

Birkby's response is to think big

It is just over two years since Birkby's Plastics went through a management buyout and it has been a very tough period for any injection moulder to deal with, but especially so for one supplying the automotive sector.

Ian Parker, Birkby's chief executive, says: "Over the course of the recession, car manufacturers and their suppliers were among the hardest hit with volume drops of almost 50%. So far in 2010 volumes are recovering but it will be some time before 2007 volume levels are experienced again."

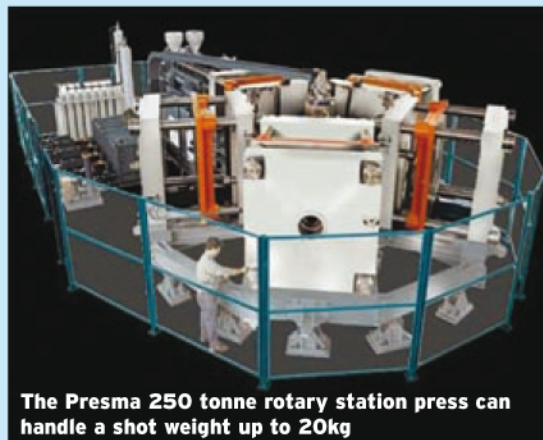
For the first eight months after the MBO in January 2008, the Liversedge company says the new ownership team of six working shareholder directors focused on ensuring a smooth transition for

customers, suppliers and employees.

But from September 2008 Birkby's, like many other focused automotive plastic suppliers, was hit by escalating material prices, a near doubling of electricity costs and a very dramatic downturn in demand from its automotive customer base. The business plan formed for the MBO was abandoned and survival became the only objective.

At the time of the MBO Birkby's annual sales were around £35m and the company employed around 450 people. In the year to 31 March 2009 sales dropped to £29m. Most of this sales drop occurred in the first quarter of 2009 when several car OEMs announced exceptional shutdown periods.

Inevitably, Birkby's went through several rounds of restructuring



The Presma 250 tonne rotary station press can handle a shot weight up to 20kg

with employee numbers dropping to a low of 240. Throughout this difficult period the company took great care to retain all its design, tooling, process and technical teams in order to be ready for any upturn in new project activity.

Twelve months later Birkby's is once again winning new business both in its traditional automotive

sector and in new sectors with a demand for large shot weight applications.

Parker says: "For Birkby's future it was vital that we found a leg outside automotive to give our business additional growth potential and stability.

Large shot weight capability has opened up new sectors and we are confident of more business wins in

the year ahead."

In the original MBO plan Birkby's sought to strengthen its relationship with its traditional car OEM customers to ensure the company remained a supply partner of choice to this very demanding sector. But the new owner directors also wanted to find additional stability through developing another leg to the business outside Birkby's traditional automotive sector.

Last summer Birkby's won a contract to produce cable troughing made from recycled plastic. A first success led to a second product, designed and developed on Birkby's Catia design systems. For both products, individual components required shot weights of up to 12kg; well beyond the capabilities of anything in Birkby's existing fleet of 76 machines, ranging from 25 tonnes to

2,000 tonnes.

To fulfil this contract Birkby's invested in a new large press capable of injecting up to an impressive 20kg in a single shot. The new press, a Presma 250 tonne rotary five station, and associated robotics were installed in September and today are operational on a 24/7 basis.

The last 12 months has seen Birkby's win new automotive contracts and develop an expertise in large shot weight injection moulding. The company is once again moving forward but Parker says the MBO team are under no illusions that the road ahead will be easy.

He says: "Birkby's is definitely a survivor and the MBO team have done a magnificent job in finding new business in these challenging times for our industry."

Manuplastics adds sparkle with PP clarifying agent

A new clarifying agent for polypropylene (PP) from Milliken Chemical is set to enable a UK manufacturer of premium injection moulded containers for the food, toiletry, cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries to make jars that are appreciably clearer than current versions in standard PP.

Manuplastics, an experienced contract moulder based in South Wimbledon, London, has trialled a new high-clarity PP in jars for moisturising creams and other toiletries. The formulation, which contains Milliken's latest high-performance clarifying agent, "Millad NX8000", would replace some current grades.

Alan Bray, Manuplastics' sales director, says some "blue chip" customers are currently assessing the jars with a view to commercial production.

Like other clarifying agents, Millad NX8000 is normally compounded into polypropylene by the polymer manufacturer. Bray says that Manuplastics, always alert to developments to give it an edge in the highly competitive container

market, was keen to find out how a resin containing the new clarifier performed in practice. According to Bray, jars in the new material not only show enhanced transparency, but also "incredible" colouring possibilities.

"The extra clarity allows excellent direct product display, while the possibility to use striking colours ensures the package will have a superb impact on the shelf. You can pick and choose any colour you like to give your product a distinctive touch."

Millad NX8000 offers a "step change" in haze reduction as compared with existing clarifying agents, claims Milliken, with its typical 50% reduction as against the current industry standard "making highly transparent polypropylene an achievable reality, even in relatively thick wall sections." The Manuplastics jars have a wall thickness of between 1.1-1.2 mm. Tests have shown that mouldings up to 1.2mm thick made from PP containing Millad NX8000 have optical properties very similar to those of optical grade thermoplas-

tics. This excellent clarity is maintained, says Milliken, even in coloured formulations when Milliken Clear-Tint polymeric colourants, designed specifically for transparent polypropylene applications, are used.

According to Milliken, Millad NX8000 can also improve mechanical properties through a beneficial effect on the crystalline structure of the polypropylene. It has food-contact approval from both the Food



Milliken Millad NX8000:
A step change in haze reduction

and Drug Administration (FDA) in the US and the

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in Europe.



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Michael Lohrer, Managing Director, HBW-Gösch

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