

You could be forgiven for thinking that the recent wave of acquisitions in the UK flexible packaging market — by the likes of Coveris and Americk Packaging — has unsettled other players in the sector. Not so, if you are Shahid Sheikh OBE, the managing director of Leicester-based flexible packaging producer Clifton Packaging Group, who is seeing the evolving market as an opportunity to further promote his company's drive towards innovative new products.

“A lot of acquisitions are currently taking place, which is great for the few remaining independents and that's why we are further investing in our plant to be able to offer our customers even more personal service,” said Sheikh, during a meeting at the company's immaculately presented site, which is a former Procter & Gamble distribution facility.

“It seems unbelievable that we've outgrown this plant. When we moved here a decade ago half of our facility was empty. However, since then we have expanded to the point where larger premises or an extension to our existing site are being considered.”

With a sales target of £20 million (\$30.7m) within the next three years which Sheikh describes as achievable based on available capacity, his objective is to secure upwards of £25m (\$38m), although this may be “through acquisition”.

“I'm actively on the look out. People still see us a small company,” admits Sheikh. “Our growth has always been steady but it's time for this sleeping lion to wake up. We've seen turnover growth of almost 20 per cent a year over the last three years.”

Clifton secured a lucrative new contract in December and this prompted the discussion of another printing press to be installed within the next 18 months. The company only recently installed a new EVO XG HD FLEXP printing press from machinery producer Flexotecnica. This machine is an 8-colour wide-web press and features an ink management control system and a 100 per cent AVT camera inspection system running at 500m/min. It has given Clifton more than 100 million running metres of printing capacity.

“We decided to buy another Flexotecnica due to the inter-changeability between presses,” explains Sheikh, who goes on to explain that the company is entering new sectors this year. “We're already in talks for another slitter and recently signed the contract for a new Nordmeccanica Super Combi laminator.”

The Super Combi laminator offers features such as one-colour gravure printing, cold-seal coating, gloss-matt lacquering in register, and solvent-based lamination, which will be added to Clifton's product portfolio when it is installed next month.

Sheikh adds that the company is seeking dis-



Managing director Shahid Sheikh urges companies to treat Clifton as an extension to their facility

Independent's day

Describing his company as a one-stop flexible packaging shop, the managing director of a UK-based family-owned business sees investments and maybe even an acquisition on the horizon. **Steven Pacitti** reports

tributors to penetrate Europe, with North America to follow in due course.

“We are like a submarine that has been under water for too long but now our time has come to surface and let everyone know about our capability. We have also started to patent and co-patent many of our ideas that have been successful.”

The emergence from the depths of the ocean is a useful analogy for Clifton Packaging's situation following the untimely passing of co-founder Khalid Sheikh, one of four brothers at the helm of the company, in May 2014.

“We lost our focus when Khalid passed away and drifted for quite a few months. But now we're back into buying mode,” he admits.

The company is also evolving away from being just about the brothers with Sheikh explaining that the company now has directors of R&D and technology and a number of managers in areas such as logistics and operations.

Production director Tahir Sheikh, Shahid's older brother, has been central to this change by directly training and educating the future team. As a family-run business, Clifton has the ability to change the production plans on a regular basis if required, a quality that Shahid Sheikh says gives the company an edge and enabled it to help brand users that were struggling to satisfy labelling

changes last December, which was a requirement of the Food Information Regulation (FIR).

“As the saying goes, you only know how good your supplier is when you have a problem. We bailed many companies out over the FIR change before Christmas by taking on projects on short notice under extreme pressure and now we have contracts with them as their way of saying thank you,” he explains.

The FIR change led to lots of packaging redesigns with supermarket chains dependent on their supplier to source the film and packaging.

“We are the first and I believe still the only flexible packaging company to sign up to the higher level on the British Retail Consortium (BRC) Unannounced audit, so there's absolute confidence in what we bring.

“My motto is quite simple: Treat Clifton as an extension to your facility to get the best of what we can offer. My customers' growth becomes our growth and vice versa. We still have customers today that were with us 30 years ago.”

Sheikh's philosophy of strong relationships has seen his company come through challenges including the so-called polyester drought about six years ago, where he cited his long-term loyalty with suppliers as the reason behind his ability to maintain a consistent supply line.

Build it and they'll come

Whether it is another flexographic printing press or a digital press that is also on the agenda for Clifton remains to be seen. Discussing the upcoming installation of a new machine, Sheikh says that sometimes you invest in a system to show that you are not stagnating, even if you don't initially have any business for it. It is about showing what you can do and what you are prepared to do in the market place.

