Turbocharge Name Badges with Imposition and eCut

Use Photos, QR Codes, and More as Variable Data

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One of the hottest topics in the print world is variable data.

In short, you have a database full of information that is output as customized finished pieces. My example will create name badges, but the same techniques can be used on almost anything you need to customize. I'm going to design a color name badge destined for printing on an inkjet or laser printer. For those who need to laser etch and cut, you'll simply use the colors needed for etching or cutting.

While CorelDRAW has had the Print Merge function for many versions, it is limited to pulling text items from a database. It is a powerful feature, but what if you want to have customized graphics, photos, or barcodes on the finished pieces? For that, we are going to use a CorelDRAW add-on called eCut Designer Toolkit for CorelDRAW.

DESIGN

Name badges come in various sizes. I will design a badge that is 4 in. wide by 3 in. tall, for which I have preperforated paper. As you design your own project, the CorelDRAW page size you use should be the exact size of the finished piece. Unless you are outputting one item per page, do not choose the paper size (such as 8.5 in. by 11 in.) or the size of your laser bed. We'll work with that size near the end of the process.

Start by creating a new file. In more recent versions of CorelDRAW, you are asked for a page size. I'll enter 4 in. by 3 in.—my badge size. If you want to double-check the size, choose **Layout | Page Setup** to get the Page Size dialog box.

For my design, I will print a solid colored background. It could be a fountain fill, a bitmap, or whatever else you desire. Since the preperforated paper doesn't always feed perfectly, I made my background rectangle 4.25 in. by 3.25 in. so I have a little room for shifting. If you are going to laser cut your pieces, the background rectangle could be 4 in. by 3 in. with slightly rounded corners. Instead of filling it, you would assign the cut color to the outline.

Because my background is larger than the page, I need to move it to a master layer so it will appear properly after the merge.
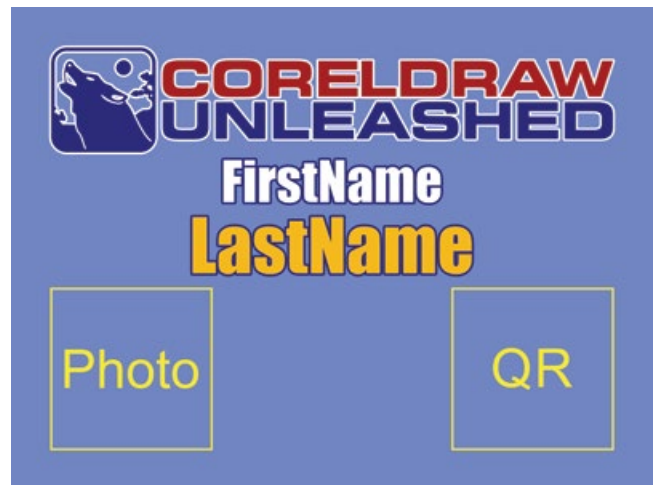

FIGURE 1: A sample name badge will later be merged with data
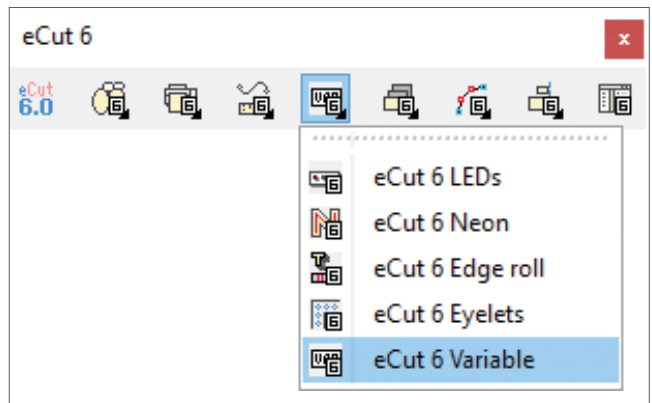

FIGURE 2: The eCut toolbar with Variable selected in a drop-down menu

Now, we'll add the design. I put a logo on top of mine, followed by separate text elements for a first and last name. In the lower left, I want to include a photo of the person. A QR code will go in the lower right. For each of these elements, I drew a 1-in. square and grouped it with text to identify the element. We'll have eCut magically replace the two grouped rectangles with a photo of the person and a QR code linked to their website. FIGURE 1 shows my sample artwork.

