



Eng Meshari Al Jabr

The Gulf Carton Factory of today is very different to the one founded over twenty-two years ago, says Eng Meshari Al Jabr, General Manager at the Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, plant. “Since we became part of the multi-industry Al Jabr Holding Company, we have benefitted from substantial investment in our factory, equipment and processes. That investment has seen us grow

from 50 employees in 1994 to over 325 people and from a capacity of 500 tons a month to around 8,000 tons a month.”

A factory extension, corrugator investments, new logistics, upgrades to pre-press and the installation of three Bobst lines in three years have all seen the company grow into one with substantial capabilities which packaging buyers in the region are making the most of. “We have many long-standing customers and they say that one of the reasons they come to us is that they feel we are very open with them,” explains Mr Al Jabr. “We listen to them, especially about what their requirements are and accordingly, we continuously develop our product offering.”

It was by listening to its customers that the company

FOLLOWING EXTENSIVE INVESTMENT, INCLUDING THE INSTALLATION OF A NEW BOBST DRO 1628 NT RS, GULF CARTON FACTORY IS WELL ON ITS WAY TO ENTERING HIGH GRAPHICS FLEXO POST-PRINT MARKET IN SAUDI.

DRO DELIVERS HIGH GRAPHICS

AT GULF CARTON



"OUR CUSTOMERS ARE RAPIDLY DEVELOPING THEIR CONCEPT OF BRANDING."

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realised it needed to invest further in its high graphics capabilities. "Our customers are rapidly developing their concept of branding," says Mr Al Jabr. "They now have brand managers and marketing teams and they are focusing on certain products that need high-graphics to draw attention."

When GCF first began to produce improved graphics work twelve years ago, it did so on equipment that meant passing the job through the press twice, once to print and once to varnish and die-cut. Installing an Esko Digital Flexo Suite system and moving the work to a more capable press, meant the plant was able to improve print quality — but its customers still demanded more. "Even using better pre-press and digital printing plates, the quality from the machine



was still not quite good enough for some customers," recalls Charudutt Butala, Operations Manager of Gulf Carton Factory.

DRO delivers

Not wanting to lose such work, the plant's owners, the Al Jabr Holding Company, decided it was time to invest further in high-graphics printing at GCF, which would also allow the plant to differentiate itself in the Saudi market. "A significant portion of our work is now high graphics, and demand is increasing all the time," says Mr Butala.

Having looked at three suppliers,

the plant chose a seven-colour Bobst DRO 1628 NT RS to deliver its high graphics capabilities and the press was installed early this year. "The servo technology on the DRO and the vacuum transfer mean the registration is much better than what we could achieve previously," explains Mr Butala. "We also installed a Bobst Registron S5500 system, which takes care of the register automatically as it is running, without the operators having to intervene."

Electrostatic sheet cleaning, infra-red inter-station driers by JB Machinery and a Duo-Technik ink control system ensures that the plant can get the most from the DRO's 11,000 boxes per hour running speed. "We can see that there has been a big improvement in our print quality, as we expected," says Mr Butala. "But we can also run at double the speed of the machines we were using before." Ensuring that the plant can cope with this speed



are a Bobst Mutiloader automatic pre-feeder and a fully automatic Bobst DRO Palletiser. "Previously we were producing maybe 600 tons a month, with six people on the machine we had. Now we can produce double the volume with half the people."

Running speed is, of course, not the only important production factor. Ease of use makes for high performance as well. This is why the DRO is designed as an 'over-pit' machine, keeping all operations at floor level, while an MPC3 human-machine interface records the parameters of up to 10,000 jobs, making setting and running the press very easy.

Easy to run

"At the beginning, the operators were a bit apprehensive, because it's a very big machine at 2.8m wide. And with the pre-feeder and palletiser it is a fully automatic line," recalls Mr Butala. "But they worked with the Bobst trainers and now they have the confidence. They say that the machine is very easy to set. And because they don't have to open and close it all the time, they don't have to always be cleaning the plates like they did with the other machine."

With the installation finished on schedule, training began and Mr Butala says this went smoothly. "We were happy with the service. The Bobst engineers were co-operative and had a good rapport with the operators. Another good thing we see with Bobst is that, after the training is finished, the trainer stays on for a time. They help and advise our operators in actual production

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and for different kinds of jobs.”

With more work arriving for the press, commercial production began in February and from March, the company put it onto two-shift working. Initially planned to produce high graphics die-cut wraparounds and trays, the arrival of the machine has now seen many projects launched by customers to replace wrap-arounds with shelf-ready packs.

The plant is particularly impressed by the service backup from Bobst. “While the Bobst trainers were here, if they felt that there were any parts needed they would order them direct from the factory in Lyon, under warranty. We like this sort of pro-active service. With some of our other suppliers, communication can be a problem – we often have to follow up and remind them after we have ordered a part. But with Bobst we are very happy,” says Mr Butala.

Trust is key

Such service chimes well with GCF, which prides itself on its own levels of customer care. “As we’ve already mentioned, we listen to our customers to find out what they need. We also have very low employee turnover. Most of our

key staff have been here for a long time. It makes our customers comfortable and they feel able to put a lot of trust in us,” continues Mr Butala.

