

Delving into the Lamination Landscape

Five industry representatives talk lamination, plus nearly 30 sources of laminators.

By Adrienne Palmer



In recent years, plastic surgery, cosmetic procedures, and anything that can change a person's appearance and help him or her find the "fountain of youth" have been on the rise. Chin lifts, tummy tucks, lip injections, and other similar medical initiatives are at the top of the to-do list for many people. No one, it seems, wants to appear to grow old, and everyone wants to look better than their best.

Clients are much the same when it comes to their graphics: They often want the printed graphic to exceed their expectations (as well as the image file's megapixels), and in their ideal world, the graphic would always appear "showroom fresh," never revealing wear or tear.

Luckily for them, the print world's equivalent to a cosmetic procedure is readily available: lamination. Like its medical counterpart, lamination offers a graphic the ability to resist aging; plus, the right laminate can add a little "oomph" to the original image, providing it with more visual impact and a more effective marketing tool.

This month, we reached out to five industry suppliers of laminators and laminates, asking them to give us their opinions on the opportunities that laminating presents to a shop, ways to better understand today's lamination landscape, and why lamination is the key to sealing the deal on your finished product.

Ubiquitous laminating

In the past 20 years, the wide-format marketplace has changed its need for lamination equipment, says Jerry Hill, VP, new market business development at Drytac Corporation.

"Gone are the super-heavy-duty and super-expensive laminators. Smaller shops have brought lamination in-house to control quality as well as turnaround time, which in turn, has created a market for entry-level to mid-range laminators. Contributing factors have been the signage channel and the explosion of the vehicle-wrap business."

What about the argument that the emergence of flatbed and hybrid printers has reduced the need for laminating?

"Even with the proliferation of flatbed printers, which essentially eliminates the need for mounting prints on substrates, laminator installs are still on the rise," says Hill. "Laminators still play a significant role in overall graphics production. While it's true that flatbed and UV printer installations are growing, the install base of solvent, eco-solvent, and latex roll-to-roll printers is still tremendous. All of these printers produce graphics that require mounting and laminating in order to produce a sellable final application to a customer."

Jennifer Corn, product line manager with LexJet, agrees: “Even though the hybrid and flatbed printers are good for high-volume shops on projects where lamination is not required, many times print shops have very specific applications that require lamination – which can add value. Beyond providing a specific finish or texture to the graphic or a specialty application like floor and carpet graphics, lamination can add also rigidity to a graphic so it can stand by itself, so to speak.”

“Finishing should be considered an added-value generator for print jobs. [Shops can] achieve consistent margins by offering mounting and laminating,” says Laurent Bouchard with Kala, the France-based company that is now marketing its laminators into the States. “On rigid boards printed with UV ink, there’s a need for protection against scratches. In most cases, UV colors are usually a bit matte – lamination can be used to enhance the print and give them more saturation/highlight.”

No matter what output hardware is being used, laminating will continue to have a role in the production of a variety of graphics applications, our interviewed companies indicate. These applications include the aforementioned floor graphics as well as window and wall graphics, plus vehicle wraps and signage – particularly products that might take a bit of a beating.

“Wherever there’s a need for graphics that go into harsh or rugged environments, there will always be a need for protection of some sort,” says Bob Elliot, a product expert for GBC. “Lamination offers the protection for those valuable graphics.”

And says Angie Mohni, VP of marketing at Neschen Americas: “The number-one thing laminates offer is flexibility. Graphics can be printed on any type of media with any type of finish. Laminates allow the customer the flexibility of changing the finish of that media to gloss, luster, matte, or textured.”

An in-house solution

Bringing laminating capability in-house is a no-brainer, industry sources say.

“If lamination is outsourced, a print shop might not be able to offer his customer a ‘just-in-time’ project,” says Corn. “Whereas having all the equipment in-house will allow them to capture last-minute specialty jobs that come in unexpectedly, as well as have more control over the quality.”

Owning in-house lamination equipment is definitely the way to go, agrees Bouchard. He says the benefits include “becoming independent from outside services and gaining better control of production time resulting in more flexibility; being faster in deliveries, avoiding damage on the work during transportation; and simply making a larger margin.”

Wicked Wraps: Visualizing Lamination

Owners Katherine and Wade Becher of Wicked Wraps (wickedwraps.net), located in the Seattle metro area, wanted to add flare to their newest fleet with bright green and black graphics to represent their “wicked” shop.

Katherine designed the graphics that were printed using the shop’s HP Latex L26500 printer onto Avery MPI 1005 Supercast Easy Apply RS Cast Vinyl Film. They then turned to their Kala Mistral 1650 laminator with Avery DOL1360 overlaminates to put the finishing touches on the wrap. Wade completed the installation, utilizing Geek Wraps Power Slam magnets, squeegees, propane torch, and other tools.

They see many benefits of lamination when wrapping vehicles, says Katherine, including:

- Protecting the printed graphics from scratches/fading;
- Providing the desired “finish” - including high gloss, matte, or luster;
- Enabling the vinyl to be stretched more during installation, making for an easier install;
- Making future removal of wraps easier; and
- Enabling wraps to be polished with specialty products like Wrap Care.

“We hand-wash our fleet two to three times per week, on average, in order to make sure that our work always looks its best,” she says. “Without lamination on the graphics, and with the high frequency of washing that we do, the latex ink would get destroyed in no time.

The lamination, however, provides protection and preserves our wraps’ brilliant shine. It also enables us to be able to polish our wraps with vinyl-specific products.”

Wicked Wraps’ primary area of focus has been on vehicle wraps since it opened its doors in 2007. As the economy struggled, Wicked Wraps moved its emphasis away from customized cars to helping small businesses at a time when the economy made it very difficult for those companies to stay afloat.

“Customers who started out with one wrapped vehicle came back with a second, third, or even fourth to get wrapped because their first one(s) were proving to be so valuable to their business,” says Katherine.