BUILD THE DATABASE

I used Microsoft Excel to compile my data. You could just as easily use Notepad or any other software that can output data as plain text.

The first row should have field names. I used FirstName, LastName, Photo, and URL as my field names. The following rows contain the data. For the photo, include the full path to the graphic file. If you don't do that, you'll have to manually select each photo within eCut. For the URL, I typed out the full URL, which eCut will convert to a scannable QR code. (Note: eCut doesn't support other barcode formats.)

I created six records because each page I'm using supports six badges. You can have 600 rows of data. Heck, you can have 6,000, though I would suggest breaking a job that large into smaller pieces to keep CorelDRAW running well.

Once the data is complete, save it as a CSV file (comma or tab-delimited, both work).

ECUT MERGE

Now we will merge our database with our sample file using eCut. Obviously you need to have eCut installed, and it is really important to also import the eCut toolbar to your workspace. There is an automated installer as well as a PDF file that describes all the steps involved. Please follow the instructions in the PDF so all works well the first time. I didn't read it fully the first time and had a few issues!

On the eCut toolbar, choose the eCut Variable function as shown in FIGURE 2. This article only discusses one of many features in eCut so feel free to explore the other features after you've given Variable a try.

Now you'll have the Docker shown in FIGURE 3 on your screen. Mine already shows the fields in the database. You'll need to click Open Database to select your file. Then click Edit Database to identify the type of data in each field.

FirstName and LastName are a "string" in this example. The full path to the filename of the photo needs to be selected and the Image button clicked so eCut knows it is a photo. Then the URL needs to be selected and assigned to the QR code. Once this is done, Save the database and click the Close button.

At the bottom right of the Docker is a double arrow. Click on it to expand the dialog box to match FIGURE 4. You'll find a number of additional options. For example, I chose to center my artwork on the page, and I set Margins and Gaps to zero. Note that if you need to type numbers, you must use the numeric keypad and not the numbers at the top of your keyboard.

