

LEADING FOIL TRADE HOUSE INVESTS

NICK COOMBES REPORTS FROM UK-BASED BLOCKFOIL

The popularity of foil blocking shows no sign of diminishing as brand owners of all types search for that extra added value to make their product more saleable and the technique becomes more popular in the security market to stem the tide of counterfeit goods.

Blockfoil, with its three UK production sites at Manchester, Nottingham and Ipswich, which also serves as HQ, is by some margin the main exponent of this high quality finishing technique in the UK. Established in 1981, it brings 30 years of continuous expertise to a market that has seen many rivals come and go, largely through lack of specialisation and investment according to Director, Peter Starling, who along with Group Managing Director, Barry Corbett, acquired the company from a venture capital organisation in 2004. The past seven years have seen significant growth for the company, which Starling attributes to long-term understanding of the technique and the knowledge it brings to adapt to changing market situations. Corbett agrees: "It's not just about machines. We believe we have the best staff in the industry. For them it's not just a job – it's a way of life!"

Vertical Integration

One of the strengths of the company has been its vertical integration. From the start in 1981, the founder, Peter Scopes, insisted that the company offer not just a trade foil blocking service, but also the manufacture of its own cylinder foiling machines and dies. Only the foil was outsourced, and this has largely remained the same down the years



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until the recent addition of platen style machines to the production capacity.

Ben Hazelton, Factory Manager at the Ipswich plant, explained, "We pride ourselves as a company on being able to foil block virtually anything that comes through the door, irrespective of substrate and ink or varnish coverage. That ability requires the right technology, but most of all, years of expertise." The company's workforce totals 65 across the three sites and Hazelton proudly points out that their average service length is over 12 years.

Each plant, largely through its location, tends to specialise in certain types of work to

machines undertaken on a one-off basis or under a maintenance contract. SF Services now has customers in more than 40 countries worldwide from South Africa and Australia to mainland Europe and the UK.

Diversity of service offered has always been a key to Blockfoil's success, and this is still true today. Dies Direct is the name under which the company manufactures and sells over 15,000 brass, copper and magnesium dies each year, 50% of which are produced as a trade service to external customers – and this service is growing. It operates via e-mail and, from MAC or pdf files, the appropriate die can be made and shipped the same day.

shorter deadlines we're being given. We can now turn jobs round in 24-36 hours without any loss of quality, where previously we would have needed 72 hours – that gives us a major advantage."

Major Investment

With demand increasing for foil blocked work, and the upper production capacity of the cylinder machines having been reached, a decision was made to investigate the market for platen type presses, and over a long period, beginning in 2004, Barry Corbett and Kevin Bloomfield, General Manager at Blockfoil Nottingham, carried out exhaustive tests on different types of work (all typical of the company's everyday production) at a number of leading machinery manufacturers' demonstration facilities.

Starling explained the rationale. "With printing press speeds increasing from typically 7-8000 sph to almost twice that, and with lead times shortening, we knew that cylinder press foiling alone could not deliver the service levels demanded by our customer base. While platen machines are less versatile, they offer significantly higher output speeds without compromising quality standards."

By 2008 the decision was made, and for its versatility across a variety of work and its ease and speed of make ready, an MK 1060ST machine was ordered from Masterwork Graphic Systems UK Ltd, and installed at Blockfoil's Nottingham plant in August of that year, where it operates under the watchful eye of General Manager, Kevin Bloomfield.

"The MK is a good choice for a trade house. We stand or fall by the quality of our work and the service we deliver, and all of our equipment must fit with that philosophy."

Bloomfield is quick to praise the aftersales service offered by MK, and the respect is mutual, with Ken Farnsworth, of Masterwork (UK) commenting, "It was a real coup for us to secure the Blockfoil order. The company is acknowledged as the premier foil blocking house in the UK, and it



L to R: Ben Hazelton (Plant Manager), Steve Cotton (Supervisor), Wayne Fiddaman (Production Manager), and Peter Starling (Director).

meet the needs of its own customer base. All three sites work closely together and undertake any type of foil blocking, with each plant being equipped with very similar machinery.

