**Case Study**

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**FILM + FLEXO = THE FUTURE**

Somebody once memorably remarked that “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” Who actually said it is open to debate — it’s been attributed to Albert Einstein and Henry Ford, among others — but there’s no doubting its wisdom.

In 2016 Ahmedabad-based Pentaflex Films LLP took it to heart. After over 20 years as a leading Indian manufacturer of flexible packaging PE film, the company took the bold decision to add printing to its portfolio: not only that, but to take the flexo route, in a market dominated by gravure. A year later the move took concrete commercial form as a new establishment in Ahmedabad, home to a new Bobst CI flexo press. Just two years after that Pentaflex took Silver with High Honors in the Kodak Global Flexo Innovation Awards — a massive achievement for such a young company.

Pentaflex’s Anand Patel acknowledges that he and his fellow directors took a risk, but explains why it was a very calculated one. “Flexo is only about 15% of the FMCG market that we focus on, and most of that is dairy packaging. The rest of the market is largely gravure, so there’s a huge opportunity to win brands over to flexo — and we have some really serious factors working in our favour.”

**Push for sustainability**

Perhaps the most powerful argument for people to take a serious look at flexo is Indian governmental policy, particularly recent wide-ranging legislation designed to enforce greater sustainability in the FMCG sector. Explains Patel: “Many countries have adopted Extended Producer Responsibility, which makes consumer brands pay attention to what happens to their products after use — in particular, material recovery and recycling. In India we’re now catching up, which is placing significant pressure on brand owners to put sustainability front and centre of product development. This will be good news for flexo.”

To discover just how good, Pentaflex did its homework, he says. “For example, we researched the current consumption of plastics and film in India, and how this would grow in line with increases in people’s disposable income — which translates into more spending on consumer goods. Add that to the drive for sustainability, and the outlook for flexo is really positive: I wouldn’t be surprised to see a sudden boom in flexo in the next two or three years — maybe by 40% — before settling down to steady incremental increases.”

**Picking “the low-hanging fruit”**

Confident as Pentaflex was of the potential, the company took its first steps as a flexo printer in the market it knew best — dairy. In Anand Patel’s words, “that’s where the low-hanging fruit were to be found. Because flexo is already established in the sector, our discussions with those players were simpler. They gave us the understanding we needed to refine our capability — to make sure we were doing things right before venturing into gravure.”

Among the lessons Pentaflex took from these conversations, two were especially important. The first was reassuring: a growing awareness of flexo’s increased capabilities. “In the past, flexo had a bad press on issues like printability and quality, but you can trace that to older technology such as stacked presses. Our Bobst CI press is a different generation of machine altogether, and the word is spreading.”

The second lesson was that a huge opportunity existed for flexo in the reverse-printed laminate market. “Reverse-printing using flexo was almost unheard of in the region ,” recalls Patel, “but by combining the Bobst press with Kodak Flexcel NX technology we could offer brands much higher quality in the reverse-printed space — with the added advantage that the pack is recyclable.”

The company’s winning entry — flexible packaging for salt — demonstrates this proposition in action. Salt is traditionally packaged in a PET+PE laminate, printed gravure for reasons of printability and quality. Explains Patel: “The brand owner wanted a sustainable replacement, so we proposed a PE+PE laminated structure — something gravure can’t handle due to quality issues on PE. In the end, the client moved from a non-recyclable package to a 100%-recyclable alternative, giving them the same mechanical properties without affecting shelf-life, and reproduced so accurately that it was difficult to distinguish it from the gravure equivalent. They were also able to recover some cost in the form of packaging waste at their end.”

He acknowledges that, considering how new Pentaflex was to flexo, this was a major achievement, and one that involved a degree of trial and error. “We put a lot of time and effort into trying out new applications, and we’re not shy about experimenting. But we’re fortunate to have a high level of technical expertise running throughout the company — from the directors to the rest of the team. It’s our USP.”

**Work to be done**

Three years on from the original decision to enter the flexo market, this expertise is behind an increasingly successful drive to bring more gravure work over to flexo. Recent contract wins include a locally-based manufacturer of ready-to-eat and instant-mix products that is taking the flexo route in a major rebranding of its products. There remains, however, work to be done before the momentum becomes unstoppable. “We have no trouble showing prospects that flexo produces quality print,” says Patel, “but that’s not the only factor in the decision to switch. We have to remember that brands and their printer-converters have a heavy investment in cylinders for existing jobs. Hopefully, we can get in front of them when they change designs, but that doesn’t happen very often.”

When Pentaflex does get to the table, he says, they can make a strong case. “The Indian market is very cost-conscious, and throughout the supply chain everyone is trying to gain margin. So the cost of gravure cylinders is a factor, particularly for brands with lots of SKUs or frequent design changes. Flexo plates are cheaper, of course. Faster time-to-market is another powerful argument: for a FMCG brand with multiple products in different sizes, waiting a week for a gravure cylinder is an issue. Flexo offers quicker turnaround for platemaking as well as on the press, so we can handle shorter runs without a drop in quality.”

He adds that the advent of toluene-free inks is beginning to have an impact with larger brands. “A lot of brands in the US have already moved away from toluene, and the same is happening in Europe. The message is getting through in India too, encouraged by the sustainability regulations.”

Finally, there’s flexo’s substrate flexibility. “The amazing thing about flexo is the fantastic quality, whatever the substrate. You can surface-print on PE, reverse-print on PET, surface-print on breathable paper or aluminum foil, or just paper. We’re doing it all.”

Pentaflex is confident a flexo future is on its way, he concludes, and how quickly it arrives will depend on cooperation between all the stakeholders. “There is an enormous variety of potential jobs out there, some more challenging than others. It takes a lot of expertise to bring together the right anilox, the right dot structure and the right ink. Going forward, all of us need to work closely to make the transition happen.”

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**About Miraclon**

KODAK FLEXCEL Solutions have helped transform flexographic printing over the last decade. Now brought to life by Miraclon, KODAK FLEXCEL Solutions – including the industry-leading FLEXCEL NX System – give customers higher quality, improved cost efficiency, better productivity and best-in-class results. With a focus on pioneering image science, innovation, and collaboration with industry partners and customers, Miraclon is committed to the future of flexo and is positioned to lead the charge. Find out more at [www.miraclon.com](http://www.miraclon.com). Follow us on twitter @kodakflexcel and connect with us on Linkedin; Miraclon Corporation.