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Story

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Labelling systems: Knowing what's inside

Since it was established more than half a century ago, Bluhm Systeme has grown from a retailer to a single-source vendor for industrial labelling. The technologies the company can offer are as diverse as the intended applications.

All manufacturing companies have to label something at various points in the manufacturing process, whether it involves transport devices such as pallets, products or the packaging used. The requirement may be set down by legislation, or may be in response to the consumers' expectation of being properly informed. Labelling takes place at various points: rack entry, production, in the warehouse, retrieval, and at the customer's end. There is even labelling that uses machine-readable codes to control the production workflow, and thus forms a part of the automation process.

The customer base of labelling technology manufacturer Bluhm Systeme is just as broad. When Andreas Koch joined the company in 1988, labelling still often involved printing and applying physical labels. Now, in his position as Sales Director, he can offer a whole raft of technologies, from inkjet to thermal transfer, laser printing and RFID chips: All kinds of labelling systems are produced at the company's facilities in Rheinbreitbach.

From retailer to manufacturer

"When we built our Innovation Centre in 2009, we essentially started over as manufacturers," Koch recalls. That was when the R&D activities were bundled and coordinated with requirements on the shop floor. "The opportunities offered by the Innovation Centre opened up important approaches for us to engage in joint development with the respective companies," he continues. "We always include the customer in the process and develop nothing off our own bat, focusing instead on what the market needs." What makes that possible is close customer contact, which is assured by the support from 70 sales employees and around 40 service technicians in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Globally, too, partners are on hand to look after customers. "Another aspect partners appreciate is the

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fact we're an owner-operated SME," Koch asserts. "In times like the present, when everything is a rush and our business is facing many changes, we can respond quickly and impress people with our reliability."

Koch believes the most important thing with consulting is to find the ideal solution for users. Whereas technical advances used to be the driver behind new developments, now it's the individual tasks set by the customers. They provide the stimuli for innovative system solutions.

Modular all-rounders

Of course, the wishes of users in terms of controllers, machines and production rates differ greatly. That's why Bluhm makes use of a modular system. "We can put modules together in a way that best meets the needs of the customers' processes," Koch explains. "The question we want to work with the customers to answer is, what cost and effort are required to achieve the desired result?"

Having a broad range of labelling solutions makes the choice easier. After all, the technologies have been increasingly refined in recent years. Inkjet printing systems, for example, have developed to the point where they can often be a good alternative to labels. If labels are not needed on intermediate carrier systems, then manufacturers can save on both costs and materials. A further opportunity is provided by laser coders, for which users no longer need ink. "This is standard practice when labelling technical products such as construction components," Koch notes. "But now we're also printing on natural products like fruit and vegetables using lasers."

The result is a multiple benefit for users: Their ongoing costs are reduced, less material is needed, there is less need for machine use, and there are significant sustainability benefits. Not only are the labels themselves saved, but also the silicone paper that's used to back the labels, for example. Even so, that doesn't mean label development itself is stagnating. "There are now solutions that enable us to do without silicone paper entirely," Koch advises. "That means the roll just contains the labels, with no backing paper. This is another solution we'll be presenting at FACHPACK in September." Using a process similar to postage stamps, the glue is activated just prior to use with a water mist. The printer automatically trims the label to suit the requirements of the process. "That's an effective improvement that saves a lot of silicone paper and allows for more supplies to be held," Koch explains.



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In the past, labellers had to use compressed air to separate the labels from their backing and attach them to the cardboard packaging, all of which uses power. “We are working to reduce the need for compressed air, and ultimately to be able to manage without it entirely,” says Koch. “That’s why we’re converting more and more devices to servo motors that will transfer the label to the box.”

A dynamic sector

As for the sustainability of the labels themselves, Koch believes one factor is key: The material must match the packaging. In his view, however, the levers for improving sustainability lie in the packaging materials themselves. Efforts are being made to make these lighter, and more particularly, to make them fit the dimensions of the product they contain. “A desirable solution, right at the production stage, would be the ability to avoid having to use standard boxes and instead make the box just as large as required for the product, or to select a different method of packaging,” notes Koch. Reusable solutions made of textile composites are a very interesting option in this regard. “When it comes to new developments, nowhere else is as dynamic as the packaging industry,” he asserts. “Working with the customers to develop solutions to a never-ending series of new challenges is fun.”

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