

Not far from the imagination mecca of the world, lies another progressive, but less-frequented facility where the exchange of ideas is routine and creativity is abundant.

Central Florida Box Co., a 43,000-sq.-ft. sheet plant located in Orlando, Florida, about 20 miles away from Walt Disney World, has been in a constant state of growth since its inception. While on the surface it may have little in common with its well-known neighbor, it boasts equally satisfied customers and employees, and visitors feel every bit as welcomed.

The plant evolved from the desire of two industry veterans to start their own box plant. Having both worked for Dusobox—a nearby sheet plant—for a number of years, they had the knowledge and experience to succeed, but were without a facility.

Then in 1979, Ed Rivera, one of the owners, sold his house and used the money to invest in an 8,000-sq.-ft plant with his colleague, Tom Ramsey. Rivera likened the facility to a bowling alley because it was simply a long, narrow section with one loading door and one side door. Nevertheless it was more than enough space at the time, and soon production began.

It was a small, family operation from the onset. Both Rivera and Ramsey had sons that worked after school and summers in the plant. Ramsey's son Jeff is still with Central as the field sales manager. However, neither Ramsey nor Rivera ever dreamed the company would grow to the extent that it has.

"We just wanted to build a company—enough to make a living for ourselves and our families," Rivera said. "We never anticipated it would get to the size it is today with roughly 50 employees."

The team's initial modest hopes pale in comparison to what they have actually achieved and now continue to strive for.

The sheet plant's two main niches are the JIT (Just-In-Time) business for brown box customers and P.O.P. displays. The majority of brown box business goes to commercial printers and the electronics sector, while the displays largest venue is the sunglass industry and small, local shops. Because of Central's ability to adapt to its customers' needs, it never refuses an order based on size.

In fact, when asked what his secret to success was, Rivera responded: "I don't have any magic formula. We do what it takes, and the common goal is always the customer. We put that in front of everything else," he said.

However, like many in the industry are discovering, servicing the customer today is a much greater challenge than it was even just a few years ago. Customers' increasing knowledge of the in-

Rivera joked that the plant has taken JIT one step further to JIC (Just In Case). Joking aside though, management takes its challenges seriously, and Rivera stressed they are meeting increasing demands through the installation of new equipment.

Not only is the plant getting into litho laminating with the purchase of a new laminator (to be delivered in June), but it has also purchased a plethora of new equip-

# Inciting Innovation

*A Florida sheet plant innovates through investment by purchasing new equipment and adapting to a changing market.*

*by Robin Litwin*



*Above: Central Florida's Merigraph plate making system. Below: The plant's new 66-in. x 144-in. Tecasa two-color flexo folder Bluer.*

dustry has led to more demanding expectations.

"The biggest demand from our customers now is the speed of the turnaround," said Jeff Ramsey. "So many people want JIT so you have to have warehousing, and you have to be quick. They are demanding answers and commitments."

ment in just the past year. The major acquisitions began last July with a Merigraph plate-making system from Anderson and Vreeland, which enabled the plant to manufacture its own printing dies.

An uncommon practice for a sheet plant, management had been experimenting with systems for a while, but finally made the de-

cision to invest when the Polyfibron liquid polymer was developed in lieu of the sheet polymer. The liquid polymer is environmentally friendly and recyclable, two important concerns at Central Florida.

Management also hired a talented new designer with a great deal of P.O.P. experience and put in a state-of-the-art CAD system. These additions have culminated in a uniquely creative and effective design department for Central Florida.

Designing and manufacturing its own photopolymer plates has also limited the plant's dependence on outside vendors, which, in turn, allows it to offer more to its customers.

"It's enhanced our service to our customers, and it's one less thing that you have to wait on to get boxes out, so we're able to perform quicker," Rivera said. Before the system was purchased it was not uncommon



*Ed Rivera (second from left) and Tom Ramsey (right) with Mr. Terada, the CEO of Marumatsu, (left) and Keith Reiter from Hitek in front of the new diecutter.*

for customers to have to wait for days on end—sometimes more than a week—just to get printing dies.

