Shrink-wrap labels? Made in Henrietta

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On a grocery shelf crowded with plenty of brands of orange juice, the one-liter bottle of Florida's Natural is designed to stand out.

The bottle itself is all ridges and rounded edges, resembling a Flash Gordon-style rocket ship. And the green and orange plastic label clings to the bottle like a wet T-shirt.

Those shrink-wrap labels, covering contours and corners of the container in a way a traditional flat label never could, come churning out of a massive printing press at Hammer Packaging's Henrietta print operation.

For the family-owned company, "variable sleeve printing" has proven to be a major investment and a growth opportunity.

Hammer spent $14 million on the tractor-trailer-size press made by the Netherlands company Drent Goebel, plus other equipment that goes with it, such as slitters and seamers to cut the sheets of plastic and form them into rings that will slip over containers.

"In the packaging business today, you need to be able to supply a broader range of products," said Chief Executive James E. Hammer. "We're selling to Fortune 50 (and) Fortune 500 companies. They buy every variation of packaging, so you've got to be full service."

The company's revenues are about $100 million, Hammer said, double what they were five years ago.

Variable sleeve printing is increasingly in demand, said Tom Voss, chairman of Rochester Institute of Technology's packaging science program. "What it provides is superior graphics, just absolutely beautiful ... and easy, quick application to the container."

The labels are done on heat-sensitive plastic that above 72 degrees or so will start shrinking. Those labels get sent in climate-controlled trucks to the customer — for Hammer that is often a food or beverage manufacturer — where they are slapped on containers and heat-treated so they shrink to the shape of the container.

The variable sleeve press runs round the clock five or six days a week.

"Our goal is to get to 24 hours a day, seven days a week and get a second press," Hammer said, adding that another press could be installed as soon as 2009.

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