing of short run orders does not have to be just about hand gluing either. There are quick



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boxes from
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...in one pass



TYPICAL SET TIME:

60 SEC

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