



Asitrade Foliostar

Investment in a laminating and converting line from Bobst Group has allowed the UK-based Offset Group to break into new markets.

OFFSET'S format for success



Edward Bone

You could drive past Aylesford (England) on the nearby motorway and not really discover much about it — apart from a signpost indicating it has a historic building called 'The Friars'. But this small town in Kent is home to the Offset Group, one of the largest independent manufacturers of retail and transit packaging in the UK, whose recent investments have meant not only domestic market expansion, but also significant export growth.

Offset Packaging Sales & Marketing Director, Edward Bone, puts the success of the company down to flexibility in production and to pro-active service. "Because we can now manufacture both size 6 and size 3b, and because we can manufacture customers' products from cartonboard or

litho-laminate produced in-house, we have a very flexible production facility. For our customers it means they don't have to go to two suppliers to source the range of packaging they need."

The ability to do this means that whatever enquiry comes in, Offset can supply it, says Mr Bone. "It doesn't matter if it's a short or long run, or if it's a small or large carton, we have the equipment to produce it and to offer customers' the cost benefits of having it made on the most suitable size of equipment."

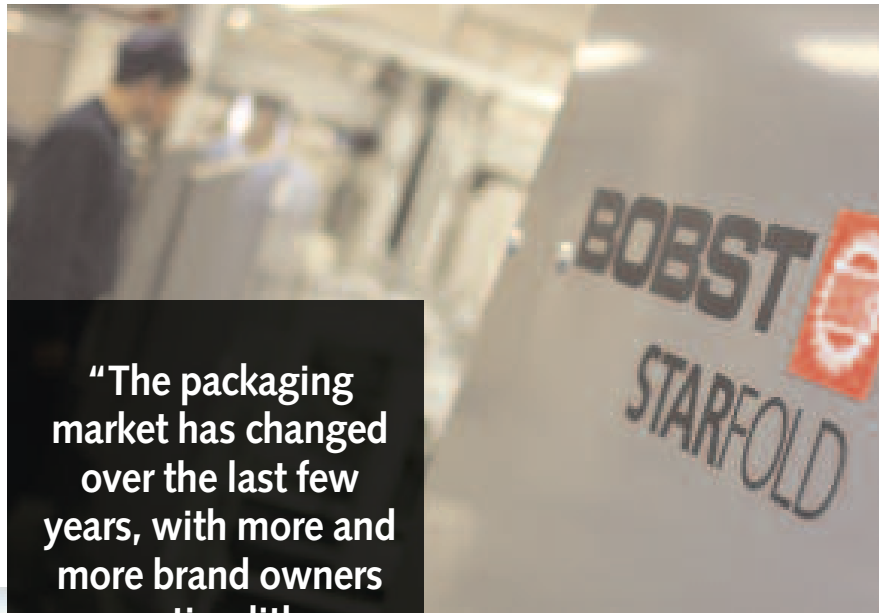
Big investment

For most of its forty year history, Offset has been known as a supplier of size 3b cartonboard packaging to a wide range of

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markets from food, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics, through to electronics, games, DIY and homewares. But a growing demand from their customers for larger formats, and for litho-laminated packs in particular, resulted last year in Offset installing a complete large format line, with a size 6 KBA printing press, Asitrade Foliostar litho-laminator, Bobst SPeria 142 die-cutter and a Bobst Starfold multipoint gluer.

"The packaging market has changed over the last few years, with more and more brand owners wanting litho-laminated packaging, so that they can reduce weight and increase product protection," says Mr Bone. "Because there is only limited independent litho-lam production in the UK, and limited size VI conversion capability too,



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a lot of that work has been going overseas. We saw an opportunity to supply a need we knew our existing customers had, and alongside that we saw an opportunity to reach out to new customers. Our long established customers here in the UK certainly feel that they have more control and more input by having a supplier on their doorstep."

