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**Special Considerations
and Latest Innovations
for Growlers & Kegs**

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Photo Courtesy of: Argent Tape & Label

Making First Impressions Count: Smart Math & Creativity Produce Innovative Design and Manufacturing of Labels

By: Cheryl Gray

Whether beer or bourbon, a distinguishing label serves a dual role in either identifying an old standard or giving consumers a reason to try something new.

Craft breweries and distilleries count on the design and production of their labels as a key marketing strategy. Labeling is part of brand identity, a creative process frequently handled by specialists in the field. Among them is Argent Tape & Label, a global, woman-owned business headquartered

in Plymouth, Michigan, which makes labels, tapes and adhesives for the automotive, pharmaceutical, industrial, healthcare and food and beverage industries. While it considers itself to be a small company, ATL is big on customer service. Bekah Keehn, who spearheads quality assurance for the company, says its customer service goes well beyond the sale.

“We are a small, dynamic company whose hallmark service begins with the personal interactions

between customers and sales account managers," she says. "Our sales account managers and customer service representatives are in continual contact with our potential existing customers, and we pride ourselves on listening to our customers. From the moment an inquiry comes through our website or an introduction is made at a trade show or other industry event, and even through successful delivery of the finished label, our sales account managers are engaged with the customer base."

Experts say that attractive, cost-effective and environmentally friendly are among the characteristics that craft brewers and distilleries want in their labels. Keehn says that finding the right combination of standard elements and unique creativity is what ATL strives to produce for its clients.

"Every customer requires different characteristics for their labels," she says. "Once we speak to our customers and have a thorough understanding of their requirements, we work with our material suppliers to provide the material substrate (underlying layer) for label production."

Durability, Keehn says, is also important. "Some need a very durable label to withstand the outdoor elements, very moist or high heat conditions, while others may need something delicate and attractive or flashy and eye-catching for prime shelf appeal. We consider all conditions the label must ultimately withstand, we review the effect or finish the label should have, we address the color and graphic requirements and we employ several different pricing methodologies to achieve our customers' requirements. Most recently, we have experienced a demand for sustainable material from our customers, and we now offer metallic, clear and white sustainable materials that we can print on. You would never know the label is specifically designed and considered environmentally friendly!"

With design demands constantly changing, technology plays an integral role in the design and production of product labels. Keehn says that digital processing gives customers a heads-up on possibilities.

"We employ digital processing and are able to show our customers online samples of what their finished product will look like," she says. In this way, customers can ask questions, and we can discuss changes without always running numerous,



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costly physical samples. We can refine the outcome well before running a physical sample so that when and if we do require a physical sample, it is as close to production-ready as possible. Employing technology in this process is invaluable in allowing flexibility and efficiency through the product and design development phases.”

Some craft beverage makers find inspiration through other kinds of collaboration. Todd Thrasher, owner of Potomac Distilling Company in Washington, D.C., teamed up with a graphic designer to get just the right look for his product labels. “I hired a graphic designer that I knew and trusted,” Thrasher tells *Beverage Master Magazine*.

“I showed her vintage labels for inspiration. We primarily concentrated on bottles from the 1960s and 1970s. I completed a marketing course at Moonshine University (in Louisville, Kentucky) that was focused largely on labels, so I was excited for the opportunity to apply what I had learned in this process. After we met a few times and sketches were developed, I sent three versions of the logo for review via email to a group of 30 people—close friends, family, business owners, etc. A large majority favored the label that had been my favorite. It was really validating to have the opinion and feedback of others.”

Thrasher, well-known in the Capital Beltway as both a sommelier and bartender, wanted creative labeling to showcase Thrasher’s logos for his five signature rums—Spiced, Green Spiced, White, Gold and Coconut, all produced in an urban, waterfront D.C. setting on the Potomac River known at District Wharf. For Thrasher, making products instantly recognizable was vital.

“The most important element is that the label is easy to read and identifiable from across a bar! I also wanted the aesthetic of a more vintage bottle. I decided not to use shrink wrap and instead went with waxing the bottles for a more handmade approach.”

Owner input also goes into label designing at family-owned and operated Bron Yr Aur Brewing (pronounced “bron-yar”), located in Washington State’s Yakima Valley. Amanda Hatten, co-owner and Operations Manager, says that in the beginning, the brewery utilized an outside design company, but it wasn’t long before she took over the task.

Becoming the brewery's solo in-house label designer was less about saving money and more about adding a personal touch to the brewery's brand.

"This is a passion of mine, and it's a great way to express who we really are as a company when it comes to working so closely together on designs," Hatten says. "We have them printed elsewhere. For our crawlers, the main thing is to create fun graphics that are filled with adventure."

There is adventure, too, in developing new innovations for labeling, led by companies like ATL, which tracks market trends. ATL's sales force has identified a rise in the use of sustainable materials in labeling and packaging. Keehn says the information was priceless.

"They brought this trend information in-house, and we put together a cross-functional team that identified, tested and priced out a line of sustainable label substrates," she says. "We partnered with new and existing material suppliers who pioneered the introduction of sustainable materials into the label market, and now ATL has its own line of sustainable material offerings that are proven compatible with our traditional, Flexo and Domino N610i, digital presses. In this time of environmental consciousness, we are excited to meet the demand for recyclable labels that utilize less material and may be biodegradable with a low carbon footprint."

Above all else, a quality label is long-remembered by the client—and consumers.

"Producing a quality label is paramount at ATL," says Keehn. "We take quality seriously, employ standard procedures and processes to assure consistent outcomes, and we spend time prior to production reviewing our customers' needs and whether and how we can produce their quality label."

Some craft breweries and distilleries are opting for full-body shrink sleeve labels. A shrink sleeve label provides top to bottom coverage because it conforms to an entire container's shape, allowing a complete label identity for any product. It is one of the specialties of PDC International Corporation, a 50-year old company based in Norwalk, Connecticut.

According to PDC International, converting to a full-body shrink sleeve not only boosts a product's shelf appeal and visibility but does so at significant savings. A regular, stock container (bottle or can) is generally used, and, with a full-body shrink label, there is no worry about aligning front and back labels. One sleeve, the company says, does the job of three labels, improving consistency, lowering costs and requiring only a single application. In the spirits industry, one full-body shrink sleeve can brand a product on the front, back and at the neck.

For breweries, a full-body shrink sleeve conforms to the entire can, covering it 360 degrees. Rather than having to store large quantities of pre-printed cans, full-body shrink sleeves allow a brewery to decorate blank cans when needed. PDC experts say that the process saves warehouse space, pares down logistics and saves money.

Increasing the bottom line for companies in the labeling industry sometimes means anticipating client needs before even the client can pinpoint it. ATL's Keehn underscores how communication and innovation go hand-in-hand, citing an appreciation from clients to a commitment to stay on top of industry trends.

"We attend trade shows and review trade publications to keep abreast of new offerings in materials, inks and methodologies, and we continually expand our product line to offer new and innovative materials and printing effects. As high shelf appeal and unique design are common characteristics of our customers' labels, we strive to meet the next level of creativity, quality and excellence."

That said, creativity, quality and excellence of any label are perhaps best measured by how consumers respond as they peruse store shelves for the multiple craft beer and spirits options competing for their attention—and their money.