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Service Is Key With Acme's Machinery

by Jim Curley

A business doesn't last nearly a century by standing pat and staying satisfied. Since 1918, when a very young Edward Cohen traveled the streets of his native Philadelphia in a horse and buggy providing recovered paper for local paper mills and later used corrugated containers for clients eager to ship manufactured goods, the company has met clients' present needs while taking those steps that would ensure future growth.

Amazingly, nearly a hundred years later, the company, now Acme Corrugated Box, is still a second generation business. One of Edward's sons, Bob, guides the company, now one of the premier corrugated manufacturers in the Northeast U.S. With its 2001 move to Hatboro, Pennsylvania, Acme became a full-line corrugator plant. Later that decade, Acme invested in a modern Fosber/BHS corrugator to replace two smaller models.

In 2006, Acme began a mutually profitable relationship with Bobst, buying a Martin 1232 NT three-color Rapidset flexo folder gluer with inline diecutting and two full slotting sections. "This line was conventional

with manual feeding and stacking on a load former until 2014," reported Jeremy Cohen, Acme's Engineering/Logistics/Manufacturing Manager. "Then we added a WSA prefeeder (a Korean company

represented by Jim McLaughlin in the U.S.) and an Automatan Auto-Stak." This line provided productivity and manpower savings; a two-man, plus one-part-timer replaced a four man crew.

In 2014, Acme Box installed another Bobst flexo, a three-color 924NT Rapidset. "This was a full-line unit, a Bobst pre-feeder, flexo folder gluer and palletizer," Jeremy said. "The

924 purchase was the turning point for our vision and for Bobst's place in that vision. In 2013, we went on a road trip and looked at four or five different machine manufacturers. Obviously, we knew Bobst from the 1232.

"When we finished the trip, evaluated our options and decided to buy the 924, it put us on a path to stay with Bobst," Jeremy continued. "It's a similar concept to the old Southwest Airlines model. Stick with one



Bobst's Regional Sales Manager Mike Schenone, second from left, saluted the management team of Acme Corrugated Box for their investments in Bobst machinery. From left are Kevin Landman, Production Manager; Schenone; Jeremy Cohen, Manufacturing Manager; and Bob Cohen, Acme's President.

model, in their case, the Boeing 737, so that pilots and mechanics can deal with similar equipment in all their planes. Similarly, with the Bobst machines at Acme, the operator interface is pretty much the same, so that training and troubleshooting are standardized. This is a huge factor. So if you train someone on one machine, it's a lot easier to move them to another machine made by the same manufacturer."

The 924, which is mirrored (left side controls on one machine facing right side controls on the other



The Acme formula, quick throughput by technologically advanced machinery operated by a lean but capable workforce, is exemplified in this overhead picture.

machine) to the 1232, features a one-button set-up for pre-feeder, flexo and palletizer. Also at this work center is a Mosca bundler and a C&M conveyor to and from the machine. Five people work in this two-machine center.

Last year, Acme replaced its decades-old Langston 50-inch flexo with a Bobst 1228 NT four-color flexo with Bobst pre-feeder and a previously purchased Automatän robotic palletizer, as well as a Mosca bundler and C&M conveyors. The 1228 is mirrored to a Bobst 8.20 Expertline with a Bobst prefeeder and a Mosca bundler. The conveyor to and from the Bobst 8.20 was manufactured by Dücker. "We believe in advanced technology, and Dücker provided that solution for us with the 8.20 installation. The controls are state-of-the-art with touchscreens that will lead to future opportunities to track work in progress," said Acme's Production Manager Kevin Landman. Installation of the Dücker system was done over two weekends.

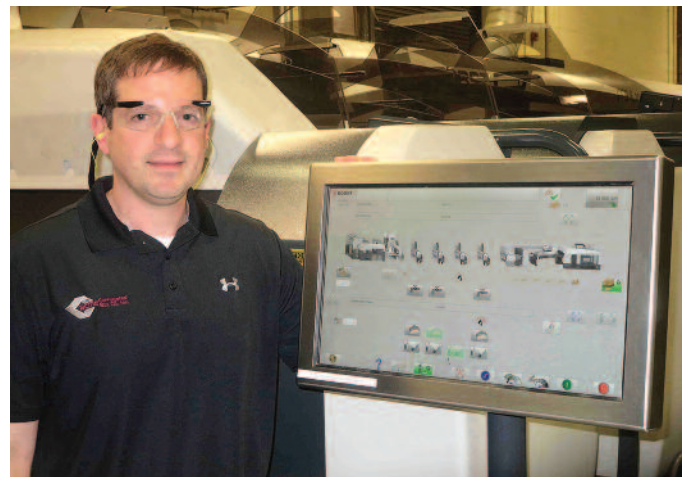
The Bobst 8.20, which started production on March 1, is "the latest and greatest high-speed flexo from Bobst," Jeremy said. "It runs at speeds up to 24,000 pieces per hour." Jeremy and Landman, Acme's "road trippers," had seen two early 8.20s on their travels to see new machinery at box plants. In March of 2015, they saw a third 8.20 at a Bobst open house in Florida. "By that time, we were actively looking for a fourth

