

Bert-Co shows them who's em-boss

The Los Angeles-based packaging company, founded in 1930, differentiates itself from the competition with foil-stamping, embossing and other intricate and innovative work, reports Dan Daley

“A few years ago, no one knew what an O-sleeve was for a DVD. You never used to see it used for DVD; now, it's become one of the widely used packaging types for that format.” Suzan Kerston, senior vice president of Bert-Co, is reflecting on how quickly packaging for entertainment media is changing. How that change is managed is what defines the nature of a company.

For Bert-Co, which has done packaging for more than 75 years for various market sectors also including business software, cosmetics, nutraceuticals and food packaging, entertainment media now accounts for over half of the company's revenues.

A key to its strategy has been to aim at the upper tiers of its markets. That applies equally to packaged media, as evidenced by the Bert-Co's often-award-winning work.

“We aim towards packaging that has a high degree of difficulty attached to it,” says Kerston. “We actually enjoy the kind of work that's harder than the typical four-colour work. That involves a lot of challenge. It's what differentiates us in our markets.”

Three of those differentiators are vacuum-forming, foil-stamping and embossing, processes that require specialised equipment and techniques. The techniques add dimensionality to the package but require additional skills. “For example, you have to be able to precisely judge and estimate the amount of distortion of the printing outline that the vacuum-forming will cause,” Kerston explains, since the printing will take place prior to the vacuum-forming process.



Bert-Co was founded in 1930 by Berton Couturier. The company's first press machine is still on display at its company headquarters in Los Angeles

Unusual materials are another hallmark of many of the company's designs. In fact, says Kerston, the combination of tactile and three-dimensional elements in package design and execution is critical in helping to differentiate products in an increasingly crowded retail environment.

“I've heard at various seminars that DVD sales are between 40 and 60% impulse buys,” she says. “How could the look and feel of the package not play a major role in getting it picked up by the consumer? And the touch is the first step towards a sale. At high price points, the package is the first opportunity to convey the value proposition to the consumer.”

Bert-Co's Pulaski, Tennessee site was chosen for its generally central location for distribution and specifically its proximity to Cinram's Huntsville, Alabama manufacturing plant

While price pressures abound in all corners of the packaged entertainment media sector, including the packaging, Kerston says that at the upper reaches of the market budgets are at least a give-and-take proposition, with some flexibility built in to address the special needs of specialty packaging. “Fortunately, at the top-end of the market you're dealing almost exclusively with the major film studios, and you're presenting them with the equivalent of a Cadillac brand for their packaging,” she says. “It makes it a better creative environment in which to work.”

Kerston says how much of Bert-Co's creative component the studios leverage depends on the project. “Sometimes they'll give us just a title — no artwork — and we have to come up with a concept from scratch,” she says. “Other times they'll come to us with a very evolved graphic concept for the packaging. But the fact that we do have a very good creative department with a lot of experience is one of the reasons the studios continue to rely on us to help develop packaging concepts. Very often it's the art that gets us the job.” Nonetheless, the give and take between creative and budget is not always reconciled over tea in drawing room of a Merchant-Ivory production. Kerston says Bert-Co's acknowledgement of the harsher realities of the entertainment media business at the moment is equally important to the company's success. “Studios



have their hands full with a long list of wishes from a lot of quarters," she says, including the need to make packaging unique attractive yet affordable, as well as making sure it fits into the confines of the retail display environment. "It also needs to be configured to be manufactured and deliverable quickly, to meet the shortening release windows the studios have to deal with. And increasingly it also has to be environmentally friendly, which is something that companies like Wal-Mart are pushing for."

That last aspect is an advantage for Bert-Co in that processes like embossing and stamping meet that kind of environmental criteria. "Embossing is really just a pressure-generated thermal process, and the metal foil or metallized polyester Mylar material we use for that can still be recycled," says Kerston.

Bert-Co has also developed its own line of entertainment media packaging. The Bert-Co-patented Cine-Pak is similar to the DigiPak (for which Bert-Co is a licensee), made of 24-point board that can be printed on both sides. But the Cine-Pak

can be folded over, which Kerston says some studios like for multi-disc sets because it makes the packaging more compact and affordable. Kerston points out that the Cine-Pak uses 30% less substrate than other DVD packaging, and that its assembly is highly productive: no paperboard gluing needed for products without pockets, and easily automated disk placement.

More recently, the company rolled out its Cine-Pak Wrap, with a paperboard wrap around the package that turns it into a mailer, which Kerston says appeals to direct mail and promotional markets, and has also been applied to several Disney products.

Bert-Co handles automated packaging in Los Angeles, and most recently Pulaski, Tenn, where it operates a distribution centre. Being headquartered in southern California helps with much of Bert-Co's packaging business focused on Hollywood entertainment. The Pulaski site was chosen for its generally central location for distribution and specifically its proximity to Cinram's Huntsville,



Vacuum-forming, one of Bert-Co's specialties, takes a certain skills-set to get it right

Ala. manufacturing plant and its newest distribution centre, south of Nashville.

"We need to give our clients the best possible support, but that's also part of the real mission — to give the consumer a great DVD experience before the disc is ever played," Kerston says. "The package is the precursor to the DVD experience itself." ●

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