Now we are ready to start merging. Select all objects in the sample artwork and move them outside of the page. Now click on the "FirstName" text in my sample artwork to select it. Then click the FirstName listed in the eCut Docker and press the Assign Shape button. This tells eCut to merge that field of data
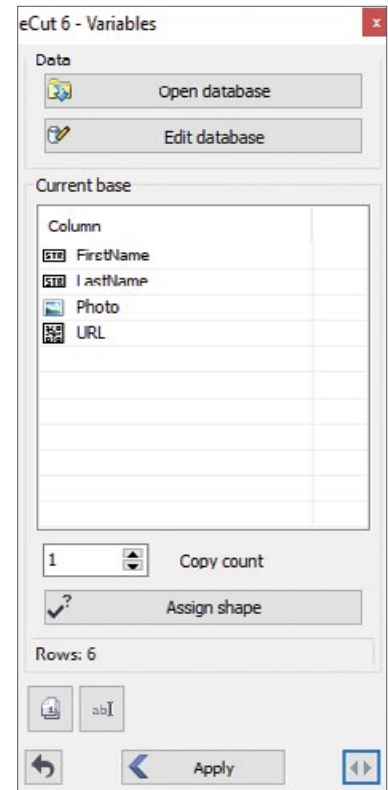
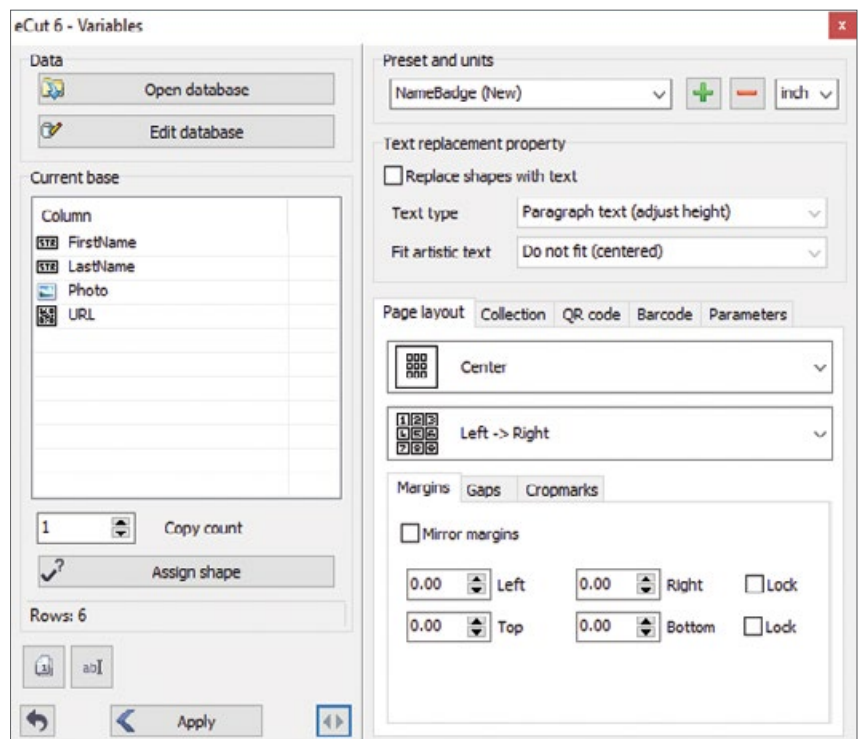

FIGURE 3: The eCut Variables Docker

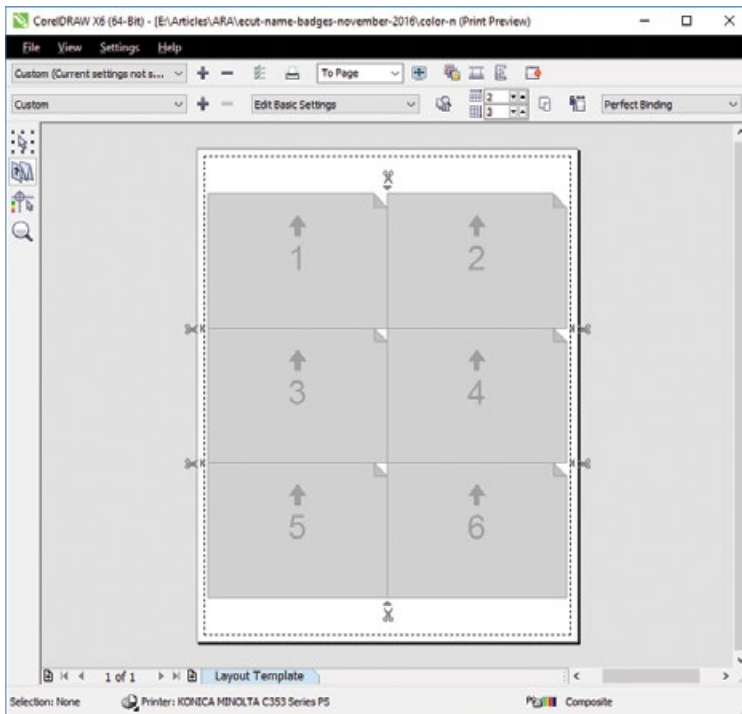**FIGURE 4**: The expanded eCut Variables Docker