This control also extends to Offset's internal processes, as Operations & Commercial Manager, Barry Brailey, explains. "Having this equipment in-house, particularly the Asitrade litho-laminator,

means that the product isn't contracted out to a supplier miles away. It means we can be totally confident in the process it goes through, and in the quality we achieve."

The Asitrade Foliostar 165 Matic sheet-to-sheet laminator gives the company the ability to produce litho-laminates in-house, yet operates on quite a small footprint for a laminator. With quick, automated, changeovers and high performance, the line is ideal for both long and short run lengths, while high register accuracy makes it perfect for today's exacting clients.

Speed of makeready is assisted by a

unique measuring unit which detects the caliper of the top sheet and substrate, using the data to automatically set the parameters of the line. Quality is assured by the Foliostar compressing each sheet prior to shingling, ensuring a uniform bond of every litho sheet to its carrier.

Capable of running sheets from 500 x 500mm up to 1650 x 1650 mm, the Foliostar can laminate top sheets to carriers ranging from cartonboard and single-face flutes, right through to double wall corrugated, all with a tolerance of +/-0.5mm. The machine is also an ideal introduction to litho-lamination in that, once users have established a market, they have the option to upgrade the laminator by adding a downstacker or inverter, or can even convert it into a full sheet-to-web lamination line.

Good experience

The choice of the Foliostar by Offset has its origins in Asitrade being a Bobst Group company. "Our previous experience of Bobst, when we replaced two size 3b die-cutters with a single Bobst SPeria, was excellent," explains Mr Brailey. "That, and their reputation for producing reliable, highly productive kit, made Bobst Group the obvious choice to supply all of the laminating and converting equipment."

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Die-cutting on the new line is provided by a size VI Bobst SPeria 142-E, which features a Feeder Plus system that controls the height of the front of the pile, automatically adjusts the position of the press footprint relative to any warp and also corrects the pile position laterally. The combined action of these elements ensures the regularity and alignment of the in-fed sheets, reducing the number of stops in production. "It's the ideal production tool for our type of work," says Mr Brailey. "It's quick to make ready, you get register almost instantly, and it runs quickly and consistently when we have a long run on."

The third Bobst Group product in the new line up is a Starfold 145 folder-gluer. Designed with decorative and added-value packaging in mind, a key feature of the machine is its AccuFold system which dramatically cuts gap and fishtailing — the two worst production problems when folding and gluing cartons made from fluted substrates.

Starfold also offers alternate folding of the blank along the entire length of the machine. To limit gap, the machine performs its first fold at the breaker and then realigns the blank on this fold, while fishtailing is

reduced by its ability to rotate the blanks as they travel along its length. "The Starfold does exactly the job we want it to," says Mr Brailey "Folding and gluing litho-lam and cartons, right up to maximum format, quickly and with finesse. I think it's probably the one piece of equipment our Chairman, Hugh Jarvis, has been most impressed by. It runs remarkably smoothly, both in terms of ease of use for the operator and in terms of production."

The final part of the investment is a six colour KBA 142 printing press. Capable of printing on a wide range of different materials including paper, cartonboard, plastics, metalised and corrugated board, up to 1200 microns, the press can also apply UV lacquers and water based emulsions. As with the Bobst Group equipment, Offset's choice of printing press supplier reflected good experiences with the plant's existing KBA products. "We were very pleased with the ease of operation, versatility and print quality of our existing KBA's," recalls Mr Brailey, "so we felt confident that their 142 model would do exactly what we wanted." Print is supported by an in-house pre-press unit with full CTP facilities and utilising a Screen Ultima 16000 plate setter.

Efficient Production

With the new line now well bedded in, other areas are on the receiving end of the company's ongoing programme of investment, which is designed to increase production capacity, performance and customer service. The in-house constructional design team are about to receive a new Zund plotter and AG/CAD software, while internal systems will be streamlined by add-on units to the company's Shuttleworth MIS system.

