A TRUE SOLUTIONS PROVIDER

Minnesota-based Squid Ink Manufacturing, Inc. is a leading manufacturer of industrial coding and marking systems and superior quality inks. Elisabeth Skoda spoke to the company's president and CEO Bill Hoagland about its upcoming appearance at Empack in Utrecht, fuelling the company's push towards expansion in Europe, and finds out more about what makes Squid Ink stand apart from its competitors.

With its head office and manufacturing facilities located in Minnesota, Squid Ink is a key part of the Engage Technologies family and is a long-term member of PMMI.
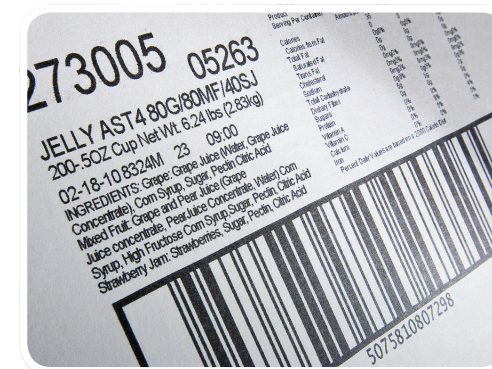
Squid Ink recently celebrated a milestone, 25 years of being in the inkjet, coding and marking business. Originally focused on providing water-based inks for dot matrix printers, the company moved into the high-resolution and marking sector, both for primary and secondary product markets. The company grew and expanded to include printing systems as well as replacement inks. Squid Ink's printers and ink are designed to print the highest quality bar codes, batch numbers, date codes, logos and large or small character text, directly onto corrugated cases, plastics, metals, glass, wood and other substrates.

Comprehensive product range

Squid Ink's product range includes high resolution printers, thermal transfer overprinters (TTO), UV LED curing systems, ink jet fluids, ink delivery systems, coding and marking systems and material handling.

"We also manufacture 250 formulations of ink, which means that in the coding, marking and packaging industries, we can address printing on everything from glass, metal, plastics, to corrugated boxes and gloss stock boxes," Mr. Hoagland adds.

Squid Ink's technology meets the needs of a wide variety of printing applications. Mr. Hoagland is proud to point out one of Squid Ink's major USPs. ▷

"Our competitors in the marketplace have really narrowed the scope of available inks, some departments used to have 15 or 20 chemists or developers and reduced it down to four or five, so they are really not ink developers any more. We still focus very much on ink development, and our customers benefit from the results."

Innovation at Empack

Squid Ink will focus on its new CoPilot range, which was launched successfully last year, at Empack in Utrecht, in the Netherlands in April 2016. CoPilot printing systems are designed to print superior quality hi-resolution characters of either porous or non-porous surfaces." ▷

CoPilot uses proven Xaar piezo technology to print up to 0.7" of hi-resolution characters, razor-sharp text, scannable bar codes, and great looking logos at 185 dpi. A 4.3" full colour touchscreen provides access to the system's internal messages and print functions. Messages are created and edited on Squid Ink's easy-to-use Orion™ PC Software and transferred via Ethernet or USB device. For larger applications, multiple CoPilot printing systems can be connected via Ethernet or wirelessly and controlled through one central Orion print station.

Mr. Hoagland lists some characteristics of the different models:

"With up to 2.1" of print height per print head and the ability to run up to two print heads from one controller, the CoPilot 382 offers a versatile, yet cost effective solution
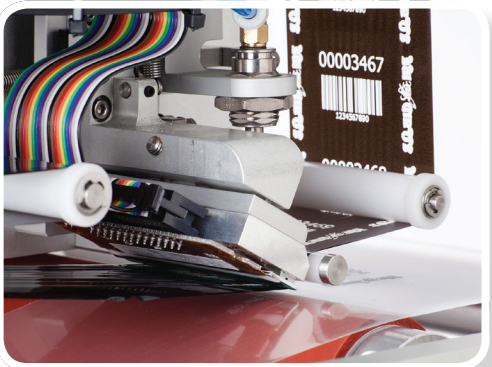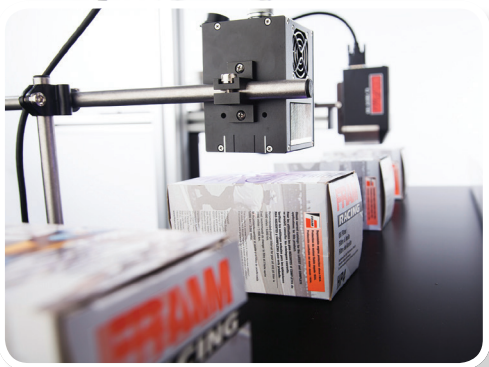
for a wide range of coding and marking applications. Furthermore, the CoPilot 256 is designed to work as an integral part of a day-to-day packaging operation, and offers up to 2.8" of total print height and the ability to print on both sides of the substrate in a single pass. Finally, the CoPilot 128 ink jet printing system offers the highest durability, versatility and productivity for printing lot codes on coated cartons, bar codes on corrugated cases, or product information and logos on PVC pipe." All of the CoPilot printing systems are CE certified and approved.

