(From left) Jose Rivera-Hamilton; James Imburgia, COO; and Carlos Teperino review the vision inspection system settings on Control Group's 22˝ Nilpeter press.

By Cory Francer

Driven to Be Cutting-Edge

Control Group combines its background in pharmaceutical packaging with a drive to innovate, leading to high-quality, creative results.

Though they knew the job would not be easy, the management team at Control Group understood that if they could pull it off, it could take the company to unprecedented heights.

The Norwood, N.J.-based company, which was founded in 1971, is primarily a pharmaceutical label printer, but in the 1990s and 2000s, Control Group began to add packaging for the personal care market to its repertoire. When an engineer for Gillette approached the company with an idea to package products in preprinted thermoformed plastic, Control Group made it its mission to figure out a way to bring this concept to reality.

It took two years to see the project through to fruition, but COO Jim Imburgia says the time, effort and money required was well worth it. In fact, he says it helped form the company's philosophy that dedication to research and development is the best way to stay on the cutting edge of the industry.

"We're not afraid to jump into something that's never been done before," Imburgia says. "Sometimes, you just have to do that."

Persistence with Packaging

When Harvey Cheringal, father of current Control Group co-owner Bill Cheringal, started the company in 1971, it specialized in pharmaceutical label and package insert printing and miniature folding, eventually expanding into flexible packaging in the mid 1990s. These items are still a large part of the company's portfolio today.

While Control Group was firmly established in the pharmaceutical label printing space, it soon realized that the market was becoming crowded. As several pharma printers added shrink sleeve and folding carton capabilities, Bill Cheringal explains that the company would be better served by placing a strong focus on research and development, with a goal of creating packaging that no one else could.

Gerard Wuttig monitors the in-line video inspection system on the eight-color, 29˝ Aquaflex FPC press.

"One of the things that separates us is we're printing things that didn't exist before we've done them," Cheringal says. "Many products that leave our facility are items that no one else makes."

It was 2006 when the company received the call from Gillette that would lead to one of its greatest challenges. At the time, thermoformed packaging typically utilized a separate label or backing card to achieve its graphic messaging, as ink cracking during the thermoforming process presented a major roadblock to direct printing. But, Imburgia says, finding a way to create this type of package would add a capability to Control Group's arsenal that would be difficult for the competition to match.

"We saw the value of that and it was something nobody else was doing," Imburgia says. "Anybody can do shrink, but to go the opposite way is tough. We had to formulate the inks ourselves with the help of one of our ink manufacturers and it took us almost two years of R&D work and many thousands of pounds of plastic."

After battling with ink cracking and unexpected issues such as ink offsetting, Control Group finally mastered the innovative package. Not only did this open the door to a substantial portion of business from Gillette, Imburgia explains that once Gillette was acquired by Procter & Gamble, it led to a significant amount of business from the consumer goods conglomerate.

The other plus of achieving such a significant packaging feat, Cheringal explains, is that it can be used as a valuable relationship building tool. By developing this process through its own R&D, Control Group did not have to worry about a customer jumping ship to a competitor.

"We wanted to get into something a little more exclusive that required more specialized equipment and more specialized talent," Cheringal says. "Therefore, once you secure a client or a project, you develop a long-term relationship with them that is not at risk for another 'me too' company coming in with a lower price."

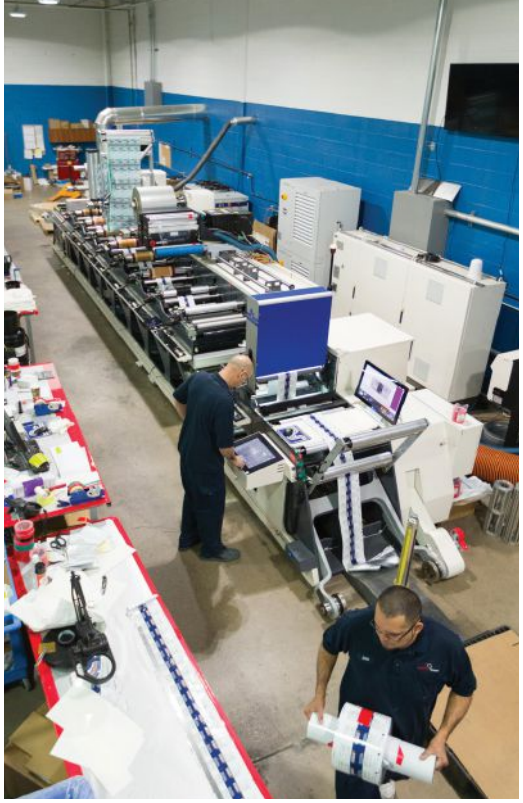
While the preprinted thermoformed plastic was a milestone achievement for Control Group, the management team says that it expects to receive marketing and engineering approvals in the next one to two years on additional innovative packaging products that have yet to be seen in the marketplace.