machine." Since the purchase of the 8.20 Expertline, Acme has retired its Emba 240 flexo, an almost 40-year-old asset. Currently, Acme redirects the labor from the Emba 160 into the Bobst cellular work centers.

The four Bobst flexos account for about 90 percent of the flexo folder gluer output at the plant. The other Acme flexos include an Emba 160 and a Serenco jumbo flexo.

"We're pleased with how these machines have performed," said Bob Cohen, "We like the Bobst quality that comes off the machine and we like the speeds that we can run the machines at. The machines are well designed and we know that if we have design issues, Bobst will address our concerns and fix when necessary. They don't run away from it."

Noting the satisfaction that Acme experienced with its corrugator supplier, Landman said, "For us, Bobst is to converting what Fosber is to corrugating. They just don't quit."



The advanced graphics on the touchscreen of the Bobst 8.20 flexo allow for quick diagnosis if an issue arises. "It's like my smartphone," said Manufacturing Manager Jeremy Cohen.

The Skills Gap

"One of the issues we struggle with is manpower," said Bob Cohen. "There's a misconception that there aren't a lot of jobs out there. The jobs are there, but they require skills and we can't find the skilled people to fill those jobs. That being the case, our only solution is to automate as much as possible."

"One of the reasons that Bobst has become a favored supplier is that Europe has done a lot of automation, and Bobst is a leader in providing that automation," he added. "Our four lines are all automated, either with Bobst palletizers or with robotic load formers. Our future will depend on higher volumes and reduced labor — not because labor is expensive, but because we want to reduce our dependence on labor and uncertain skill levels."

"We're not unlike people in other parts of the country who are struggling to find people who want to

work in a box factory – So, labor savings becomes a consideration in our investments,” Bob explained. “The idea is to redeploy labor productivity.”

Made To Order

In a way, the purchase of four top-notch flexos in a decade justifies a vision Bob Cohen has had for several decades. “Back in the 70s and early 80s, I couldn’t understand why you couldn’t move product more quickly through the converting equipment and out the door,” he said. “We found competitive response time lacking. It was our opening to the market. Thirty to 35 percent of our boxes now are three days or less from order to delivery.”



Mosca bundlers service all of Acme’s four Bobst flexo work centers.

Even 20 years ago, when he operated a medium-sized sheet plant in nearby Bensalem, Pennsylvania, Cohen stressed throughput efficiency – sheets in the front end and finished boxes out the door. With the two corrugators he installed when he moved to Hatboro in 2001, he began to slash delivery times for his customers.

Though other converters will inventory for certain clients, Bob is not a fan of that strategy. “I think it’s a major mistake to produce for stock, because you lose a sense of what your costs are. Once you produce for inventory, the damage, the insurance, the warehouse and the obsolescence muddy up your numbers and your margins. With inventory, everything gets damaged, everything gets dirty.”

Still, the reality is that some production is salted away for future shipments as needed. “We hold only the items we can’t produce quickly,” Bob noted. “We only have 20,000-25,000 square feet of inventory space and we try to control that business. It’s not what we do.”

His insisting on keeping inventory under control sometimes provides Acme with a competitive edge. “We have a client that also buys from a major integrated. Many times we’ll get them out of a jam when that

supplier can’t react to an emergency, and the customer needs an overnight shipment.

“We tell our salesman that he must convey the message that we just can’t be ‘firemen,’ ” Bob continued. “We’ve got to build on that ‘fireman’ role we sometimes play to grow our business with that customer.

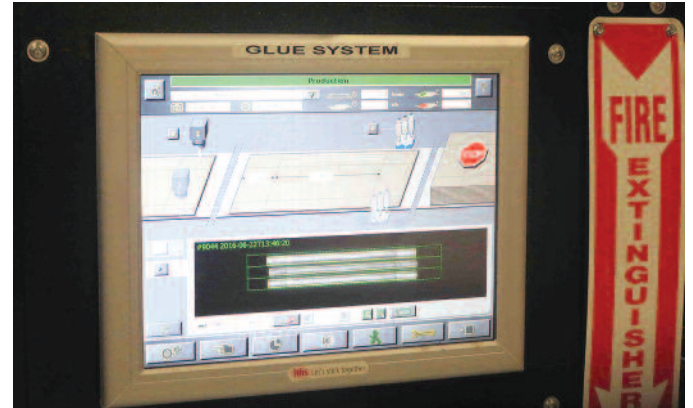
“If a sourcing decision is based on anything but price, we think we can make a good case for that business,” he added. “If the client has service issues, relationship issues or quality issues with another supplier, that’s the client we want.”

