The Art of Laminating: Tips to cold laminating Part II

We have discussed loading the laminates in part one. Now comes the nerve-racking part where you have to laminate a print in hopes that everything will go smoothly. In other words, no air bubbles and no wrinkles or else it's back to the printing stage.

By Daniel A. Keegan

Laminating a print is where you must take your time to do the job right the first time. Small air bubbles in a laminated print can generally be fixed, just like die-cut vinyl, by poking a hole in it. Wrinkles on the hand are unforgiving and then it's back to the drawing board.

If you are new to the lamination process, run the laminator at slower speeds. As your confidence or comfort level builds, then give the higher speed a try. You are going to make mistakes and it only takes a split second to mess up a print, but that is part of the learning process. It is my hope that these articles help to minimize those mistakes. Just remember that what is discussed here or in past articles is not carved in stone, because different makes and models of laminators

operate differently. This is somewhat of a guideline with the assumption that you already have the laminates webbed up and ready to go.

Laminating a single print:
Always remember to feed the print into the laminator with the curl of the material. In other words, the material was printed from roll stock and has the memory of

being wound up on its core. If you haven't noticed, most materials have a tendency to curl more as they get closer to the end of the roll. The exception might be by leaving the print sitting overnight on a flat surface to where the print may flatten out. The thinner or lightweight materials may be more forgiving. No matter what the case may be, the goal is to avoid having to re-print an image.

The normal way of feeding a single print into the laminator is with the rollers in the down position (rollers not turning). Then you would slide the print between the rollers until it stopped. Anything that you can do at this point to get the print to lay flat is a big plus! If your laminator has a vacuum plate, use it. If not, a simple solution is to push out to the sides of the print using your fingertips as you insert the print.

This is also a good time to use the foot peddle, if your laminator has one, to do a quick "start stop" to get the print starting to feed into the laminator or an assistant

to flip the switch. Once the print is pinched between the rollers, it's not going anywhere, so now you can position yourself to the back of the laminator or the receiving end. The "start - stop" is so the print and/or laminate does not start wrapping around the rollers. Speaking from experience, if you ever get the prints wrapped around the rollers…you'll never do it again! Now that you are in position to avoid all of the pitfalls of laminating, it's just a matter of turning the rollers ON to finish laminating the print.

An alternative solution to the above is to leave the rollers up and lay the edge of the print around the bottom roller. To do this, you may need to adjust the feed plate to where you can feed the print from below it. This is especially useful if the print has a lot of curl to it. The print will conform around the bottom roller to lay flat against it. Once you have the print in position, drop the top roller, and then start the laminating process. This method also works well for those longer prints.

Laminating a long print:
If you know that you are going have a long print or print multiple items on the same material that need the same type of laminate, use your printers take-up roll system if it has one. Keep in mind that the typical core diameter for most laminators is three (3”) inches. Therefore, a 3” diameter core tube should be loaded on the take-up roll system of the printer. This tube can be the same width of the material or even a little longer. The goal here is to keep the edges of the material as even as possible which minimizes the print from wondering or drifting back and forth while laminating.

Load the roll of print(s) onto the lower material bar of the laminator. The assumption here is that the laminate is webbed and ready to use. It is also recommended that there are at least two to three feet of un-printed material (after the print) to use as a safety cushion or feeder. This allows the operator time to

look for any problems that may arise and start over if necessary.

Before you tighten up the brakes on the lower material bar, make sure that the material is centered within the laminate. Now tighten the brakes. There should be enough tension on the material so that it is not easily turned by hand. Then feed enough material over the top of the bottom roller by holding the edges of the material and trying to keep even tension on both sides. Make sure that the material is flat against the bottom roller. Drop the top roller and get ready to check everything out.

At this point, you need to run about 12” of material through the laminator to check for wrinkles in the laminate and or material. Keep an eye on the backside of the laminator so that the print does not wrap around the roller, have an assistant if possible. Tension on the material is important. The material at this point should be taunt, not loose, on either side. If it is loose, tighten the brake a little more and then feed a little more material through.

Once everything looks good, then it’s time to press the “GO” button. I would recommend going slow at first, because you can always increase the speed later.

To give you a brief idea about the above “long print” photos, the printed image was printed on a 50” wide adhesive backed vinyl. The print itself measures 48” wide by 24’ (feet) in length and is one piece. There were a total of three separate prints of the same size. Everything went smoothly with no wrinkles and no bubbles…the client was happy and that’s what counts.

I have watched others, and done it myself, laminate 150+ (feet) of material at one time without a problem. Of course the laminators had additional options that the one in the above pictures does not have. There is a reason for all of those “bells and whistles” or options in which you need to match up to the goals of your company. Can the lower models of laminators get the job done? SURE they can! It boils down to time frames and ease of use. Take your time and pay attention, then those problems fade away…a few tips from the more experienced operators will not hurt either. Everyone has their own styles or methods of doing things. What works for one may not work for another, but by being able to adjust a method to your liking may be a greater benefit in the long run.