A Technological Commitment

Control Group's dedication to research and development has been a catalyst in earning the company new business, but without the proper tools, the time and effort spent creating new packaging would be for naught. The company currently runs a fleet of nine flexo presses for both labels and flexible packaging. Control Group Co-owner Jeffrey Levine explains that any flexo press can produce a label or flexible package, but the more sophisticated the equipment, the better the result will be.

"We maintain our quality because we constantly invest in new technology, whether it's in the platemaking area, the heavily automated digital front end with the graphics, or the press technology," Levine says. "It's all part of what we do here. So we give our talented people the equipment they need to put out a fabulous finished product."

As a flexographic printer, Imburgia says the company recognized early on that servo technology would be a key to producing packaging at the



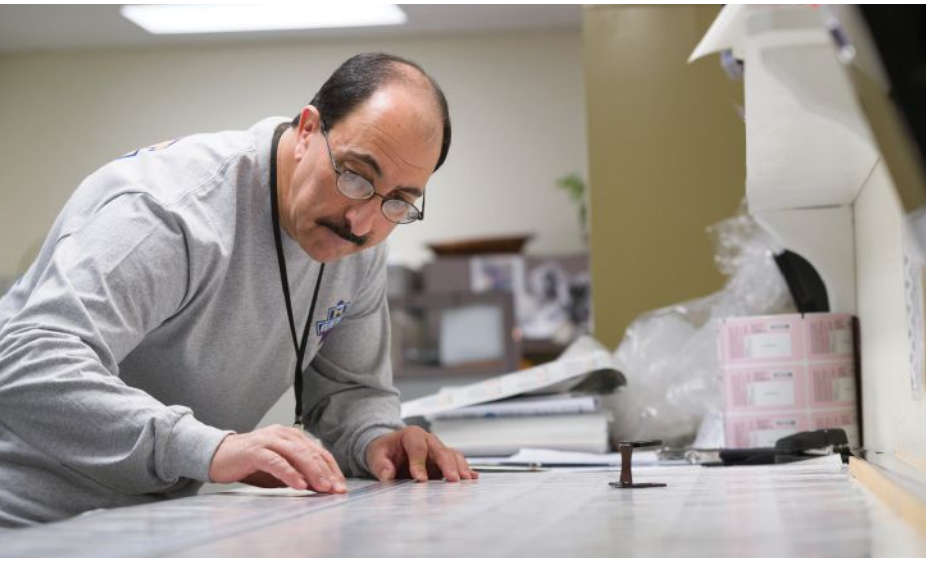
Makeready materials are removed from the 22″ Nilpeter press.

high-quality level the company desired. In 2006 it installed an eight-color, 29″ Aquaflex flexo press, which was one of the industry's first full-servo presses available in that size range.

With the Aquaflex press up and running, Imburgia explains that demand for flexible packaging eventually dictated Control Group acquire a second packaging press. But unlike the Aquaflex, he says the company did not require the new press to be full servo, only requiring the technology on the plate and impression cylinders and not the anilox roll. This need led Control Group to Nilpeter, which had been considering developing a press with this type of technology. Imburgia explains the two companies collaborated on the new 13″ press, leading to Control Group installing the first one.

"It worked out very well," Imburgia says. "They built the first one, we put it in and it was everything we hoped it would be with servo. That's the only way you can do this type of work. You have to have the machines to do it. You have to have the hardware."

When it came time for the company to look for an even wider option, Control Group decided on a 13-color, 22″ Nilpeter FA-6 with a movable rotary screen and cold foiling capabilities, solidifying the company's fleet of flexible packaging presses — or so they thought.



(Top) Press operator Oral Roberts works on Control Group's HP Indigo WS6800 digital press.

(Bottom) Anthony Sarno reviews a sample for quality assurance.