Can’t Miss Manufacturing

As he nears a half-century in the box business, Bob is aware that a well-honed operation will be necessary in an ever-more demanding marketplace. “Clients don’t have patience anymore with excuses and other quality issues. If you can’t meet quality requirements and response times, you lose the client.

“The flexo we most recently replaced was fine for hand-packed boxes, but was not capable of producing a case-erector quality box,” he said. “Now, with the investments we’ve made, we can.”

Production Manager Landman added, “Flute crushing used to be a major problem. The quality that these machines provide, in particular the 2.80, enable us to eliminate crush and use light substrates for our boxes.”



Acme has used hhs’s glue system on its last three Bobst flexo installations. “We’ve had good success with runnability and less customer complaints,” Jeremy Cohen noted.

“The start up of the 8.20 went very well,” Jeremy noted. “For other Bobst installations, the installer had one ‘punch list,’ the trainer had another ‘punch list,’ and the process optimizer had a third ‘punch list.’ On the 8.20, we wanted Bobst to bring it all together. The installer, the trainer, and the process optimizer were here to construct one ‘punch list.’ That’s been a better path than the others we had taken.”

Mutually Beneficial

“We really have a full-service partnership with Bobst,” Landman said.

“We have two separate agreements with them on

training and service,” Jeremy explained, “The first, called Process Optimization Visits (POV) are held about six times a year across the four FFGs. What Bobst does is observe your operation with their machines and suggest improvements for that line, on issues such as maintenance, tooling, and the entire process.



Two of Acme's four machines are full-line Bobst, which include prefeeder, flexo and palletizer.

“The second one is Maintenance Plus,” he noted. “These are basically machine audits that we do quarterly. Out of those audits come reports, which might include recommended repairs and optional repairs based on the seriousness of the issue. If the repairs are under warranty, they make them. If not, Bobst provides a quote. After the visit, we consult with them, and then we take action on their report.

“Bobst also has an online portal called Bobst in Touch, which enables us to buy necessary parts at the site, track the order and pay the invoice. Pick&Pay is another Bobst service. This tracks our use of consumable and automatically replenishes these items quarterly. All the things you use and replace frequently. It's been a good program,” Jeremy said.

“When we buy a new piece of major equipment, the impact on the entire operation is dramatic,” Bob said. “So we have to buy very carefully looking at such things as box quality, volumes, agility in moving boxes through the plant, and training. A major question is this, ‘Can they provide the after-sales service we might

need.’ We don't want to have to source everything for a new machine.”

“Bobst is very receptive to the issues we bring up, and that's not only good service, it's smart thinking,” he added. “One thing that's impressive with Bobst is that if its customers have problems with some aspect of the technology and solutions are found, they will incorporate those changes into future production of that model. These are evolutionary machines. I'm sure our machine is an enhancement of the first 8.20.”

“On any new machine, we do something we call a New and Altered Machine Review,” Jeremy added. “We go through a safety check list. When we put the 8.20 in, we came up with 30 items that needed to be addressed. A lot of it, such as fire extinguishers and lock-out, tag-out procedures, was specific to Acme. But we also had a yellow alert (near miss) when a door on the machine almost came down on the fingers of the Bobst trainer. So when this was communicated to Bobst, we asked for the door to be redesigned. They came back to us with a redesign, and we believe this redesign has solved the problem.

“I remember that on a previous purchase, the 1228, we found a problem with a warning horn. That was taken care of. We push fiercely for safety upgrade on new machines. Bobst listens and they take care of it,” he noted.

“There's a tendency of equipment suppliers and their customers to get complacent,” said Mike Schenone, Product Manager/Regional Sales Manager for Bobst. “Accept the mediocre, the ‘good enough.’ We don't get that way, in part because we are pushed by our best clients. When Acme pushes us and we improve, we become a better supplier to all our customers.

“We build the machines and have that expertise, but clients like Acme run them every day,” he continued. “We are happy to make changes that will make our machines more productive and safer. What we are designing for Acme, we can take to other clients not only in flexo, but in other segments of converting. And that's good for everyone.”

“I think we push Bobst a lot harder than most other customers,” Landman said. “Too much of our industry is accepting of less than optimal performance. That's unacceptable to us in our mission to serve our client.”