

Labeling to Promote Growth



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Labeling to Promote Growth

For years manual labeling has been the standard as a means of identifying labware, and for a long time it was the only option.

Though manual labeling is still a suitable process for some applications, other options are available now—and more accessible than ever. Many laboratory and storage facility managers struggle to meet goals and improve processes, and what they might not realize is that a more thoughtful labeling strategy can lead to more streamlined processes and integration opportunities.

Labeling isn't something all on its own, it's a small, but integral component in your overall strategy. This means, that though it may not be fun, it can't be eliminated completely from your processes without interrupting your workflow. On the other hand, it also means that your labeling strategy can likely be optimized to integrate more effectively into your workflow and ultimately support growth.

As a trusted source in the barcode and labeling world, we're familiar with the struggles that come along with label application in a variety of settings—including healthcare. Over the years we've worked strategically with our teams of engineers and partnering companies to provide—not only labels that last—but full solutions to combat the difficulties that come along with the preparation, application and tracking of those labels.

Here, we're going to focus on two label application alternatives to hand-labeling that offer increased opportunities for integration and optimization of your processes: automation and outsourcing.



1. Automatic Label Application

Automation equipment is growing more prevalent as it improves efficiency and accuracy in all areas of labs and research facilities—including label application. A range of labware labeling equipment exists, offering different levels of automation—from standalone desktop units that apply labels one at a time, to larger more customized machinery that can be integrated into larger workflows.

Automated equipment ensures accurate labels are precisely placed on labware for consistency and scanning efficiency. Most equipment can accommodate varying time sensitive information and is able to apply labels significantly faster than they can be applied by hand—making it a suitable option to improve both accuracy and efficiency.

Who is Automation For?

Automated labeling isn't for every lab, but there are a few cases where it's likely to be the ideal labeling strategy:

- **High volume applications:** In high volume applications label automation can expedite the process and enable a higher throughput rate. This increases efficiency, and makes the labeling of your tubes

and vials part of your existing process. It also frees up employees time—that would normally be spent labeling—to work on more valuable tasks that could also use an efficiency upgrade.

- **Larger automated processes:** As mentioned above, automation is becoming more widely used in the healthcare industry. If your practice is already utilizing automatic processes or looking to move towards automation your labels may need to be precisely placed in order to prevent stoppages downstream. Many automated labeling systems can be easily integrated into larger automated systems, further promoting your shift towards automation and ensuring consistent scan rates throughout your processes.
- **Label accuracy is critical:** In the healthcare industry, when human samples and specimens are being held in tubes and vials, conserving the integrity of the sample is always the number one priority. When automation equipment is used variable data can be recorded and accurately placed on samples in a single step to reduce the risk of mislabeling.



What are the Limitations of Automation?

As with any method of labeling, label automation does have its drawbacks. The main drawback of automation is that it's an investment of both time and budget. Typically, this shift in process will require capital expenditure and a lot of planning. You will need to consider if there is enough space for the equipment, how existing automation will integrate, what will be done with the current labeling space, and where your employees will be reallocated. Once all is considered, as long as your automation implementation plan has been fully thought through you should see justification of return on investment.





2. Outsourced Labware Labeling

A few label and labware suppliers have outsourcing programs where they take care of the procurement, printing and application of barcode labels onto your labware. The labware will be barcoded to your specifications and some suppliers even offer additional services like tare weighing, special marking technologies, kitting, sorting and custom packaging. This solution enables you to be completely hands-off when it comes to labeling and leaves you and your staff to focus on more valuable laboratory processes.

Who is Outsourcing For?

Though these services are often quite customizable, they aren't quite for everyone. Here are a few examples of the kinds of labs that would benefit most from pre-barcoded labware:

- **Information is known ahead of time:** Since your supplier will either provide you with generic barcodes or, your customized barcode information will need to be provided at the time your order is placed, any information that isn't known ahead of time cannot be accommodated. This typically includes time sensitive information and patient specific information.

- **Pressure sensitive labels don't meet your needs:** Some suppliers will offer special marking technologies that require specialized equipment and expertise to apply. Many of these special marking technologies are more durable than pressure sensitive options, including direct mark and ceramic labels. Some suppliers offer laser etching, at Computype we offer ink based direct mark and ceramic labels. Beyond durability, direct mark print technology also offers accurate color matching for brand representation and color coding systems.
- **Real estate is limited:** Though automation comes in many shapes and sizes, you may not be able to find a solution that will keep up with your volume needs without taking up too much space. Pre-barcoded labware lets you take the labeling step out of your process, allowing you to dedicate space once used for labeling to more value added processes.



The space necessary to store your pre-barcoded labware will need to be considered, but is typically more space efficient than other options.

Overall, this option is ideal for applications of any volume that don't require variable information and will need a more long-term barcoding solution than a pressure sensitive label. Just like automation, pre-barcoded labware offers increased efficiency and accuracy, but to what degree all of these benefits will be achieved depends on your source.

What are the Limitations of Outsourcing?

The main downfalls of pre-barcoded labware are the inability to accommodate variable time sensitive information and inconsistency of the service between suppliers. Pre-barcoded labware as a product has been around for a while in the form of tubes with generic barcodes applied on pressure sensitive labels, while pre-barcoded labware as a service, including custom barcoding, unique marking technologies and additional service options is relatively new. It's important to first find a supplier you trust, then take an in depth look at the options they can offer before committing, as your supplier may be more limited or more flexible in their offerings than you expect.



How Does Barcoding Promote Growth?