Manchester, which was opened in 1988, with its access to the M62 corridor, can serve the large print companies right across the north, while Nottingham, which opened in 1997, is strategically located for key customers in the Midlands, mostly within 40 miles of the plant. Ipswich, as well as being 'base camp', is the sole source for die manufacture and also has an engineering facility (SF Services) offering new build, refurbishment and servicing of foiling, embossing and cutting and creasing



New styles of foiling developed by the company require special dies, and these along with those for holograms, embossing and de-bossing are all part of the trade service. Ben Hazelton stressed how important in-house die production is to maintaining quality and service levels. "It allows us to be faster to press, and with the capacity of the MK machines we need consistency of pre-press to meet the ever

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certainly put the machine through its paces.”

Within weeks of being fully operational, the new MK platen was making its mark, to such an extent that six months after being commissioned it had increased business for Blockfoil to a level where a second and third machine were being discussed. Farnsworth takes up the story. “The MK 1060ST is popular because it’s the most versatile machine in our range and is therefore ideal for trade work. It has longitudinal and transversal foil pull as well as a used foil rewind station. Electronics make set up and control easy for the operator, and it can handle material from 90 gsm paper to 4mm corrugated board with a variable heat source adjustment across 20 zones from 40 degrees to 180 Celsius.”

According to Peter Starling: “The effect of installing the first MK was immediately noticeable. It appeared to generate a new level of confidence among our customers who began to discuss new projects and other areas of interest for foil blocking.” The timing was fortuitous too, coming as it did at the onset of a recession, when brand owners become more conscious of their products’ appearance and were prepared to spend extra on adding value to the

Well Established

Masterwork Graphic Equipment Limited was established in 1971 in Taiwan. Over the past 30 years it has become a group of companies involved in the manufacture of machine parts and graphic arts equipment, exhibiting at Drupa as far back as 1990.

In 1992, Tianjin Changrong Print and Packing Co Ltd was established in Tianjin, China, as a manufacturer of die cutters, foil stampers and folder gluers, and the company has become one of the leading manufacturers of folding carton equipment. Recognised for its use of the most advanced manufacturing technology over the past three years, MK equipment is now exported to Europe, North America and Oceania, as well as other Asian countries. In 2003 the company’s range of die cutters and foil blockers received certification of CE safety standards.

To provide a service to its customers, and to test its new technology, the company has set up a converting plant at its Tianjin facility — equipped with two manroland offset presses, MK die-cutters, foil stampers and folder gluers, and other equipment for the production of folding cartons. The company offers hands-on training for its own and its customers’ employees. An important aspect of this converting plant is that each of the company’s new products is installed and undergoes continuous testing for an extended period before it is launched onto the market.

packaging to protect their market share.

With a plan to standardise equipment across the three production sites, the second MK 1060ST was installed in Manchester in early 2010, and the third in Ipswich soon after, in an overall investment programme of £1 million.

Security Aspects

Security work has long been a particular specialisation for Blockfoil and a dedicated security unit was opened in Ipswich in 1996. One key area that Blockfoil is continually developing is its expertise in holograms and its own proprietary technology (Securigraphix™ and Photographix™) which are foiling techniques in the security field where holograms are not the ideal solution. “We can work the graphic image or photograph in our studio to suit foil blocking and then make the dies in-house to create spectacular images embossed into the foil,” explained Starling. While

not being high-end security, these techniques allow Blockfoil to offer a wide range of different finishes, and essentially, it brings brand protection within the price range of more companies.

Security Foiling is the Blockfoil Group’s niche security business. It was established to utilise the wealth of expertise available in the organisation. As well as advising other Group companies on brand protection and document security, it sells into 66 different countries and is currently producing its biggest order to date for 250 MicroPOISE™ desktop hologram application machines, many of which will be deployed in the fight against fraud in Africa. Its sister company, Profoil, offers a complete range of consumables and associated items for large and small scale foil blocking (dies, toggle clips, foil, make ready materials, plug and play foiling machine upgrades etc.) via its website www.profoil.com

With an annual output of some 35 million sheets a year and rising, Blockfoil has an excellent working relationship with the major foil suppliers, whose products become more specialised as performance requirements increase. It is also clearly a mark of how far Asian technology has progressed that a market leader has the confidence to base a major part of its growth programme on Chinese machinery. It is, no doubt, a pointer for the future.

