

At the Heart of can design



CanTech International speaks to **Sébastien Prévost**, head of CX at **Hart Print**, about the Quebec-based company's digital printing journey, expansion and ethos. **Alex Rivers** reports

During the past few years, digital printing has emerged in the can packaging sector and is now gaining massive traction. With new technologies, printing directly onto the body and neck of the can has become possible and is today a popular choice for brands, driven by the desire for high-quality, cost-effective graphics and textures, and eliminating the need for paper or plastic can sleeves.

One company pioneering this process throughout the US and Canada is Hart Print. The idea started with Stephanie Hart, who was and still is an investor of Brasserie Harricana, a small craft brewer in Montreal. Hart wondered why craft beer cans still featured sticker labels and sleeves rather than having the design printed directly onto them.

She pitched this thought to her classmates at Concordia University's Executive MBA programme, Jean-Pierre (JP) Paradis and Alexander Anishin. When the three of them asked brewers if they'd be interested in digitally printing on cans in small batches at competitive prices, the answer was a resounding yes. The company was incorporated in July 2018, with Hart, Paradis and Anishin named co-founders. Brasserie Harricana fittingly became Hart Print's first customer in October 2019.

Sébastien Prévost, the company's head of CX, spoke to *CanTech International* about the continuation of Hart Print's operations from this point.

Building momentum

The company's first printing machine to be installed on its Montreal line was supplied by German manufacturer, Hinterkopf. A quirky feature, Prévost said, is that the printer was named 'Jolene,' after the famous Dolly Parton song, by the Hart team, because Paradis spent endless days with the printer during startup. "The lyrics in that song are 'please don't take my man,' which we all imagined JP's wife saying to this printer," Prévost recounted with a laugh.

"All our printers have either singers, band or song names. Our second printer in Montreal [installed in 2020] is called Freddie after Freddie Mercury,"



because it sounds a bit like the song 'We Will Rock You' when it is in operation.

Prévost noted that in 2020, the craft beer movement began to significantly build in momentum. "There was also a sleeve ban for plastic in Quebec," which meant an even bigger influx of customers for Hart Print, he explained. By the end of 2020, Hart Print had exceeded 22 million cans printed and had acquired more than 150 customers.

Prévost said that Ardagh Metal Packaging (AMP) was one of the first major players in the can making industry to "notice the writing on the wall" about digital printing's soaring potential. "We were one of the first companies globally to offer digital printing on beer cans, so Ardagh were interested in us as innovators in this space."

The acquisition by AMP was finalised in November 2021 and helped further fuel the company's growth.

Expanding production space

Throughout its journey thus far, Hart Print has also worked closely with Ska Fabricating to optimise its lines with specialised conveyance systems, as well as depalletisers/repalletisers.

"In October 2023, we opened a second site in Carol Stream, which is in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois."

**Ska
Fabricating
MAB Bulk
Depalletiser**





Operations specialist, Edgar Betancourth, holds a digitally printed can from Hart Print's Montreal facility

Prévost explained that Hart Print worked with Ska Fabricating to take what they had learned from the expansion at its Montreal site, and apply it to this new space, which featured three printers.

In 2022, Hart Print had a 50 million can capacity; by the end of 2023, the number was close to 150 million cans. In one year, Hart Print was able to double its customer base, five years on from the company's incorporation.

At the time of speaking, Prévost noted that Hart Print would soon be cutting the ribbon to a new site in Maryland. This site will be using three Hinterkopf D360 digital printing machines, with Ska Fabricating working closely with Hart Print to optimise the footprint. "We anticipate producing a quarter of a billion cans by March 2024," said Prévost.

Skill & ethos

Hart Print creates designs all the way up into the neck of the can, which was a challenge the company wanted to overcome early on. "There is warping on a can neck, and a necking lube is used, which is essential to form the can, but a pain to print on. This did create adhesion issues to begin with, but we pushed the innovation," said Prévost.

"We have a flame station, which features a bar that burns residue oil and prepares the cans for print. That innovation came a year and a half ago," he said.

When it comes to colour, Prévost commented that Hart Print's approach is 'the more the merrier.' "We're not limited to six-colour can decoration – sometimes we like to say, let's do 16,000 colours." Prévost explained how this energy helps Hart Print to continue pushing limits and drive innovation for its customers.

He highlighted Hart Print's team of designers, who he said are always thinking outside of the box. "For instance, one of our Chicago customers wanted designs 'A' and 'B,' but I met with the designer who worked on that project, and he said that he offered them design 'C,' which featured selective gloss [areas that stand out from matte design areas on the can]. The customer commented that what we'd come up with wasn't what they'd originally wanted; it was 'more beautiful,' and went on to work with us for more of its SKUs."

Despite its growth and supplying to giants such as The Coca-Cola Company, Hart Print's customer base still includes smaller, local craft breweries, and offers a no minimum order quantity: "We like to say, big and small, we do it all," said Prévost.

"Our ethos is that we're removing one plastic sleeve at a time, improving our sustainability and environment. But obviously the trajectory is not going to stop there." Prévost divulged plans in the next 12 months for Hart Print to open in the Southeast of the US, as its customer base is rapidly growing in states such as Georgia, Florida and Tennessee.

"We're actively considering going out west as well, because we have customers in California, Arizona,



Nevada and Oregon," he said, and commented that Ska Fabricating is going to be integral to this growth, continuing to assist Hart Print in optimising its future lines.

Prévost also tells *CanTech International* that Hart Print is working on a new, pasteurisation-proof over varnish to add to its offering.

Maintaining variety & speed

Aside from seeing a shift in packaging choice to aluminium as a more sustainable option, Prévost commented that a major trend Hart Print has noticed is the demand to print on a larger variety of can formats.

"Beer's standard formats used to be 12oz and 16oz, but we're seeing the imperial pint growing in popularity now. There are more than 150,000 convenience stores in the US, so craft brewers or water producers want their cans to stand tall on shelves or in the fridges in these stores," he said.

"On the flip side of that, we're seeing smaller formats becoming popular for coffee brands or distillers, for instance, that sell in four and six packs. They want to differentiate themselves and be versatile in the market."

Another trending demand, Prévost noted, is agility in can decoration. "We live in a 24/7 world – take TikTok for instance, where everybody has their 15 minutes of fame. If something happens today, a brand is going to lose out if it waits five months to get a can design approved, printed and shipped.

"If you're banking on a trend or a timely event, like a special occasion or a sports achievement, you'll want to ride that wave as soon as possible."

Prévost noted that digital printing allows for greater flexibility in 'A/B testing,' which aids in minimising cost risks associated with trying out different can designs. This is intrinsic to the world of immediacy and Hart Print has the technology to make that happen, offering much shorter lead times, he said.

Lastly, Prévost commented that colour and texture will always be paramount in digital printing: "While people are obviously interested with what's in the can, we know that it's the unique packaging that is going to win people over." **CTI**