Giving labelling a lift

During the past year, Rotocon has focused on establishing, expanding and improving its locally-manufactured solid rotary die, print cylinder, and accessory range for the narrow-web industry. Nici Solomon reports on progress.

SINCE our last visit to Rotocon's Longmeadow Park, Johannesburg, facility (PPM September 2016), the team has been busily investing in customer and staff education and broadening the range of available products, and has embarked on a machinery refurbishment and reconditioning programme.

According to branch manager, Patrick Aengenvoort, this R1-million programme has encompassed software upgrades to two Bostomatic CNC rotary die and engraving machines, two gear cutters, three lathes, and three grinding machines, as well as related hardware. Asked to cite examples, he explains that one Bostomatic machine has been fitted with a Fanuc servo control system, improving precision and, ultimately, the quality of dies produced; and a lathe is currently being reconditioned to as-new condition.

Technical manager, Tim Shaw, a label industry veteran with 38 years' tool- and die-making experience, describes the past year as a transitional period. 'We knew some time and customer education would be required to convince the market that we're strong enough technically to consistently produce and deliver high-quality rotary dies, print cylinders and accessories on time,' he reveals.

'We've made good progress on this front and fulfilled our mandate of making a positive difference by developing new products and building additional markets. We have, for instance, just finished developing a winch-driven universal roll lifter that makes labelling production easier by allowing the operator to conveniently load and remove paper rolls from the press.'

Besides improving ergonomics and a worker's health – as rolls can weigh up to 80kg – the lifter also helps reduce damage (and extra costs incurred) from dropping rolls during manual changeovers.

The roll lifter can be purpose built and modified to suit any customer's needs, he adds. The next step is making the system electronic and then adapting the design for die lifting.

Taking a step further

The ultimate vision, however, is creating a special projects division that will meet customers' every need, from technical advice and design and development to machine repairs, upgrades and spare parts.

Michael Aengenvoort emphasises that this is in line with Rotocon's increasing involvement in assisting and advising customers. 'Tim has the technical background and knowledge to close the gap between the industry and the new generation of service technicians who don't have the expertise to assist with older machines still in operation,' Michael maintains. 'These older machines represent a sizeable portion of the South African industry and have mostly been well looked after, but parts availability is starting to prove problematic. So we want to be the first port of call for these printers and converters when they require an upgrade or spare parts.'

As Patrick Aengenvoort sums up, Johannesburg-based customers are keeping the branch so busy that it's experiencing strong growth and requires more space and another technician in a few months' time to help install, maintain and service new equipment sales.

▸ **Rotocon CEO, Michael Aengenvoort, technical manager, Tim Shaw, operations manager, Rajendra Gowrie, and Johannesburg branch manager, Patrick Aengenvoort.**

Training is **paramount**

ROTOCON's directors believe the real value of the company lies in its people because it takes very skilled individuals with a built-in level of commitment and initiative to elevate customer service to the next level.

Educating employees so they are well-trained is the organisation's key strength. Machine operators, for instance, are either trained internally or sent to principals' facilities for up-to-date development exposure, while admin staff and technicians who interface with customers are also trained rigorously.

One example is Johannesburg branch admin assistant, Savannah van den Berg, responsible for internal sales and ordering of flexible dies, who recently completed a basics of die-cutting course at Wink's head office in Germany.

This one-week course helped her get to grips with how flexible dies are manufactured, etched and engraved; their tolerances and qualities; how substrates and coatings influence die choices; and the importance of tool accuracy because each die is produced for a specific material to ensure it cuts at its best. All are variables that need quick assessment when customers place orders, in order to meet their expectations of high-precision, custom-manufactured dies, delivered from Germany within 24 hours.

Before Savannah places an order with Wink, she needs to filter information and convert it to Wink's standard format. She's assisted in this process by a bespoke software programme that fills in the fields online.

▲ **Receptionist and admin assistant, Savannah van den Berg, is now responsible for internal sales, ordering all flexible dies. She proudly shows off her basics of die-cutting certificate, received after a week's course at Wink's plant in Germany.**

Savannah stresses that this information needs to be perfect because Wink's service is very fast – a die order typically reaches the engraving department within an hour and cannot be cancelled or changed because it goes straight into production from this department. Orders placed before 11:00 usually leave Germany at 21:00.