

# Converter Reaches Plateau, Ready To Scale Heights

by Jim Curley

In the central flatlands of Florida, the metaphor of an "uphill climb" may be geographically inappropriate, but that's what business has been like for Central Florida Box since its founding 18 years ago. "We did our own thing, worked hard for our customers and took advantage of opportunities," says Tom Ramsey, President and co-owner of the Orlando, Florida based sheet plant.

How far Central Florida Box has come since Ramsey and co-owner Ed Rivera opened the two-man operation, selling for part of the day,



From left, Central Florida Box's Tom Ramsey, son (and Field Service Manager) Jeff Ramsey and Ed Rivera have invested significantly to capture market share.

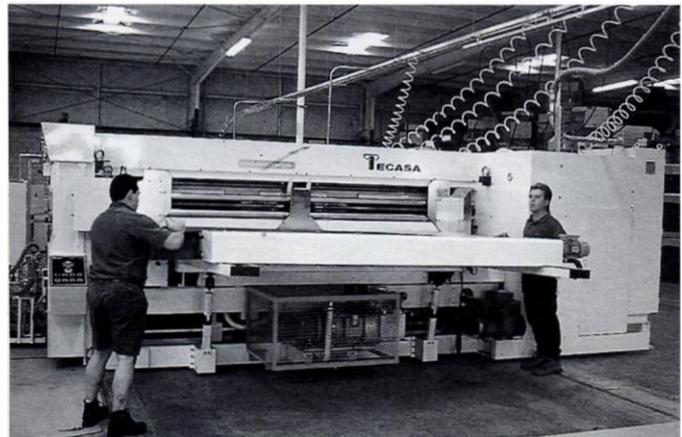
converting and delivering the orders they had sold for the rest of the hours, was evident recently when Central Florida Box hosted members of the Association of Independent Corrugated Converters during the AICC's Spring Meeting in Orlando, Florida. Independents toured the 43,000-square-foot production facility (with 3,800 square feet of office space) and viewed two new pieces of equipment: a 66-inch by 141-inch Tecasa two-color flexo folder gluer and a Marumatsu Super-Max automatic flatbed die cutter. Also expected on site before the end of the summer is a new litho laminator. "It was great to host the AICC," says Ramsey. Rivera adds, "They have been a mountain of help for us, particularly in the last five years."

## Critical Decisions

"We went a number of years without upgrading our equipment and we had reached a plateau," says Rivera. "We've always been looking for niches and realized we'd have to invest in new machinery to take advantage of opportunities in the marketplace."

The Tecasa flexo is a case in point. "There is a furniture market in Florida, and the Tecasa will enable us to enter the big box market," explains Rivera. "In addition, we were

looking to stretch out of the norm of the 50-by 110-inch machine and complement our McKinley 66-inch rotary die cutter with Geo. Martin stacker. The Tecasa will expand our capacity by about 30 percent."



Central Florida Box's Tecasa flexo folder gluer

"The other exciting thing about the Tecasa is that it's really versatile." Ramsey adds. "It can run a blank as small as 17 by 25 inches or as large as 78 by 141 inches. It can complement our 38-inch S&S ZLM two-color flexo and pick up the slack on that machine."

The unit features a central computer that provides automatic control of all movements of machine devices, with printer to obtain information about production data and stops diagnostics and a memory of all orders to be repeated.

Other machinery in the plant includes a 50-inch by 110-inch Hooper QuadLock one color flexo converted by Harper Machinery, an International Paper Box straight-line folder gluer, a 50-inch by 113-inch Greenwood printer slotter, a 46-inch by 64-inch Miehle die cutter and a Global slitter.