This latter investment reflects what Mr Bone calls Offset's culture of 'pro-active service'. "Buyers these days expect more support from their suppliers, and one of the reasons they come to us, and stay with us, is our pro-active focus in servicing them. Our account management teams make suggestions to customers as to how they can improve their packaging, or reduce their costs, or perhaps reduce their contract packing times. By putting ourselves in the position of the buyer and thinking 'How would I like to be serviced?' or 'What information would I like to have?', we can keep one step ahead. The new MIS is an example of that, because it will allow us to give our customers information about the status of their job much more quickly than before. In our markets, you have to deliver quality, and you have to be competitive on price, but it is meeting the customers' needs, even before they themselves know what they are, that makes us different."

Green Partner

This pro-active approach also manifests itself in the Offset Productions approach to the products it offers. Along with the BRC/IOP and FSC accreditations you would expect, the company is also expecting imminent accreditation of additional green credentials. "Our work for the consoles, games and electronics markets has seen us working for the past 12 months towards Sony 'Green Partner' status," explains Mr Bone. "Sony established this in 2001, with the aim of encouraging suppliers to introduce green environmental management



systems, and it's now probably the most important accreditation to have in the electronics packaging market. Green Partner establishes a set of management methods for eliminating environmentally unfriendly substances from Sony's supply and production chains, and we're proud to be part of that."

The company also works extensively with food packaging buyers who want to go down a greener route, and has established a separate brand called Green Box Environmental Packaging for its 'Food to Go' products. "Using materials such as biodegradable, compostable boards helps our customers' products make less impact on the environment. There's definitely more interest in this type of approach, particularly in areas such as the sandwich packs we produce, and we can go as far as the brand owners want with it."

The ability to work closely with brand owners has meant that very little of Offset's work comes through third parties, says Mr Bone. "Because we have such a good relationship with the brand owners, they feel confident in using us to meet the range of packaging requirements they have, including those beyond the UK. Around 20 per cent of our work is exported, mainly to Europe, and because of the present strength of the Euro against Sterling, it delivers significant cost savings to our customers there."

Group synergy

Offset Productions is the manufacturing arm of a group of companies under the umbrella of Offset Holdings. The other members include Offset Packaging, which is the sales arm for conventional packaging, Green Box Environmental Packaging, for the 'Food to Go' market; OP Digital, which provides the Group's design and pre-press needs; Triflex Productions, which supplies film barrier laminates; and a Greeting Card division which supplies a number of high profile publishers.

The origins of the group date back to 1969 when Chairman Hugh Jarvis, his father Maurice, and mother Betty, formed 'Offset Productions and Technical Services', which



operated from an old waterworks at nearby Maidstone, Kent. Hugh's background as a Sales Executive with Bowater Packaging, combined with long hours and determination, meant that the company soon became known within the packaging industry for quality and service.

In 1980 the company name was changed to Offset Productions Limited and, as a result of growth, the business moved to larger, more modern freehold premises in Aylesford, and also moved into B1/3B sized production, high quality greetings cards and short-run litho-lam.

Along with last year's move to size 6 production, Offset has established a strategic partnership with Brohl Wellpappe GmbH+Co KG, also a user of Asitrade laminating lines, to add the size 7 format to the range of products on offer to its customers. Brohl Wellpappe has four packaging factories in Germany, which produce litho-laminated, flexo pre-print, and flexo post-print packaging.

New website

Mr Bone believes that the group's new website will be key to providing its current and future customers with a view of the values, products and range of services the group has to offer. "We're going live with the site at www.offsetpackaging.co.uk in March. It's not only going to be a portal to the group member companies, it will also detail our accreditations, services, production equipment and personnel."

It seems likely that Offset will continue to invest in equipment designed to further improve both customer response and productivity, as Mr Brailey explains. "To service our customers properly we have to be as efficient as we can be, and as transparent as possible with our customers. That means using the latest technology to speed up feedback, improve performance and maximise uptime. That not only gives us comfort, but it also reassures our customers that they will get their order in full, and when they want it. The Bobst Group kit is a key part of ensuring we deliver exactly that."