The GCF plant is located in the industrial city of Al Ahsa, in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, close to both Bahrain and Qatar. Established in 1994, GCF originally served mainly local customers, but now supplies packaging to all parts of Saudi Arabia and also exports to Bahrain, Jordan and other neighboring countries. The plant’s main customers today are in the beverage, water, bakery, industrial, ceramics and agriculture sectors. The company also services all the major dairies in Saudi Arabia. “We started off with simple brown and

white boxes with simple printing,” recalls Mr Butala. “Over the years we started producing offset laminated boxes, but as high quality flexo post-print developed we moved away from litho-laminated boxes and that has led us to this investment in the Bobst DRO for high graphics printing.”

Alongside the jobs found in most corrugated plants, GCF also handles jobs where extensive manual work is required. “We do some jobs where the trim cannot be removed on automatic die-cutters, so we do that by hand,” explains Mr Butala. “It is work that a lot of companies don’t like to do, but we do it because we always aim to satisfy our customers.”

With a financial interest in GCF since 1994, the Al Jabr Holding Company took full control of the company in 2008 and immediately began an investment programme to increase both capacity and capabilities. Al Jabr is one of the most successful businesses in Saudi Arabia, says Mr Al Jabr. It is the sole agent in the Kingdom for both Kia cars and Haier home appliances, has interests in building



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materials, laundry and contracting businesses and has manufacturing divisions which, alongside GCF, produce products as diverse as soft drinks and smart chips. "Now we are 100 per cent owned by Al Jabr, we have strong financial backing," he explains. "Previously we had very tight limitations when it came to investment, but now our group is always willing to invest. We are in safe hands, which gives our customers security of supply."

Investment at GCF has been in both plant and machinery. The purchase of adjacent land has allowed the plant to add an extension which has seen it grow to 42,000 sqm in area, all of which now meets food industry standards. An upgrade programme for the plant's 2.5m BHS corrugator has seen one Module Facer replaced and upgrades to the dry-end under way, all with the objective of improving quality, increasing output and reducing waste. "The new Module Facer helps us produce micro-flutes with better quality," explains Mr Butala. "Also, some of the Siemens electronic controls on

the old unit were obsolete. So now if there is a breakdown, we can get support."

The corrugator dry-end has undergone similar replacements. "At times we used to face downtime due to electronic issues, which also used to generate waste. So we decided to change the whole unit to reduce both." While the BHS was off-line, the plant utilised its 'backup' TCY corrugator. This normally runs only on a single shift, but satisfies the 'risk management' requirements of some customers for who GCF is their sole supplier. Other investments have included a Mosca pallet strapper, Solema pad and partitioning machine, Robopac high speed auto stretch wrapping unit and a WSA pallet inserter/auto conveyor.

As promised

The roots of the decision to buy the Bobst DRO NT 1628 NT RS can be traced back ten years, explains Mr Butala. "Even though we had no Bobst equipment at that time, every year the Bobst sales manager for our area, Naoufel

Ghezal, would visit and update us on the latest developments in Bobst equipment and the industry in general." When one of the plant's casemakers needed replacement, the company decided to look at Bobst. "We went to see an FFG 924 at a plant in Germany and we were impressed to see it running at over three times the speed we could get from our existing machinery. We also saw that our local competitors were choosing Bobst and we understood that they were the leader in the market." Once the FFG 924 FP had been bought and installed, Mr Butala was particularly impressed that, on most jobs, it ran at the maximum speed given in the machine specifications. "Our experience with other equipment manufacturers has been that you often do not get the speeds promised in the brochure."

The success of the FFG 924 led the plant to buy another Bobst line the following year to satisfy the demand from a very particular market. "The area around us here in Al Hasa is very famous for dates," explains Mr Al Jabr. "There

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are many date farms and date processing factories. They need boxes that are very small in height." While the plant could run these on its FFG 924, speeds were reduced because the box dimensions were on the very limit of the machine's given capability. "We knew we needed a smaller machine that could run these small height boxes at high speed. After enjoying the performance of the FFG 924 on so much of our work, the decision to buy a Bobst FFG 618 Quatro was very easy."

Alongside equipment, Bobst also supplies GCF with ongoing process improvement support, says Mr Al Jabr. "We have a technical coaching contract with Bobst now. Two or three times a year, depending on our needs, we get visits by either a Bobst instructor to help us with production issues or a maintenance technician to help us with pro-active service."

With ISO 9001 Quality Management and ISO 22000 Food Safety Management certifications already, GCF was recently asked by a prospective customer if it had FSC Chain of Custody accreditation. "It was a big, blue chip company," explains Mr Butala. "Thanks to the systems we already had in place, we were able to move fast and achieve accreditation in just one month. The client was very happy. We achieved it even before their existing suppliers had and now their orders are coming to us. Chain of Custody is a growing trend in some sectors and we expect that this customer's competitors will now go down the same route."

The investments at GCF have



gone hand-in-hand with a revision of the company's outward image — partly to clear away any vestiges in customers' minds of the old GCF. "Just like many of our customers, we are paying close attention to branding," explains Mr Al Jabr. "We have created a new visual identification for the company and we have completely re-modelled our website."

The investments made in GCF by the Al Jabr group have increased both turnover and market share, Mr Al Jabr says. "Our customers particularly like that print quality has improved, while our service has remained excellent. They especially like that we serve them well in their emergencies. We had one customer who had to launch a product in just one week. In twenty-four hours, we had made the plates and dies, manufactured the boxes and delivered them. We're proud of that sort of achievement. You can't do it every day, but when our customers need us in an emergency we are there. We are very flexible. Having equipment like the Bobst lines makes us able to accommodate our customers like this." ■