In September 2016, Labelexpo Americas returned to Chicago. The Control Group team decided to make the trip from New Jersey, but had no intention of opening up the checkbook to purchase any of the presses on display.

"We went to this show with zero intention of buying a press — I can't stress that enough," Imburgia says. "We said to ourselves before we went there, 'We'll see the technology and we'll see where it goes so that if six months from now something happens, we'll know which press is right for us.'"

But when they reached the Nilpeter booth and saw the new FA-6* in action, they began to have a change of heart. While Control Group had a strong first impression of the press, the trip to Labelexpo also coincided with a customer committing to a large order of printed flexible film — the type of job that would benefit from the increased capacity.

Cheringal, Levine and Imburgia met with the Nilpeter representatives and worked out a deal right on the show floor. Imburgia recalls that the strong relationship the two companies have developed over the years gave Control Group the confidence it needed to make the purchase, despite not running any print trials.

Levine explains that the press was shipped straight from the Labelexpo floor to Control Group and was immediately placed into production. He says the company is making the press even more technologically complex, adding five more print stations to provide a total of 13 colors, including rotary screen and other capabilities.

"We know Nilpeter's reputation and how well they stand behind their product," Levine says.

Two Technologies at Work

While Control Group has been pressing full speed ahead into the latest flexographic technology, it took a more subdued approach in entering the world of digital printing.

Imburgia explains that Control Group's first foray into digital printing did not go well at all, prompting the company to return its first digital press. But, it eventually opted to try a second round with digital, acquiring a previously owned HP Indigo WS4500.

Imburgia explains that this press demonstrated the benefits that digital could provide, including reduced waste, very tight registration and cost-effective product sampling. But after less than a year of running the HP Indigo WS4500, Imburgia says Control Group realized the need for more advanced digital technology, upgrading to an HP Indigo WS6800.

While the Indigo WS6800 has taken on much of Control Group's short-run work, Levine explains there isn't a specified run length limit imposed on the press. Because digital printing eliminates the makeready times associated with flexo, Control Group does use the Indigo press for some longer runs when quick turnaround times are a factor.

"The business that's going onto the flexo presses are the longer runs that are better suited for that application," Levine says. "Even though the digital is best suited for short runs, we're actually putting some longer runs on there because it allows us zero makeready and we are very confident in the finished product."

Keeping a Watchful Eye

While much of Control Group's flashiest packaging is in the personal care and health and beauty markets, the company's background as a pharmaceutical printer has led to its dedication to maintaining stringent inspection and quality control over all of its packaging.

Imburgia explains that the company prints pharmaceutical pouches for a well-known international pharmaceutical and over the counter drug manufacturer, totaling 80 million pouches per year. It would take the company about three weeks to inspect one order, he says, even though it only took about three days to print. Not only did this immensely slow down production, Imburgia says it wasn't the most foolproof way to inspect the finished product.

"We weren't very confident that we were catching every potential defect because we were printing 26″ across with 72 pouches in a repeat and trying to make sure all of them didn't have a speck or piece of dirt blocking some type," he says.

To improve the speed and accuracy of the inspection process, Imburgia says Control Group installed video inspection systems on all of its flexible packaging presses. Now with the ability to inspect packaging in real time, also known as roll mapping, Imburgia explains that operators can safely rely on the inspection system to catch defects. Additionally, what was once a three week inspection time frame has been significantly reduced.

"The idea is to print quality," Imburgia says. "It has made us such better printers because we're seeing all the issues as we're printing them and it's real time."

Levine explains that in the pharmaceutical industry, thoroughness is imperative in the quality assurance process. And even as the company has expanded into new market segments, it maintains the same high level of scrutiny across all of its divisions. As a cGMP facility, compliance audits and quality agreements are standard, which he says contribute to Control Group's goal of supplying 100% defect-free printing.

"What's happened is over these years, a variety of customers from other industries, whether it's consumer goods or cosmetics, love the comfort that our pharmaceutical core brings," Levine says. "We have one set of procedures that applies to everybody … They all get treated as if it was pharma."

By combining its innovative intuition, high-quality print capabilities and thoroughness of its quality control, Levine says customers are provided a level of comfort that keeps them coming back.

"We find that when they come in here for a visit and they see our procedures and print quality, they're getting the best of both worlds," he says. "It's been a proven success for us." ***pP***