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Growing Their Customers' Businesses:

New 'Empire' Has Enhanced Focus

by Jim Curley

Five years ago, Don Simmons and Hal Mottet embarked on a journey familiar to many boxmaking entrepreneurs. After decades as employees of integrated firms, Simmons and Mottet purchased an independent and struck out on their own.

"I wanted to be a millionaire," Simmons says with a chuckle. More seriously, he quickly adds, "I wanted to see how we could put our knowledge and experience to the test by running our own box company on the independent side of the business."

The duo bought Carson, California based Empire Container, a venerable independent firm. The Eagle family, a pioneer in West Coast boxmaking, founded Empire in 1947 as a bag manufacturer and reprocessor of used boxes, but for most of its six-decade history under the Eagle family, Empire Container made corrugated containers.

Earlier this year, the new owners announced that they have changed the company's name to Empire Packaging & Displays. "In our first few years, we were focused on growing our business. Now we have trained our attention on growing our customers' businesses with creative packaging and displays.

"We will provide our customers with a one-stop shop for their packaging needs," Simmons says. "If we can help our customers grow their revenue, we will become more valuable to them, and we will prosper.

"Empire Packaging & Display will focus particularly on start-up companies. A lot of our competitors in the southern California market, though independent, are larger and might ignore start-ups. We won't," he adds.

One Step At A Time

Like other independents starting out their business, Simmons and Mottet started out cautiously. "Our initial upgrades were in general business technology, as the previous owners were not comfortable with current technology," Simmons remembers. "So we initially invested in an automated phone system and new software." More recently, Empire has purchased CRM

(Customer Relationship Management) cloud-based software from Norada called Solve360, which allows the company to manage the selling process from "suspect to prospect" and eventually customers while coordinating project workflow from start to finish with sales orders.

With a plant full of older equipment, including several S&S machines and a 52-inch Langston corrugator, the new owners

changed the plant slowly. "We added mainly used equipment," Simmons says. Major additions included a Western Slope folder gluer and an Automatän labeler.

Taking The Plunge

In late 2010, the company opted for its first major piece of new equipment, a Baysek C-170 flatbed diecutter. The machine was installed in the late spring of 2011.



After decades on the integrated side of the business, Don Simmons, left, and Hal Mottet joined forces to purchase Empire Container from the Eagle family.

"The Baysek is doing inserts, dividers, pads, circles - basically what the integrations don't want to do unless they can notch them together and spit them out," Simmons says. "But their process results in a lot of scrap and added labor.

"Our niche in this market is that we present our customers with a clean product, one with no scrap or corrugated 'hair' due to imprecise cutting. This is essential, because many of these products go into a food environment, where cleanliness is essential."

Previously, Empire was doing the separation of product from scrap by hand, but found that it couldn't handle the volume of business it was getting without using more automated equipment. "Hiring more people was out of the question," Simmons adds. "We have limited space here, so bringing more workers in would disrupt production."



With the Baysek C-170 automatic flatbed diecutter, the time it takes to make a truckload of product has been slashed from 12 hours to just three, reports Empire Packaging & Display's Don Simmons.

"We had contemplated installing a bundle breaker at the end of our rotary die cutter, but that wouldn't strip the scrap," he explains. "And since the product would have been converted in a rotary, we wouldn't have gotten a precise product. The Baysek, because it's a flatbed, gives you uniform output. You get cleaner, truer product, made cost-effectively."

"The installation was pretty flawless," he remembers. "For the most part when you plug the machine in, it starts running," Simmons says of the Baysek diecutter, installed in the 65,000-square-foot plant in just a few days. "But there was some training involved. By adjusting the machine, we are able to utilize some board that is less than flat.

"Also, we had to learn how to design dies so that we would get maximum production from the machine while still being able to palletize the output," he adds.

Results from the production upgrade are undeniable.

"With rotary diecutting, stacking product, product separation by hand, and then restacking, it used to take us 12 hours to produce a truckload of product," Simmons says. "With the Baysek, it takes about three hours."

This enables Empire Container to expedite rush orders without resorting to warehousing and helps to reduce its own costs on this lower-margin business.

Currently, about ten percent of Empire's business is moving through the Baysek, but the Baysek may allow Empire to enter new markets, Simmons says. He mentions circles for the bakery segment and shaped-to-order paperboard for blister packs as two opportunities for growth.

The C-170 die cuts miniflute through doublewall and chipboard through solid fiber at a speed of up to 1,800 pieces per hour and features an adjustable sheet-to-cut register. Empire's C-170 is equipped with the AutoLoad feature, which takes loads of printed sheet directly from the printing machines and automatically feeds them into the C-170. The supplier also developed an intermediate preloading device that gives Empire the option of transferring units directly to the Auto Load without hand stacking or manually handpiling short or misaligned sheets.

Where They Ain't

In their half-decade of ownership, Simmons and Mottet have refocused the company by utilizing the experience they gained in both the independent and integrated sectors. "Practically speaking, we wanted to be where integrations were not," Simmons says. "We inherited a large Universal boxmaker so we continued Empire's presence in the large-box business."

In recent years, like other independents, the two owners have focused on ventures such as Lean Manufacturing, gaining SFI certification, and bolstering its design staff. Empire's most recent design hire formerly worked for a carton converter and "brings considerable experience in both structural and graphic design," Simmons says.

While display work is still a small percentage of Empire Container's business, Simmons sees strong possibilities for growth in that sector - and not just with traditional targets of independents. "I worked with a lot of agricultural customers while I was with integrations, and we're deeply involved in developing innovative packaging for the agriculture business," he says.

Simmons and Mottet have viewed the continued consolidation of integrations with considerable interest. "Consolidation will be good for companies like us," says Simmons. "The bigger those large companies get, the less focused on the customer they will become.

"Focusing on the customers is the key for independents like us," he says. "We're excited about the future."