

Plastics in Packaging

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LASTING IMPACT

Why Ian Smith is bullish about the future of rPET hybrid packaging

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START-UP and restart

To describe ePac Flexible Packaging’s business model as copy-and-paste would be to do it an extreme injustice, but the converter’s growth is proof of the old adage, ‘if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it’. **Dominique Huret** and **Jean Schrurs** interviewed the team at the company’s offices in France

Keen *Plastics in Packaging* readers might remember ePac Lyon’s managing partner and chief executive Jonathan Schmitt. He spoke openly about ePac’s disruptive business model at a conference about flexible packaging in Paris last March, and since then, the company’s French factory close to Lyon has taken off and is now thriving.

In these pandemic times, it is refreshing to meet energetic entrepreneurs with a crisp and clear strategy, and Schmitt points to the sweet market spots that he identified when opting to build a French printing hub.

“The market was not offering small orders of quality flexible packaging pouches and bags, and yet, the demand was there,” he says. “Nowadays, many small-size craft producers in the food, cosmetic, pet food, and pharma industries are in need of packaging, whether lay-flat or stand-up pouches or roll-stock. I have been a strong believer in the benefits of digital printing technology since the early days.”

For Europe, the initial key supply point was the Brackley factory in the UK, which is a production site with a sales department. The business model is as follows: a sales office is then created in another country, while the nearest factory supports with production. When sales reach break-even, a plant is built nearby to reduce logistics and environmental costs, and that new factory then becomes a hub. Nearby countries and markets can then be developed and supplied

until new factories emerge.

“We have proven success with this industrial development model in the US,” he adds.

In September 2020, ePac opened the Lyon sales office in what Schmitt calls “an immediate market response” and the company started to convert an existing warehouse into a state-of-the-art packaging plant at the end of December that year. Major works were needed to set up a 1,200 sq m hall to meet food-grade standards and digital technology requirements (air conditioning, pest control, workflow and so on).

“Luckily, the holding team provided assistance in engineering and equipment sourcing, as all ePac factories operate with the same equipment: HP digital printers, Karlville slitters and die cutter/pouch lines, and Nordmeccanica laminators,” he says. “Equipment installation, building upgrade, hiring, and training all took place in the following three months and the first products coming out of Lyon were sent to clients in April 2021.

“For ePac’s model, this new factory was a copy-paste exercise. However, this is ignoring the regulatory complexity of France, where being French and having connections and experience here helped a great deal. Brexit and the pandemic hassles were an additional burden, but our motivated staff and a start-up spirit made it happen.”

The company sells tailor-made stand-up and lay-flat pouches in reels or units for segments including body care,

Left: Jerome Mikczyk is working for a local flexo printer but also as an artist. He took pictures of the different stages of the building of ePac’s Lyon printing house and had them reverse-printed on a mannequin



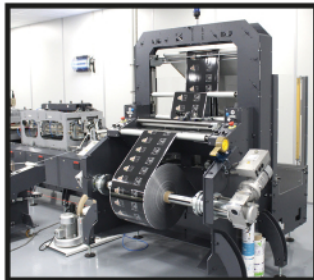
Jonathan Schmitt (left) and Maria Lyri are enjoying the benefits of digital printing technology

ePac Flexible Packaging

Global turnover	\$100 million
Headquarters	Austin, Texas, USA
Total global workforce	500+
Production/sales sites (2021)	16 USA, 2 Europe
Additional sales offices (2021)	South Korea, Australia, Ghana, Austria

pet food, cosmetics, gardening, snacks and confectionery. They are made up of three layers in PP, PET, PE, ethylene-vinyl alcohol and metallised film depending on the type of barrier required.

“While glossy appeal seems to be gone, mono-materials are in and so is coated paper,” explains Maria Lyri, marketing coordinator at ePac Holdings Europe. “The beauty of digital printing is that there is no waste, and we can print multiple stock-keeping unit orders of the same format in the same run.”



Maria Lyri says that nothing is lost in digital

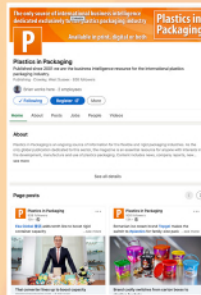
Above: All ePac facilities operate with the same equipment

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