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NEWS

Acme Corrugated Box Begins Post-Pandemic Expansion In PA

BY LEN PRAZYCH

As the world continues to recover from the pandemic, there is still a sense of uncertainty as the nation's manufacturers begin to fully reopen their doors to embrace a "new normalcy." What isn't in question, however, is the unprecedented and explosive demand for corrugated boxes in a questionably "post-pandemic" world. Ask any independent



An architectural rendering of Acme Corrugated Box's 80,000-square-foot expansion of its facility in Hatboro, Pennsylvania.

box maker and the answer is the same: "Backlogs like we've never seen before." "Busier than we've ever been." "Can't get enough sheets fast enough to fill customer orders." "Had to add a second shift."

Or in the case of especially successful independents, Acme Corrugated Box Co. among them, "Need to invest \$35 million and build a new 80,000-square-foot expansion."

"This expansion demonstrates our commitment to our overall growth and enhanced sophistication of the company," said Acme's President, Bob Cohen. "It will allow us to increase manufacturing capacity, further embrace innovation of new products and flute profiles, and give us a greater ability to serve our customers."

With the thawing of the northeast soil and the pandemic apparently under control, the company recently broke ground on an addition to its existing 250,000-square-foot facility in Hatboro, a 1.5-square-mile town 15 miles outside of Philadelphia, where Acme was founded in 1918 by Bob Cohen's father, Edward J. Cohen. In the story of the independent spirit worth retelling and remembering, Edward packed his horse-drawn wagon with scrap paper and traveled through Philadelphia's dusty streets in search of customers. He found plenty, and soon added reclaimed corrugated boxes to satisfy the diverse needs of the

bustling city. Just two decades later, Edward had incorporated and moved his operation indoors in Center City Philadelphia. The end of WWII brought increased prosperity, and as the economy grew, so did the company.

Seven decades later, in 2021, it's still "business as usual," and the company is still growing, still prospering, with Bob Cohen, 73, owning the company and the third generation firmly entrenched: Erik, 46, is Acme's top salesperson; Jeremy, 43, is the company's Vice President of Operations; and Alex, 28, who joined the company a year-and-a-half ago, is one of Acme's front line supervisors, all of whom will be writing the next chapters of the "classic tale of an independent box maker's hard work, family commitment, and achievement of the American Dream."

Overall Optimism

"The expansion plans were actually in place before the pandemic hit, but in July of last year we paused – along with the rest of the industry – to re-evaluate our commitment



Jeremy Cohen

and we determined that there was still the need to expand," says Jeremy.

Adds Bob, "As a sign of our overall optimism, we continued with our plans fully aware that there will be uncertainty coming out of a pandemic. Still, the signs we saw told us that we have a duty to meet the future with confidence and forbearance. And I believe that when we complete our expansion, our facility will be the envy of other converters."



Bob Cohen

The approximately 30 percent increase in the facility's footprint will allow for a 50 percent increase in manufacturing capacity. The new construction will house a new high-speed Fosber 110-inch doublewall corrugator line, which will replace a Fosber 98-inch corrugator.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Once the new corrugator is operational, the 98-inch will be decommissioned, disassembled and moved. In its place will be added a WIP system distinct to the U.S. and designed to allow the total automation of sheet transfer to converting machine centers.

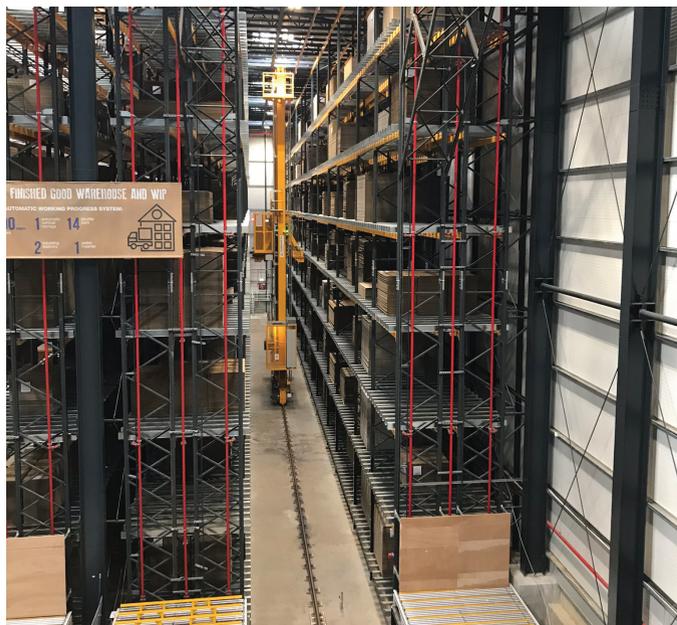
The 110-inch corrugator will allow Acme to produce its current flute offerings of C, B, D, E and BC, BD and ED double wall flutes, with the possibility of some additional offerings.