Now that we've discussed the effects automating or outsourcing your labware labeling strategy can have on your processes, let's talk about the impact these changes can have on your overall growth. Increased speed, efficiency and accuracy in labeling all sound nice, but what do you actually gain from these improvements? How does their impact travel beyond the barcode?

Automating or outsourcing your labeling processes allows you to do a few things that fuel growth: re-allocate resources, increase productivity and build trust.

Re-allocating Resources

Automated or outsourced container marking reduces the amount of time and effort your employees spend applying labels. This ultimately results in employees having more free time and/or having more employees available around the lab.

Sure, you could use this as an opportunity to reduce labor costs, but we recommend re-allocating employees for a boost in overall productivity. We'll talk more about this in the next section however, because there are more valuable assets with potential for re-allocation.

Specifically in the case of outsourcing, you no longer need to dedicate space in your facility to labeling.

Sure, your pre-labeled labware will need to be stored somewhere, but so do your consumables with a manual or automated strategy. This saved space can be reallocated to more constructive assets that you may not have had the space for previously.

On the other hand automation can allow you to re-allocate some of your budget. Although automation equipment is certainly an investment, it is a budgeted capital expense. Consumables and maintenance still factor in as recurring future costs, but overall the amount spent on automation equipment should be returned to you in monetary form through labor savings and increased productivity over time. The money you save can then be put to use to further promote growth throughout your processes with improvements in equipment, the work environment and more.



Increasing Productivity

As mentioned previously, not only do alternative labeling options like automation and outsourcing make it possible to prepare higher volumes of labware significantly faster, it's also likely your employees will have more time and availability than they did before. Whether you choose to boost your throughput volumes or re-allocate employees, space or budget to more value added tasks—or any combination of the former—you have the opportunity to boost productivity in more areas than just labeling.

Labeling isn't likely to be the source of all of your issues—but a lack of resources is a likely cause behind missing goals. Taking advantage of saved time, effort, space and budget can boost productivity throughout your facility by reducing the time and effort spent on other tasks and making room for valuable assets.

Building Trust

Trust is extremely important for any company to build in relationships with partnering companies and customers alike, especially when experiencing growth. Surprisingly, a better marking strategy can actually assist in this element of growth in a couple of ways.

Sample identity is often critical to ensuring accuracy in test results, and although barcodes are a convenient identification tool, poor application can lead to loss of sample integrity.

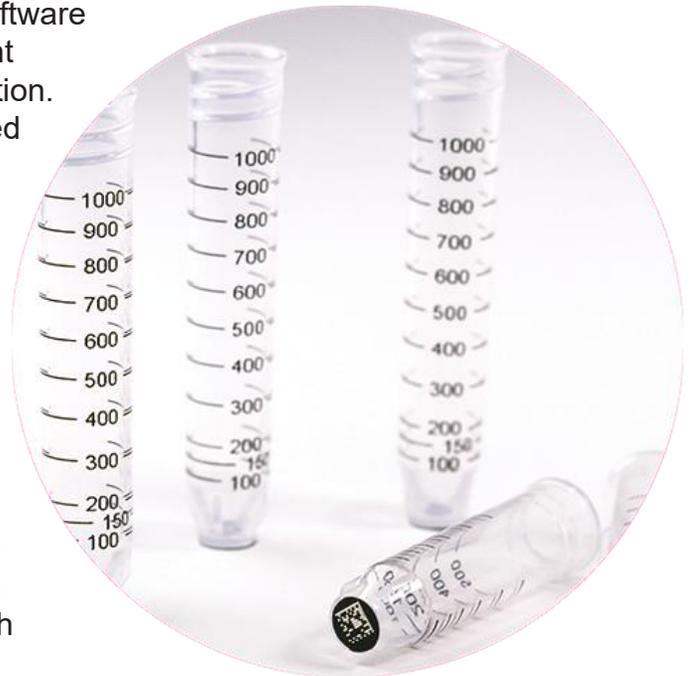
One way this can happen is through mislabeling. When it comes to error proofing your processes, relying on humans to manually apply and check labels isn't the most trustworthy method.

Automated machinery can integrate directly into your software systems to ensure the right labels are applied to the right containers, and of course manual checking is still an option. Automated application also ensures the labels are placed consistently and precisely in the same location, when labels are properly oriented they can be easily scanned by downstream automation reducing the likelihood they will fail in diagnostic machinery.

When it comes to outsourcing, there are additional options to improve sample integrity that benefit facilities with particularly harsh processes or long storage periods. If you work with an outsourcing partner who is able to offer more permanent marking technologies, like the direct mark and ceramic labels we offer in our READY Labware Services program, you can better ensure the integrity of your samples through harsh exposures and extended storage.

Additionally, precisely applied barcodes and markings look professional. Aesthetics may not be top of mind in the lab, but when you're working with others it's important to make a good impression. The appearance of your containers may not actually represent your practice, but to an outside party it can inform their perception of your practice. Just as a suit and tie convey a positive, professional message to a potential employer or client, a precisely placed label gives the impression of a clean and organized processing system.

As you can see, there are various ways you can label your tubes and vials. Labeling by hand, integrating label automation equipment, and outsourcing your labeling are all viable—potentially beneficial—options for your lab depending on your current sample demand and consistency. If you feel like your current labeling method could use a refresh, reach out to your supplier to see what they have to offer. Computype has the resources to accommodate both of these options, and can advise you on finding the best option to meet your goals and improve your processes.



Ready to make a change in your labeling strategy?

Discuss your current processes and goals with one of our barcode labeling professionals today! We can help match you to the best marking solution for your practices.

Download our automated tube & vial labeling brochure for more details on our automated offerings.

Check out our READY Labware Services brochure for more info on how we can deliver labware to you, ready to use.

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