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Collaboration helps propel Creative Labels of Vermont

(Winooski, Vermont, USA)

With the help of FLAG, HYBRID Software and Label Traxx, Dwane Wall has streamlined CLOV's prepress processes to drive efficiency.

Creative Labels of Vermont (CLOV) is a second-generation, family-owned label printing company located in Winooski, VT, USA. CLOV was founded in 1983 with three employees, a Vandenburg label press and a handmade screwdriver rewinder. Today over 30 employees service customers in food and beverage, wine, beer and spirits industries, printing labels up to 13" wide and 21" long.

The company operates four conventional flexo presses and two HP Indigo WS6800 digital presses. Although CLOV's prepress department was equipped with the latest technology from art editing workstations to platemaking, Dwane Wall, president of CLOV, knew something was missing from his workflow.

Over the years, the converter has leaned on industry partnerships to help boost the business. Approximately six years ago, Wall reached the conclusion that there had to be a better way to deal with art files. At the time, he recalls, "Everyone would get a proof, FedEx that proof and handle it in a sneaker net type process. Everyone would name files differently and we would often print the wrong label."

Wall perceived automation as the only way to be successful, noting, "I knew there was a better way to do it. But I just didn't know what it looked like."

Dwane Wall, President of Creative Labels of Vermont

Enter Mike Agness, executive VP, Americas at HYBRID Software, whom Wall met at an industry event where he sketched out his vision on the back of a cocktail napkin. Wall realized that with the growth of digital and proliferation of SKUs, automation would play an even greater role in the coming years. "Dwane really understood his business and wanted to stay in front of it," says Agness. "Unfortunately, not all converters are that proactive. He knew he would have more jobs coming in because of digital but didn't want to keep hiring prepress operators."

From that initial meeting, Wall and Agness sketched out a plan forward. Agness notes that HYBRID's philosophy is to "right sell" – enabling customers to embrace a product and then move forward when the business is ready. Wall describes the process as giving him the power to "inch worm his way along. Cash is finite so we appreciated the flexibility of doing one thing, figuring it out and then bringing on a new component."

First CLOV installed PACKZ, a standalone software tool for PDF editing that put file editing and manipulation into operator hands. Unlike Adobe Illustrator, an application for label design, PACKZ prepares PDF files efficiently for print production.

Six months later came CLOUDFLOW with the Proofscope module. This package drove even greater efficiencies through his entire process by providing digital asset database management to ensure that his computer worked in sync with his MIS system. Additionally, Wall could now send customers a web link to view their label on any browser. Files now come in and are automatically pre-flighted and moved along. And everyone is always looking at the latest file tracked by the software.

Agness credits Wall with driving the need for change throughout his organization, noting, "You really have to embrace change to become more efficient. Dwane got his customer service and prepress teams engaged which was critical. He gave reasons that change needed to happen and why they should believe."

Driving collaboration
In order to maximize HYBRID's software, Wall needed it to speak seamlessly with his Label Traxx MIS program. He used a **FLAG** event to broker a relationship between the two companies and convince Label Traxx that it should open up its program to another workflow supplier. As Wall recalls, "I liked HYBRID's business philosophy – they value their customers and appreciate our business. I'm a small business and I feel comfortable when I'm being treated openly, honestly and fairly. And to make the most out of HYBRID, I needed this collaborative problem solving to occur between the two companies."

From this first meeting, a very positive relationship was born. Today the two companies talk openly, co-develop programs and bring new solutions to the label industry.

Wall has used his positive experience with HYBRID to encourage other FLAG members to try the software. Agness acknowledges that "every time we saw Dwane talking to another owner at a FLAG event or a trade show and showing label art right on his phone that a sale wasn't far behind."

Wall suggests that he's "probably sold more packages than some of their salespeople."

HYBRID became a FLAG vendor partner approximately four years ago, and in that time has participated in all available in-person and virtual events, and hosted Lunch and Learns. As FLAG has grown to 100+ members, so has HYBRID's customer base. FLAG customers who lease software from HYBRID see a big rebate in the first year. Agness notes, "We cut sizable checks to FLAG customers – and always with a smile on our faces." He acknowledges that FLAG has been a great investment for HYBRID, as the organization doesn't need to hire a national accounts salesperson.

"FLAG gives us the introduction and gets us to the corner office much quicker. It's a win-win-win organization," he adds.

Wall, a 10-year FLAG member, adds, "When we first became members, John McKay had a good vision of what he thought he could build. What he's actually doing today is extremely valuable for the industry as a whole. It offers a different level of camaraderie, multi-functional learning and fosters a sense of trust and collaboration."

Wall participates in peer groups, attends all meetings, encourages his buyers to work with FLAG vendor partners and uses contingency backup as a sales tool for his bigger customers. He adds, "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the rebates. A dollar is a dollar– but I put great value on everything else the group brings to me."

As with many FLAG members, CLOV has been extremely busy over the past year, printing labels for food, wine and spirits and personal care customers. He realizes that he "just couldn't do the volume we're doing today the old way. We used to have four people in our prepress area. We were able to repurpose two of them and now we have only two individuals doing three times the work."

Investing in software, rather than manpower, is a clear selling point for HYBRID. Agness notes that a fully burdened software solution in a five-year lease is "half the cost of a fully loaded FTE right out of college. And software is there 24/7, 365 days of the year, takes up no space and never goes on vacation."

Wall adds, "The market has changed and so many of our customers require multiple SKUs, and shorter run lengths. Our beer guys sometimes need labels for 20-30 different beers. And for some applications – for example, nutraceutical labels for people and pets which are then private labeled to chiropractors and vets – we wouldn't even have been able to gain the business without our automation capabilities from HYBRID."

He concludes with his usual humor, "I've made a lot of dumb mistakes in my career, but HYBRID wasn't one of them."

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ABOUT HYBRID SOFTWARE

With offices in Belgium, Germany, Italy, UK and the US plus a global partner network, HYBRID Software is a software development company focused on innovative productivity tools for the graphic arts industry. HYBRID Software's CLOUDFLOW workflow, PACKZ and Stepz editor as well as integration products offer a unique set of advantages that include native PDF workflows, vendor-independent solutions based on industry standards, scalable technology and low cost of ownership. These products are used by more than a thousand customers worldwide in all areas of prepress and print, including labels and packaging, folding cartons, corrugated, wide format and digital printing.

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