Yes We Can A "can-do" attitude is a key ingredient in the success of Central Florida Box, both in equipment and personnel. Last year, Central Florida Box completed its computer-to-press system with the installation of a photopolymer platemaking system. "It was taking from 3 to 10 days to get a printing plate from the outside, and about 50 percent of the ones we received had something wrong with them," said Rivera. Ten years ago, Central Florida was mounting its own plates, but was not looking into making plates, because the cleaning of photopolymer plates was, in Ramsey's words, "not environmentally friendly." When water became an acceptable cleaning agent, Central Florida revisited the subject, and, with the help of Bryan, Ohio based Anderson and Vreeland, located a unit. Shortly after the unit was installed, Central Florida had to have 30 printing plates in 10 days; it was decided that the company's neophyte platemakers would handle the order.

"It's was really baptism under fire, but all the plates turned out real well," remembers Ramsey. He credits Atlanta, Georgia based Polyfibron Technologies with helping Central Florida implement the system by training its workers. Now artwork flows from computer to negative to platemaker to press.

"We have terrific graphic and structural designers, and today we print 95 percent of the boxes we make," says Rivera.

The installation of three major new pieces of equipment in a period of less than a year might faze other small converters — the company employs 52 people — but not Central Florida. "We designate our operators as A-, B- or C-class operators, depending on whether they can run all machines, two machines, or just one machine," explains Ramsey. "Everyone here is pretty much cross trained." At Central Florida, there is no maintenance department; operators are responsible for maintaining their own equipment. This policy, says Ramsey, promotes a sense of "self-worth" among the company's employees.

Another area in which employees take responsibility is in the environmental arena. Ten years ago, Central Florida Box worked with Sun Chemical in a program that would reduce the amount of water used for wash-ups on its ZLM from 30 gallons to one quart. "Actually, it can be done with one pint per wash-up, but we're generous: we give them double that amount," Ramsey jokes. The washing applied with pressure is thorough; Central Florida has never had to have its anilox rolls professionally cleaned. The end product either goes into barrels to make black ink or is evaporated. Central Florida has developed its own ink evaporation system to handle that chore. "We think it's important to be environmentally friendly," Ramsey says.

"Our employees have been the major factor in our success," Ramsey says. As someone who started in the industry as a janitor at U.S. Corrugated Fiber Box in Dayton, Ohio, and, before he had left that firm five years later, had become a top printing press operator, Ramsey has an appreciation for production workers. In the early 1970s, Ramsey moved south and was hired by Dusobox, coincidentally just one day after Ed Rivera joined that Orlando based converter. By the end of the Seventies, the duo were ready to strike out on their own. "It hasn't always been easy, but there's always been progress," says Ramsey.

#### Only You

Some converters might shy away from the responsibility of being a sole supplier to customers, but Central Florida welcomes the challenge. "Once we have a part of someone's business, we try to get all of it," explains Rivera.

One prospective customer, leery of entrusting his box orders to just one supplier, was himself challenged by Rivera. "Call us up anytime, don't let us know in advance, and tell us you need boxes tomorrow," Rivera told the end-user. "It worked, and he became a customer."

"Though we have 9,500 square feet of warehouse space a half mile away and inventory certain sizes, we prefer to run a just-in-time operation," explains Ramsey. "We view the new Tecasa, for example, as a just-in-time machine. Big boxes are too cumbersome to warehouse."



The Central Florida Box principals credit Amtech's Unix-based applications for providing them with the visibility into production that they need to satisfy customer needs on a Just-In-Time basis. "In the future, I see our salespeople using laptops to provide instant price and delivery time quotes," says Rivera.

Concerned that the "can do" attitude must be tempered by the realities of production, Central Florida slates "quickie" planning meetings to make sure that sales is "on the same page" with customer service, design, production and shipping, especially with a new customer or a particularly demanding job.

"That's one the chores of Tom and me — to keep those meetings focused," says Rivera. Both principals are moving away from the day-to-day operation of the plant to dealing with larger issues. With Tom's children, Jeff Ramsey and Alisa Hoskins, Customer Service Manager, taking a larger role in plant operations, Central Florida Box is poised to enjoy rapid growth. The machinery is in place; the workforce is ready, willing and trained; and the goal is to double the business in the next five years.

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