Whether this comment is in direct reference to a digital printing press is uncertain, as Sheikh explains: "Digital printing will come and a digital press costs well over £1 million (\$1.5m). However, the major drawback at this time is that operationally they are far too slow. At this stage I'm not looking at the competitiveness; it's about what the customer wants and needs. A perfect example of our strategy to lead rather than follow is the fact that we were the first UK converter to invest in a Nordmeccanica solvent-less laminator and also the first to invest in a Japanese Totani pouch maker, which makes shaped pouches in-line."

Additional machinery utilised by Clifton includes two Nordmeccanica Simplex SL solvent-less laminators.

"These machines can last for many years but we update our machines on a regular basis so that we have the most advanced technology," explains Sheikh.

Sheikh was particularly keen to demonstrate the company's BIMEC turret slitter, with plans to add another to compliment the existing Titan SR7 slitter adjacent to it in the plant. Here he demonstrates the impressive automatic changeover of a film reel, which takes a few seconds on the turret slitter, compared with the manual replacement on a standard slitter.

"We don't make printing plates here but we have everything else. In flexible packaging we're a one-stop shop. We do design, printing, applying coating, laminating, slitting, and make the pouches. I'll even contract pack for the customer if required," says Sheikh.

He goes on to say that the Totani machine is still as advanced today as it was when originally purchased, while plans are in place to add further pouch makers in the bag making department.

"Shaped pouches remain a big interest for us and can give the customer that extra special USP. We can do a full turnkey operation from concept to completion, supplying the packaging as well as the machines that the products can be packed on."

The machinery



The company recently installed an EVO XG printing press from Flexotecnica

division, led by Zed Sheikh, has installed more than 200 lines in the market.

"There is huge potential for stand-up pouches to be used in other sectors such as cereals and frozen foods."

The rice sector is a staunch supporter of stand-up pouch packaging and Clifton has helped many customers convert from manual filling of paper sacks and Jute bags to printed laminated film on the reel, which is run on specially designed form, fill and seal (VFFS) machines.

"By automating this process we have managed to reduce the labour costs and ensure better continuity in production and improve pack presentation, not to mention the improvement in lead times for film on the reel."

Proud of its British roots, Clifton Packaging is every bit as focused on its domestic UK business now as it was when *Plastics in Packaging* visited in 2006.

"We've always been very strategic and focused on our ideas here. Just-In-Time deliveries have pushed supply lines from China and India back and they're not as competitive now as they used to be due to the long lead times. Through innovation and continuous investments, we have stayed competitive."

A part of the company's packaging portfolio is lidding and barrier films, which is enhanced by the fact that Clifton has coating capacity on-site. Last year the company introduced an anti-bacterial product for existing lidding films due to the campylobacter bacteria issue, which was highlighted by the media in December.

"Antibac is an exciting development and there will be many other products in the near future using this technology," adds Sheikh, who



Clifton says that its Totani pouch machine is still as advanced today as it was when originally purchased

BABA vision

Improving food production and security and reducing waste by increasing the shelf-life of fresh produce is of paramount importance for the African continent.

Spearheaded by the late Khalid Sheikh, the Clifton BABA (Buy African Build Africa) Foundation seeks to boost the region's sustainability credentials. By leveraging the food processing and packaging technologies of Clifton Packaging Group, the aim is to raise the profile of African packaging for both local consumption and worldwide export by implementing added-value at source.

In a fitting tribute to Khalid, who was also known as 'The Son of Africa' by many prominent African leaders, Shahid Sheikh said that Clifton will start a factory in Uganda as a legacy to their older brother.

"We have manufactured a machine to purify contaminated water," said Sheikh. "Africa has huge amounts of land-locked water but they don't know how to extract it or process it. We can deliver the whole system from purifying the water to packing it into bags or pouches immediately."

"Our BABA bag offers a 70 per cent material reduction when compared to a bottle. Ultimately I want a biodegradable bag, which is currently being worked on," he adds. "Khalid's vision was for Africa to become a global player in trade and industrialisation, hence the slogan 'Africa needs trade not aid'. We will make this happen."



explains that Clifton has patents pending on upcoming new developments.

Furthermore, in line with retailer requirements for 'one-touch packaging', Clifton is launching a range of ovenable films and pouches.

Last year also saw the company secure orders in excess of £1m (\$1.5m) for packaging machinery and retort packaging used in the ambient and long-life ready-to-eat soup and rice sector in Ghana. Clifton has successfully sold products to countries including South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Ghana and Nigeria for more than a decade.

For a man who earned the nickname 'The Packaging Man' during his school days, Shahid Sheikh is keen for the food industry to hear this sleeping lion roar.

More information from Clifton Packaging Group, Meridian Business Park, Centurion Way, Leicester, LE19 1WH, UK. Tel: 44 116 289 3355. Fax: 44 116 289 1113. www.cliftonpackaging.co.uk