“We will also continue to perform a lot more detailed testing,” says Jeremy. “We believe that we are intrinsically a structural box producer and as such we do quite a bit of internal testing to ensure the box we are producing meets the requirements of the product being packed.”

Complete Integration

Acme retained the general contracting services of Cincinnati, Ohio based WSA-USA to facilitate the integration of the new machinery and material handling.

“We are so proud to be partnering with the Cohen family on this historical expansion and automation project,” says Jim McLaughlin, President of WSA-USA. “Acme was one of our first customers when we entered the U.S. market in 2011 and they’ve been a long-time partner of ours ever since. This will be our ninth project together and it’s an especially exciting one.”



Acme will have a 7-story Vertical Rack WIP System by Warak.

Acme and WSA-USA began discussions about the expansion project back in 2017, when the first concept drawings were crafted. The respective teams have taken trips together to Europe and Asia to visit multiple highly automated corrugated facilities to learn from their experiences and how to utilize the best elements into Acme’s expansion plan.

“In 2019 we started testing the layout in our 3-D Simulation model to validate the solution with our Barcelona, Spain based partner, Warak, and for the past three-and-a-half years, we have been fine tuning the layout and integrating new levels of automation to the finished solution,”

adds McLaughlin. “When the project is completed, Acme will become one of the most advanced and automated corrugated plants in the world.”

The project will include a WSA-USA Automatic Material Handling system controlled by WSA’s iFAS integration system, a 7-story Vertical Rack WIP System to store 10MMSF of board serviced by two Stacker Cranes, and a Harmax Automatic Roll Delivery and Return System with a Roll Car integrated with the new Fosber Link M3 Roll Track System.

Additionally, Acme will put in a VortX starch kitchen by BW Papersystems, which uses a proprietary 10-step adhesive mixing process that efficiently prepares precise starch batches in far less time than most other systems. Batches can be mixed and ready in 10 to 12 minutes versus 30 minutes or more on some other systems.

Souderton, Pennsylvania based AES Scrap Conveyor Systems will supply the waste handling equipment, which includes a second baler, a second hogger shredder, a core shredder and an AES patented Air Shark rotary material separator. “AES’s headquarters is just 20 minutes from us and they have been servicing us for more than 30 years,” says Jeremy Cohen. “Their reputation for excellence and our long relationship with them was a choice that just made sense.”

Future Initiatives

Construction on the expansion is expected to be completed sometime in the first quarter of 2022. The additional floor space created by the expansion will allow Acme to add three additional converting lines in the future, work that is considered Phase II and Phase III. The company is not expecting to add any new employees just yet but like other converters, there is an ongoing challenge in finding and retaining quality workers, especially machine operators. Acme continued in full operation as the pandemic was spiking. The company’s “headcount” remains much as it was when the pandemic started.

The change in buying habits during the pandemic has dramatically impacted the demand for containerboard and like most other converters, Acme Corrugated Box Co. will continue to benefit from the ever-changing ways consumers buy products. The Cohens know there will be more movement back to retail. They also know that companies like Amazon are intent on reducing their packaging excesses. They also expect changes in demand as consumer buying trends change. With the expansion, they will be even more prepared to meet market demands for the future, whatever the future may hold.

Says Bob, “We, like most independents, will continue to compete on competency, innovation and service. To prove value, we must continue to find ways to differentiate ourselves by using the best material available, utilizing the best equipment available and knowing that success is dependent on finding new products and new ways to service our clients. It’s a simple formula but one that has worked extremely well for us.”

With a 103-year track record of success, who will argue otherwise.