

Putting partners first at Marcom Plastics

Technology and tenacity are driving success at Marcom Plastics, reports KAREN STRETCH.

ASTRAPAK subsidiary, Marcom Plastics, may be considered a success thanks to its technological prowess and staff expertise. However, a considerable portion of these achievements can be attributed to employees' passion and pride.

Since inception in 1994 as an independent producer of thin-wall unprinted polypropylene yoghurt containers, Marcom's sales and production teams have focused on personalised customer service.

General manager, Gerhard van Reenen, joined Marcom in 1998 when the company was in its early growth phase. 'Back then, we were a team of seven without fancy job titles. Everyone just "mucked in" to get the job done and to deliver top-quality packaging – on time,' he recalls. 'In 2004, we were acquired by Astrapak, and that's when we really started to grow. Throughout our 18-year history, we've always focused on understanding the challenges faced by our customers, and offering a partnership approach.'

Now with over 200 staff, the Pretoria-based plant boasts a multi-million rand turnover. Still specialising in thin-wall injection-moulded packaging, Marcom's reputation for product quality has been further enhanced by substantial investments in in-mould labelling (IML) technology.

'When we introduced IML in 2007, it represented a huge step forward in our decoration capabilities. Since then, many customers have switched to IML and we're experiencing significant growth in this area,' continues Gerhard. 'We now supply IML packaging to a large portion of the South African market and to numerous African countries, for products such as yoghurt, margarine and cream cheese. We're already the exclusive African supplier to Parmalat and this experience has stood us in good stead for the huge volume orders for containers and lids we're now producing in our dedicated Unilever business unit.'

To meet demand from Unilever, an existing warehouse was converted into a new production centre housing eight servo-driven multi-cavity injection moulding machines, including one with extra clamping force for a particular margarine mould. More than 100-million units/annum are now produced in this unit alone.



- ▲ Marcom Plastics has invested in a modern IML production plant, specifically for a multi-million rand Unilever contract.
- ◀ Service excellence and consistent product quality have assured Marcom Plastics' long-term exclusive supply contract with Parmalat.

Converting matters

Taking on such a high-volume contract is not for the faint hearted and Gerhard is quick to point out that commitment from every staff member has ensured success.

'We run two scheduled shifts a day and during peak periods this increases to 24/7 production,' he comments. 'Every employee is committed and motivated. Meeting strict quality standards is a priority that's reflected in our growth. We'll continue to flourish because of this service and quality philosophy,' he maintains.

According to Gerhard, Marcom Plastics' world-class manufacturing (WCM) culture extends from the factory's front entrance (where the pristine security office is situated) right through to the dispatch area, eventually filtering down to the final consumer.

Each employee takes pride in his or her work and emphasis is placed on building strong partnerships, both internally and with customers. Training and understanding the business as a whole is critical to realising fresh growth opportunities.

'We encourage our sales staff to ask questions and to get to know their customers' businesses inside out. By understanding the challenges customers face, we can offer well-informed solutions to problems. It might just be a simple repair to a customer's machine by our tool makers that can make a positive difference to a packing operation. Each party has a vested interest in the other's success; it's not just about supply and demand, it's about relationships,' Gerhard insists.

Detail from design to dispatch

At Marcom, product development starts by finding an appropriate brand image; and this is professionally managed in-house by Braam Cloete. Using the latest design software, Braam creates brand portfolios, or enhances existing designs, and produces top-quality printing plates within a few hours. As well as providing

a time-efficient service, Braam develops customer relationships that extend to the shop floor.

In case of technical faults, each production machine is connected via a remote network to its supplier. However, Gerhard remarks, faults are fortunately rare.

'In collaboration with our international technology partner, Shalam Packaging, we have sourced the best equipment; and tool or mould repairs can be completed quickly and efficiently in our in-house tool room,' he remarks. 'In partnership with the National Tooling Initiative Program, we also employ up to four apprentices at a time, who complete their training alongside our experienced tool makers.

'In an adjacent technical department, every machine's service history, performance and mould status is tracked,' Gerhard continues. 'At daily meetings we outline our Asset Care objectives and track performance. Each customer receives a report on his mould's service schedules and, in accordance with our strict WCM procedures, we can access vital information on any machine at any time.'

Completing the picture, Marcom has installed its own granulation department, where waste is reworked, bagged and sold for reuse.

'We might run a multi-million rand operation, but we never forget where we have come from,' Gerhard sums up. 'Keeping our feet on the ground and looking after every aspect of the business ensures our future success with Unilever, Parmalat and the numerous other loyal customers that we like to call our partners.'

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