Also among its equipment additions are two more recent acquisitions: a 66-in. x 141-in., two-color, Tecasa flexo folder-gluer and a Marumatsu Supermax automatic flatbed diecutter. Both of these were showcased for about 100 people who attended an open house at Central Florida Box in conjunction with the Association of Independent Corrugated Converters (AICC) meeting held in Orlando from April 9-12.

Both additions were delivered the week before the open house and are expected to increase and improve production, allowing the plant to pursue new business.

The Marumatsu was brought on board in an unusual agreement between the distrib

utor, Hitek, and the plant. Hitek installed the machine and purchased Central Florida's dies for them so that the machine would be up and running for the impending open house. Hitek then gave Central 90 days to actually decide if it wanted to purchase the machine or not. This agreement came at just the right time for Central, which was in the market for a diecutter that could satisfy the company's growing P.O.P. business.

"This machine should give us more flexibility and help us to eliminate overtime," said Jeff Ramsey. "It will enable us to go after more P.O.P. business."

The machine is specifically designed for high-profit short runs and tight registration. It reportedly can cut and strip with a single die, with one of its biggest benefits being quick setups. It comes equipped with a lead-edge feeder, compact stripper and counter ejector. It has the ability to feed AB double wall through E- and F-flutes, any industrial mix, litho labels, laminated board, plastic corrugated and displays.

In addition to the machine's features, Central has been very impressed with the service it has received from the supplier. The

machine was shipped in one day, set up in one day and running the same day.

"Fifteen minutes after setup we had an operator running it," said Jeff Ramsey. "It's the most unbelievable setup that I've seen."

Management is equally satisfied with the Tecasa installation, which, according to Jeff Ramsey, is replacing an older, slower one-color machine. The machine was purchased with expansion into new markets in mind.

"We went for the 66-in. machine because we are going to go after the furniture business," said Ramsey. "We also liked the versatility of the machine."

The decision to purchase the machine was made at the TAPPI CorrExpo show in Atlanta last November. Between the time of the purchase and installation, Rivera and Tom Ramsey travelled to Spain to see the machine up and running before it was disassembled and shipped. Rivera said the relationship with the supplier played a large factor in deciding which machine to purchase.

"Tecasa has kept us informed all along

and they have done everything they said they were going to do," Rivera noted. "Not only did we like the way the machine was constructed, but we talked to the engineers and we liked the way they responded to some of our questions."

Central Florida's Tecasa is equipped with a modem that connects the plant back to the supplier's headquarters in Spain. If a problem should occur, special software enables Tecasa to check the machine and send back information—including pictures detailing where the problem is—to the plant instantaneously. For the first six months, Tecasa will also be monitoring the machine from Spain to determine what the plant's learning curve is.

Although they like to remain humble in their accomplishments, Central Florida has managed to stay one step ahead of its competition with its progressive purchases. This has not come from belittling its competitors, but rather from focusing on its own strengths—a rare approach in a highly competitive market.

"We don't look at it as competition. We simply try to respond to our customers' demands more than anything else," Rivera said. "There's a lot of good competitors out there, and I think that we are better because of them, not in spite of them."

This attitude has also transcended to how management treats its employees. While it incorporates very few of the latest by-the-book management techniques, it operates using common sense, treating workers with fairness and respect.

"Coming up through the ranks ourselves, we simply treat employees how we would like to be treated," Rivera explained. "We have a lot of meetings, we interact, and we do not allow egos to get in the way."

These simple tenets, combined with a great deal of hard work, have not only sustained Central Florida for the last 18 years, but will undoubtedly be the impetus for future growth as well.

The future is already taking shape. The next stage is to become a 100% manufacturing facility and incorporate a separate 70,000-sq.-ft. warehouse and distribution center. The plant already rents 9,500 sq. ft. of outside space, but is looking for more.

So while a few miles away tourists turn to Tomorrowland in the Magic Kingdom for a dose of the future, Central Florida Box Corp. has no need for such fairytale fantasy. The company is already well on its way.