Also on show will be the company's TTO (thermal transfer overprinter) range and its UV curable systems, which eliminate the need for solvents while lowering maintenance of the print systems.

"There have been a lot of technical difficulties with solvent based inks, which still dominate the market, especially with VOCs (volatile organic compounds). Our UV curable inkjet solution puts the ink on without VOCs. We developed UV curing systems that go with the print systems to give complete integration and lower maintenance costs. Because there are no solvents, our solution allows for less opening time. We have released this option both into the US and Asian markets, where it has been greatly successful, and it will be introduced to Europe at Empack," Mr. Hoagland points out.

"Squid Ink's new UV system is versatile and can print on metal, competing with continuous inkjet printers with no volatile organic compounds, making them safer for human interface and environments." ▷

Focus on Europe

Squid Ink has been selling inks and ink jet printing systems in Europe since 2000. Last year, the company set up a new sales support and warehousing facility in The Hague in the Netherlands, with space for ink, printer, and parts storage, technical and sales support, as well as office space. The location allows Squid Ink to better support a growing list of distributors and large end users in Europe.

"Having a warehouse in The Hague allows us to provide quicker response times when people need our products, rather than waiting for products to be transported from a distance. The new site has opened up technical support for expanding distribution throughout Europe," Mr. Hoagland explains.

"We have enlarged the facility and included training facilities, which is crucial to our expansion. We now have a fully certified logistics company to handle hazardous materials. We have seen a very positive response from our European customers thanks to reducing costs and response times in technical support."

International presence

Squid Ink has three facilities in Minnesota, where the company's headquarters are also situated, and one in California. In addition, there are two facilities in Shanghai, one technical support and sales facility and one assembly facility.

"We are trying to keep our cost competitive edge in the Asian market, and we are in the process of setting up a joint venture in Bangkok, Thailand, expecting first batches of ink to be ready by the middle of the year," Mr. Hoagland adds.

Since opening its distribution facility in The Hague, Squid Ink has expanded its reach to 17 European countries thanks to various distribution agreements.

"We have reached solid market penetration and great expansion in a short time, in countries such as Germany, Italy, France, the UK, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Switzerland and Russia, and we just recently signed a distribution agreement in Romania. We also just recently signed a major OEM agreement to manufacture inks for a major company in Europe, so it has been quite a year for us," Mr. Hoagland is happy to report.

Growth

Squid Ink expects to grow organically in the coming years thanks to ongoing product developments.

"We have expanded our distribution in a little over 60 countries globally, and are able to provide our customers with the solutions they need. R&D is of crucial importance. Our R&D lab is staffed with 15 engineers, and we are planning on expanding this

further in order to provide our customers with even more cutting edge solutions," Mr. Hoagland says.
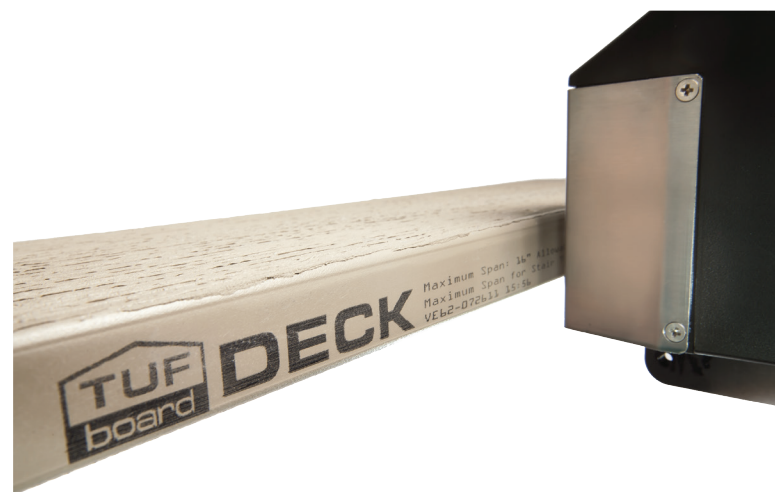
Squid Ink currently has around 120 fulltime employees excluding its Asian operations, and achieved a growth rate of 12.5% in 2015.

"Of course it is an unknown how fast the market will grow, but we have what it takes to support our customers and distribution base, and this is our main driver for growth," he adds.

In conclusion, Mr. Hoagland is keen to point out Squid Ink's credentials as an ink developer and complete solutions provider.

"A lot of people make statements about being solution providers, but really cannot offer anything much beyond standard ink. On the contrary, our ink and software development allows us to be a true solutions provider to the market place. I believe it comes down to being able to help the customer. We will take on a project and we don't have to go out and purchase any ink, we will manufacture and develop it. For example, one of our customers in the continuous inkjet field wanted a very specific green ink, which nobody in the world makes. It took us seven or eight months of development to create a green ink for them, and the customer was very satisfied. We work with our customers to help them achieve exactly what they need." ☐

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