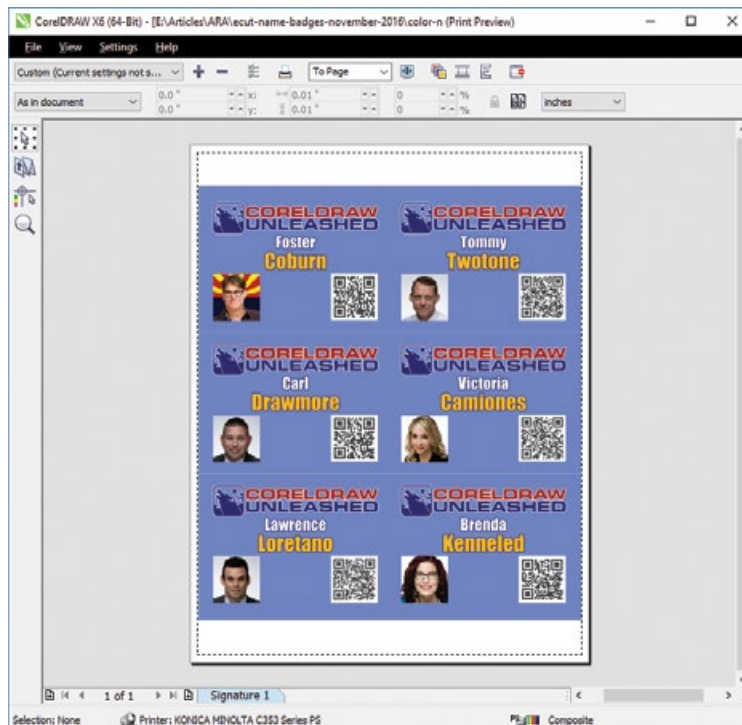**FIGURE 5**: Print Preview screen with the Imposition Tool selected

FIGURE 6: Preview of the printed page of badges with photos and QR codes

with what I have as FirstName. Repeat this with LastName.

Now make sure the rectangle and the label for the photo are grouped and select that group. Then select Photo in eCut and press Assign Shape. Repeat this with the QR code rectangle and URL data field.

All of the hard work is done, and it is time to perform the merge. Select all of your artwork first and then press the Apply button at the bottom of the eCut Docker. If anything goes wrong, there is an Undo button at the bottom left of the eCut Docker.

IMPOSING AND PRINTING

I now have a six-page file and I want all six pages to output on a single printed page. No problem. Select **File | Print Preview** and you can set up the exact output you want.

On the Print Preview screen (FIGURE 5), select the second tool down; it looks like a folded paper. Then on the Property Bar, I selected two columns, three rows, because that's the format for my preperforated 8.5-in.-by-11-in. sheet. If you have an output device, like a laser engraver, that has a larger bed size, you can fit as many pages as possible.

There are other options for defining page margins and much more. Explore all of the different options available in the Print Preview screen, one of the most powerful features in CorelDRAW! Once I switched back to the Pick tool in Print Preview, I can see an example of the printed page as shown in FIGURE 6.

eCut: Try It, Then Buy It

You can get a fully-functioning free trial of eCut Designer Toolkit for CorelDRAW—a commercial add-on for CorelDRAW X3–X8—to try it out for a few days and make sure it does what you need before you buy it. Two sources are listed below with shortened URLs for easier typing.

CorelDRAW Unleashed: http://bit.ly/2cVZu6f

Pavel Mishakov: http://bit.ly/2cxUqzA

THE POWER OF VARIABLE

Even if you never produce a single name badge, there is some variation on this process that can take your production into overdrive. Merging data with artwork can very quickly create hundreds, if not thousands, of customized finished pieces for your customers.

And for those who don't have a need for merging data (all three of you), take advantage of the Imposition features in the Print Preview screen. I often talk to users who are doing this manually and wasting huge amounts of time. If you are just cutting a wide variety of shapes, check out the cutting,

nesting, and route optimization features of eCut. Variable is just one of many powerful eCut features! ● ●

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