



STRATUS director Isidore Leiser (left) with new Gallus EM410S press

Profitable in a tough market

FRENCH CONVERTER STRATUS has maintained its growth by moving into niche sectors, leveraging centers of excellence and staying Lean. Andy Thomas reports

With 240 employees, a turnover of 35m and occupying 35 million square meters of production space, the Stratus group is one of Europe's leading label converters.

The company has maintained its profitability in the face of a modest Western European growth rate of 2 percent by moving nimbly into niche sectors where it can really add value – and by keeping up a dedicated and active R&D department with its own full-time manager.

As well as pressure-sensitive labels, Stratus is active in wrap-around, shrink sleeve labels, in-mold labels (IML) and flexible packaging and runs 32 production lines across every print process, including offset, letterpress, screen, UV flexo and digital.

The group has three plants spread around France, each of which acts as a Group center of excellence in certain products and technologies.

L&L visited Stratus' SEEC plant, the Group's biggest operation based just outside Lyon. It has a turnover of 20m, 140 employees and a dedicated sales force of 11. It specializes in IML and

shrink sleeve labels.

In the North, close to Lille, is Stratus Etinord, with 40 employees. It specializes in tyre labels, piggy-back labels and textile labels. The Martin, Limoges plant has a turnover of 8m, 60 employees and 11 salespeople and its specialty is digital printing, with two 6-color HP Indigo ws4500-presses. This site also specializes in transfer labels, adhesive-side printing, textile labels, loyalty card technology, wraparound board labels and braille. The plant is also leading Stratus' RFID program.

The group's operations are tied together electronically by the PECAS Vision management information system (MIS) and EskoArtworks' Artpro/Nexus digital workflow system.

'With the MIS we know exactly when a job goes to pre-press, when to press and to post-press, and we can cost those jobs at each stage,' explains Stratus director Isidore Leiser, whose father founded the company. 'We can see the status of any press on screen.'

Nexus and Vision are fully integrated, so a thumbnail image of any job can be

made available to the MIS system, and the MIS system automatically creates job information for Nexus' graphics workflow, preventing errors arising from double keying.

The Group's presses and GMG digital proofing system are calibrated to a common standard. Under test is EskoArtwork's Webway internet-based job approval system for clients who want Stratus to manage their master files and make text and other changes remotely.

Platemaking is centralized at SEEC,

GROUP CTP

Digital plates are produced at SEEC on a Kodak Thermoflex Mid hybrid platesetter, which provides the flexibility to image digital flexographic and letterpress plates coated with a LAMS ablation layer, as well as film. Tests are underway on solvent-free processing of the flexo plates and a DuPont Cyrel FAST thermal plate processing system will likely be the next step. Offset plates and screen are imaged with film. 'We will move offset to CTP, but we will have to have enough volume,' says Isidore Leiser.

MOVING EAST

Stratus services key French and global brands across a wide range of end use sectors. The latter include leading tyre brands Bridgestone/Firestone, Goodyear, Michelin and Continental, and in the pharma sector Reckitt Benckiser and Pfizer. Food and consumer goods are well represented through the likes of Kodak, Carrefour and Sarah Lee.

'Our customers are becoming more European and a lot are moving to Eastern Europe,' comments Isidore Leiser. 'It's not feasible to deliver to them there, so we are looking to buy an operation in the region.'

Lyon, with jobs arriving from the remote sites into hot folders, then straight into SEEC's Nexus automated workflow, greatly simplifying process control across the Group's three plants.

This high level of integration makes it easy to move work around the group depending on available capacity and specialization. Isidore Leiser sees this as a key strength: 'Having three sites gives our customers production assurance which is so important today. We choose the route for a job when the job comes in, depending on factors such as size and quantity of the order.'

ISO9001 is implemented across Stratus' three sites along with ImprimVert, which is the environmental standard used by the French printing industry. 'It means we do not throw away toxic products and we try to reuse waste products like solvents and printing inks. We are also looking at taking back liner waste,' said Leiser. 'We have trialled PLA and it's no problem on the machines, handling like a PP, including printing on the reverse.'

ADDING VALUE

R&D is a central pillar of Stratus' growth strategy. The company has a separate R&D department located at SEEC, run by Julien Chauveau, who ran L&L through the company's latest innovations.

Most recently, Stratus has formed an exclusive strategic alliance with a company which develops micro-encapsulated fragrances and scents. Stratus has developed a way of screen printing these micro-capsules onto adhesive carriers. This carrier is placed inside a resealable label, and the act of opening the label breaks a seal and releases the scent. The micro-capsules are effective for 2-3 days opening and closing the label. Julien Chauveau points out that a lot of different products could be micro-encapsulated – insect repellent, for example.

In-mold labelling (IML) has become a specialist area at Stratus. The company prints IML both rotary offset and UV flexo, and has experimented with adding both cold foil and Braille in-line. 'The problem we need to overcome with braille is that the dots are flattened by the injection molding process,' points out Julien Chauveau.

Stratus long ago abandoned attempts to finish IMLs in-line and today has four off-line stripping/sheeting/stacking machines with a rotary die station to cut out shaped labels.

As well as OPP IML substrates, Stratus has printed on OPS IML film, which is required for OPS containers.

Shrink sleeve labels represent a major growth sector for Stratus, and as with IML, the company has been able to add cold foil and Braille.

Booklet labels are another specialty, bolstered by a recent investment in a GRE booklet label production system. Onsetted booklet labels, offset printed, can be made up of 24 panels and can incorporate cold foil in the designs. Multi-page reclosable labels can include a wide range of items including dry peel promotional labels, scratch-off panels, games and coupons.

LABELS & LABELING



Special finishes developed by Julien Chauveau's department have included a 'soft touch' PP laminate applied over cold foil to create a powerful visual/tactile presence, as well as security inks and varnishes.

More recently Stratus has diversified into non-label products such as dry wipes and packaging products including cartons, tags, collars and blister packs.

PRESS TECHNOLOGY

The latest press installation at SEEC is a Gallus EM410 'S' press. 'These new Gallus presses have excellent registration, enthuses Isidore Leiser. 'Because of the servos we can record the parameters of each job, then recall those parameters for a repeat job. The press is then quickly into register. Some substrates like films would be impossible to print without servos and there are no more gear marks.'

Sleeves have made a big difference both in terms of easier handling and mounting accuracy. 'We were the first to use aluminium sleeves instead of composite sleeves after Labelexpo Europe,' states Leiser. 'With composite sleeves, after one year they can move – the aluminium are much more stable. When they are cut, the adhesive does not damage the sleeve. They are double the price, but it pays for itself.' The press is fitted with ink pumps and chambered doctor blades.

Other production machines at SEEC include a Gidue E-Combat shaftless press equipped with eight UV flexo printing units, twin cold foil units, laminating and delaminating/relaminating units.

For finishing, Status mainly uses Rotoflex inspection rewinders. The company is happy to hold stock for most customers, who pick weekly. 'Handling customer logistics is more complex than printing. We are a service-driven organization,' concludes Isidore Leiser.

LABEL AID

In Issue 4 (September) of L&L, there were errors in the article titled 'Thinking Big' on page 76. The company is Label Aid Inc. not Labelaid. Carl Hanson is the founder, and Darlene Crooks the president. Apologies to all concerned.