



Label Converters Stand Behind HarvestMark Traceability By Creative Labels

Whether it's a single watermelon or a clamshell of strawberries, traceability solutions in the produce industry are all built on a simple foundation: a carefully designed label that gives each item, or each package, a unique identification number or code.

Armed with this ID, growers and packers can track an individual item back to its source in the event of food safety issues or recall. Now with traceability solutions like HarvestMark, combined with the expertise of label converters such as Creative Labels, Inc., consumers have the power to use the same identifier for instant online access to harvest, distribution, quality and food safety information for the specific product they just purchased.

Behind the scenes of this burgeoning trend are the label converters that must invest in the latest variable data printing and quality assurance (QA) technologies to print the billions of labels, in sequential order, that will be required in the next several years.

“The label converters really make traceability possible. They are the key to the whole thing,” says Elliott Grant, chief marketing officer and the founder of HarvestMark.

Not every label company gets to be a HarvestMark partner, however. “There are very specific technical capabilities that we require,” says Grant.

According to Grant, traceability solutions now require labels that include not only the traditional printed company artwork and product information, but also a sophisticated two-dimensional (2D) barcode. A 2D barcode is the next generation of barcodes and can store up to 7,089 characters within a graphical image, significantly greater than the 20-character capacity of a traditional barcode.

With a 2D barcode, a grower or packer can scan the label with a reader. Consumers can also scan the code using an iPhone or Smartphone with a camera, or they can type the code in at www.HarvestMark.com.

Grant explains that the core capability required of a label converter is the ability to print these unique codes, in sequence, on every label using variable data printing capabilities. He also notes, “that’s a skill that many label converters don’t have.”

Variable data printing, a form of on-demand printing in which elements such as text, graphics and images may be changed from one printed item to the next, is well understood to be the future of label printing. However, for many label converters, variable data printing requires a six-figure investment in the appropriate equipment along with extensive training.

“It’s a combination of having the right equipment and the right set of technical skills so they can not only print a high quality label, but also print the unique 2D barcode on each label at line speed,” explains Grant.

With the importance of the label in the process, HarvestMark relies on certified partners to print and/or integrate HarvestMark Codes into their packaging materials and products.

For Oxnard-based Cool Pak, a company that works directly with growers and shippers throughout the United States—and in particular, California—becoming a certified partner aligned with the company’s desire to be a leader in the traceability movement.

“We consider traceability to be a strategic area of growth for Cool Pak and we are working to be at the forefront of the issue within the produce industry,” says Daisy Contreras, Inventory Production Controller at Cool Pak.

To date, Cool Pak has utilized HarvestMark for both strawberries and grapes. The company exclusively utilizes Gilroy, CA-based Creative Labels, also a certified HarvestMark partner, for its labels.



Creative Labels specializes in printing high quality and pressure sensitive labels, tags, and coupons for many industries, and has worked with many produce growers and shippers in Northern California.

Creative Labels is equipped to handle the most technical and advanced label applications required and can produce a wide variety of custom printed products with variable data.

“We are very comfortable with them being located here in California, along with their quality, turnaround time, and customer service,” says Contreras.

The HarvestMark codes are more than simple serial numbers, says Grant. They also have security encryption built into them so the codes can be used for things like customer loyalty programs.

“You can scan or enter in a code and get a discount at the market, for example. So it’s very important that the label printer does a good job of printing the labels correctly, not repeating them, not leaving any out, because these labels have value,” adds Grant.

HarvestMark also demands a high level of in-house QA from its label converter partners.

“We ask our certified partners to do an entire QA process every time they do a run of labels to ensure the quality and make sure they have been printed in the correct sequence,” says Grant.



In addition to HarvestMark's specific requirements, Creative Labels recently ordered a new, 100% inspection unit for its presses that will inspect and verify the integrity of variable printed product and will also read the variable barcodes.

“We encourage the best inspection tools they can get, so I applaud them for that,” says Grant.

If a label printer is not already a qualified HarvestMark partner, they are invited to become a certified partner by meeting the requirements. If not, the grower or shipper can select from an existing list of approximately twenty certified label converters like Creative Labels that are located throughout the U.S. and internationally.

For Grant, the development of traceability solutions in the produce industry is cutting edge, even in comparison to other industries that are known for advanced packaging.

“A lot of people view the produce industry as a late adopter of technology, but something is being done here that’s way in front of the curve even compared to some of the consumer packaging out there,” says Grant.

“Last year we put a billion traceable labels onto the market in just the first full year of the program. So this is a very exciting, growing market with a lot of potential, and it’s a value-added service for label and packaging converters,” adds Grant. “And the sophisticated labels are the foundation of the process.”

For more information, contact Creative Labels, Inc., 6670 Silacci Way, Gilroy, CA 95020; Phone: 866.552.2357/408.842.0376; Fax: 408.842.7188 or visit www.creativelabels.com.