

Vision Quest

Flexstar Packaging's clear vision and heavy focus on people give it the tools to adapt quickly and change with its customers' needs.

BY CHRIS MC LOONE | REPRINTED FROM PACKAGEPRINTING | JANUARY 01, 2008

Measuring success in a business isn't always done by solely tallying dollars and cents. Customer and employee loyalty is one measuring stick, and having the ability to adapt to trends within a particular industry is still another, while setting high expectations and meeting them is another way. Flexstar Packaging, Inc. (Richmond, British Columbia) has a clear vision, a heavy focus on people, and the ability to change quickly—all of which are hallmarks of its success. Another notable quality is its ability to solve problems. "We believe it is very important to dig in and solve issues versus playing the blame game," says Marc Bray, president and CEO. "There are very few new problems in this industry. The same problems just resurface."

EXPANSION EQUALS SUCCESS

Expansion, in this case, does not include enlarging a building or opening up a second facility. Flexstar's 62 full-time employees are located at the company's facility. Flexstar is an independent operation, but also co-manufactures for a number of other North American converters. Expansion in this case comes in the form of deliverables. Over time, the company has expanded its product offerings to include high-barrier lamination using solvent, solventless, or water-based adhesives; cold-seal rollstock; microwavable hot-fill, and retort laminations; standup pouches; and a variety of new coex films.

"Our operating philosophy is quite simple," says Bray. "Provide superior quality and service to the customers in our region. Our full-service offerings and capabilities allow us to support our customers as they grow into new products. We believe in an empowered team concept, and our commercial group consists of experienced industry players." The experienced team has also aided in the company's success. "Much of our success has been based on our team's collective experiences in the industry," states Bray. This philosophy has helped the company supply products for a wide variety of retail and industrial markets including fruit and nut, cereals, confectionery, coffee packaging, prepared foods, frozen foods, retortable products, and specialty films for industrial applications.

Flexstar came into being in April 2005 following an asset sale of the Richmond, B.C., facility by Sonoco Products Company. Its facility has operated for more than 27 years under various ownerships. Since its launch, it has invested heavily in new technology to enhance its capabilities and improve the efficiencies in the plant. "Capital investments have included a new SAP system, extrusion upgrades, a Nordmeccanica Super Combi 2000, the Uteco ONYX 876 press, and a PCG GQ pouch machine from PPI Global Technologies." Through the years, according to Bray, the facility has seen the transition from PE-based converted products to high-quality printing, barrier laminations, and pre-made standup pouches.

The company prints on a variety of substrates including PET, OPP, coated barrier films, and PE. It uses solvent-based inks and solvent, solventless, or water-based adhesives.

FACING ISSUES AND TRENDS

Bray contends that Flexstar faces many of the same issues all other North American converters face including rising raw material and energy costs, and increased competition. "A trend that we have seen in the markets we serve is less forecasting and shorter lead times," he says. "This forces converters to operate in a much different manner than in the past. As such, we are focusing on lean management and team empowerment to address this issue."

Staying competitive amid demands for shorter runs and demand for lower prices isn't always easy, but Flexstar has taken several steps to ensure it stays in the game. The company has developed more flexible supply and inventory programs to satisfy customer needs and improve the flow through the plant. "We are constantly looking

for improvements to our supply chain to reduce material costs for the customer,” says Bray. “This proves to be a continuous project to ensure high-quality, FDA-approved materials at competitive prices.”

The company also uses geography to its benefit. “The commodity markets are very volatile and global demand is causing more pricing pressure than ever before,” Bray concludes.

Trends in the flexographic printing sector mirror those in the rest of the industry for the most part. One trend in particular is the increase in quality of flexographic printing, which has been gaining on gravure printing. Flexstar has been in the flexo business for some time and owns Windmoeller & Hoelscher, FMC, and most recently, Uteco flexo presses. Two of the presses feature in-line lamination. The new Uteco press helps Flexstar address industry trends as well as enhance the company’s product offerings.

“The market trends are for shorter lead times, enhanced graphics, and more SKUs, which result in shorter, more frequent runs,” says Dale Ince, director of business development. “This requires more consistency and repeatability in the manufacturing process.” The supervisory system on the Uteco press has enhanced the consistency of changeovers for repeat jobs. Plus the INK SPEC and BST Pro Mark systems aid in consistent, repeatable results. “The end results are lower waste, higher productivity, and more flexible scheduling, which is a benefit to both the customer and ourselves,” Ince continues.

The gearless technology of the Uteco press, according to Bray, also holds excellent register, which allows for more complex designs with less trapping, more process printing, and a stronger consumer appeal.

SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS

One term that has become nearly as ubiquitous as “short-run printing” is sustainability. From the Wal-Mart Scorecard to countless consultants specializing in sustainable operations across industries, everyone is concerned about ensuring they run green operations.

Flexstar is no different. In terms of packaging materials, the company has a number of active projects focused on both the use of sustainable materials and overall material reduction. “The main issues we have seen when shifting to 100-percent sustainable products have been product barrier requirements and the lack of high-quality raw materials that can be sourced with reliability in volume. If a customer wants to roll out a sustainable product in volume, we need to be able to ensure [there is] a supply of that raw material consistently,” Bray asserts.

Operationally, Flexstar’s moves to be a more sustainable business include shifting to solventless laminations, which have substantially decreased VOC generation, implementing an active program to recycle all waste solvents and inks for use in the company’s wash-up systems, and purchasing recycled cores and reusable pallets in the plant. “We also recently started a plant-wide recycling program and are capturing and recycling 85 percent of the total weight of what was previously landfill,” says Bray.

AIMING HIGH FROM THE START

The secrets to Flexstar’s success aren’t really secrets at all. “We have a clear vision, a heavy focus on people, and are nimble to change quickly. Much of our success has been based on our team’s collective experiences in the industry,” Bray contends. It’s all right there: vision, focus on people, and adaptability. Ask any converter how it’s been successful, and more than likely, some or all of those traits come into play.

But there’s something else when it comes to Flexstar: high expectations. “I started in this industry running rotogravure products, so that’s always set my expectations for quality and performance in printing,” says Bray. “The new technology available in flexography today has certainly made me a flexo ‘convert.’ We believe flexography is by far the best choice for flexible packaging.” – reprinted from *PackagePrinting*