

24 Jun 2016

The wild card of flexible packaging

Set to turn over £18-20 million this year, family business Clifton Packaging Group Ltd started out in London in 1981 selling carrier bags wholesale, before moving to Leicester in 1983. Today the successful company supplies printed packaging, packaging machines and contract packing to a wide variety of customers in the FMCG sector. By Neel Madsen.

A specialist in flexible packaging including lidding films, barrier films and stand up pouches, Clifton Packaging Group not only produces high quality packaging, it also builds and sells bespoke filling machinery and offers contract packing for customers. Based in a large purpose-built facility on the Meridian Business Park, in Leicester, the company was established by the Sheikh family and celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, but it came from humble beginnings.



'I sometimes have to pinch myself to check if this is reality,' said managing director Shahid Sheikh about the company's, and indeed his family's, journey from rags to riches. No doubt, Mr Sheikh, who received an OBE in 2013 for services to business and the community in the Midlands, had to pinch himself again when his company won the award for Company of the Year at the Leicester Mercury Business Awards 2016. This award recognises the company's impressive growth, innovation and development.

He said, 'We were shortlisted in two categories - the Excellence in Science and Technology category and Company of the Year. I am absolutely thrilled to announce that we won the big award of the night - the Company of the Year award. The judges commented on the fact that Clifton Packaging is the perfect mix of success in our industry, growth, innovation, vision, employee engagement and development, and community support.'

Having collected this recognition in front of almost 800 guests at a black tie gala, Mr Sheikh dedicated the award to his late parents and elder brother Khalid Sheikh, former chairman of the company, who passed away in May 2014. He also thanked his elder sister and other family members, and went on to emphasise the importance of the team at Clifton and its customers. He said, 'Our staff are instrumental in helping us to achieve all that we have to date and in helping us to take the business to where we intend to take it over the next three to five years. Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank our customers and suppliers. It is true to say that without them we wouldn't be who we are today.'

Moving on up

Clifton Packaging bought its first press in 1983, a one colour second-hand machine for printing carrier bags. Customers were mainly cash & carry outfits and other shops, until the family discovered a new and more lucrative market in supplying bags to the exhibition sector; short runs at very short notice. This enabled them to move from a tiny unit to a new 2200 square foot factory in 1985 and invest in a Windmüller & Hölscher, four colour stack press, again second hand, but a massive step up in production capacity. Production grew, and in 1987, another move saw the company take over a 7000 square foot facility, buy a wide web Simon VK four colour CI press, a bag making machine, its first fully automatic slitter rewinder (a Titan SR6) and a solventless Nordmeccanica laminator.

By 1996, expansion was on the cards again and Clifton Packaging moved to new premises in Watergate Lane, in Leicester. It was here that its first machine for making stand up pouches was installed, and innovation started to become a vital part of the company's ethos. The turning point came in 2001 when Burton's Biscuit placed an order. Mr Sheikh explained, 'It really put Clifton on the radar when we became supplier to Burton's Biscuits and introduced the Quad Seal resealable pouch into their range for the first time.' He continued, 'Ultimately this order proved to be the catalyst for our dramatic growth and it gave us tremendous recognition and ranked us among the best in the world of packaging.' It also meant that the company was able to consolidate its operations in 2004 and move to the current five acre site.

Heavy investment

After more investment in machinery, including a new press and new laminator in 2005, another turning point came in 2008 when Clifton invested £1.5 million in a new Flexotecnica wide web CI flexo press which took the print quality to a new level. This was complemented in 2011 by a large scale oxidiser to reduce harmful emissions; a year which also saw a Bimec automatic duplex turret rewinder added to the inventory.

Over the last five years, expansion has increased exponentially with more production capacity added in the form of three Nordmeccanica laminators (one of them a Super Combi 3000), a Flexotecnica Evo XG eight colour wide web press and a Comexi Proslit S1 DT high output slitter rewinder. The most recent major investment is a Uteco Crystal eight colour wide web CI flexo press, which means that the production hall now has three wide web presses producing flexible packaging. Both the Crystal and the Evo XG feature an ink management control system and a 100% camera inspection system.



Printing plates are supplied solely by Waldo Limited in Louth. The two companies have worked together for a number of years to push the boundaries of HD flexo printing. Mr Sheikh said, 'We have a very close working relationship with Phil Walmsley and his team at Waldo. We work very well together and I would describe it as a symbiotic partnership based on complete trust.' Mr Walmsley commented, 'Business partnerships only succeed if both sides truly work together, and I feel that we are an integral part of Shahid's company.'

In the pouch

Clifton Packaging first launched stand up pouches in 2000, a market that is now rapidly growing, and as an area of expertise, it can supply these as resealable pouches, shaped pouches, pouches with spouts and pouches for special applications such as microwave, ovenable and retort. Once the company had successfully produced pouches for Burton's, other brands soon came knocking on the door, and products for Jammy Dodgers and Wagon Wheels are just some of the numerous jobs that have since made it onto the shelves of all the big supermarkets.

With an in-house design team, the company can help customers through the whole process from initial idea to finished product. Shaped pouches can also be made on the company's Totani pouch making machine and these can be supplied open for easy filling. One of the most successful launches was a pouch for Sunny Raisins aimed at children who could use the packaging as a glove puppet once the contents had been consumed.

The company has used its expertise to develop an anti-bacterial coating for films, which helps combat Campylobacter bacteria often found on the outside of traditional poultry packaging and is a potential cause of food poisoning. Since then it has developed a 'one touch antibac squeeze pouch' reducing the current traditional format by 70%. It is engineered so that during filling no transfer of bacteria occurs, and the consumer can open the pouch and transfer the contents into the pan without touching the raw poultry. Clifton has also recently launched an ovenable 'ready to cook range' of printed ovenable films, roasting bags and stand up pouches produced completely in house.

Ready for the next wave

With so much investment over the last 10 years, you could be excused for thinking that the company is now set up for the future and need not think about buying more presses for the moment, but you would be wrong. Having spent time in Shahid Sheikh's company, it is clear that he and his family do not rest on their laurels and that when they decide to move ahead with a project, time is of the essence. 'I believe in myself and my team,' he said, 'and I have a dream of where I want us to be in three to five years. We are aiming to hit a turnover of £25-30 million and we will achieve that by expanding the premises and buying a whole raft of new flexo presses alongside other machines and maybe even a digital press.'

'As a private business with a flat management structure, we're very quick to make decisions. We invest in the latest technologies and are always looking at developing new innovations. To be an ambassador for the industry you have to lead from the front.'

He continued, 'We have increased our turnover substantially, but it has been achieved via controlled growth due to the investments being made. With continued investments in the pipeline, we intend to grow our business by 20% year on year. Our margins are healthy and we are ready for the next wave of investment.'

'It may seem mad to an outsider looking in, but there is method in our madness and we don't take no for an answer. We may be the wild card of the industry, but we have proven that we have the right formula for success. We have been under the radar for a long time, but this is now going to change.'