



Selecting the UV ink market

Here's another in *PACKAGING REVIEW's* series of articles about specialised ink producers. Following last month's report on *GL Specialized Inks* (a company that's carved a niche for itself in the field of screen printing inks), the focus this month is on *Select Inks*, which has also proved that success comes from identifying a niche market and then specialising in the relevant technology, reports Gill Loubser.

'STICK to your knitting' is the motto of Peter Thomas, founder and owner of Select Inks in Cape Town. With 30 years' experience in the ink-manufacturing business (having worked for companies such as Inmont, Coates Lorilleux, Hostmann Steinberg and Sicpa), Thomas certainly knew his subject from every possible angle when he decided to set himself up as an independent ink manufacturer.

It was in 1996 that he decided to 'go it alone' and establish his new business venture named Select Inks. His initial strategy was to focus on the UV ink market, serving both the narrow-web and wide-web sectors, as well as serving the narrow-web flexographic industry with water-based inks.

'It's important,' Thomas maintains, 'to focus on a niche market in order to remain competitive in the face of rapidly advancing technology. If you don't maintain that focus, you'll never keep up with technology.'

He's had no reason to alter that original vision; and it's a strategy that's clearly paid off, as the business (based in Killarney Gardens, outside Cape Town) has experienced tremendous growth — so much so, that Thomas has now purchased an adjacent plot of land and plans to expand his premises. 'We've actually grown much faster than I anticipated,' he adds with a happy smile.

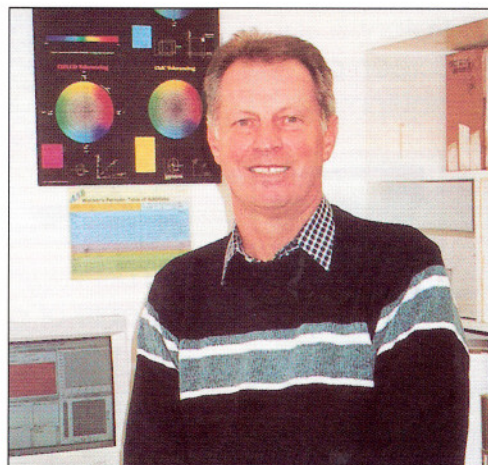
With some 30 staff members around the country (in the Cape Town factory and in the satellite blending plants in Durban and Johannesburg), Thomas is proud of what he describes as his 'home-grown team'. He has trained all his staff from scratch, not poached from other ink manufacturers.

Trend to UV printing

Internationally, there's a growing trend towards UV printing, and South African label and packaging printers are beginning to join this tide as they lose their initial fears of the technology and to appreciate its many benefits (see article on UV printing on page 37).

Asked whether South Africa is keeping pace with overseas UV technology, Thomas gives an emphatic nod. 'Some 70% of presses installed now include UV printing stations,' he comments. He adds that during the company's almost seven-year existence, he has seen significant growth in UV printing applications — particularly spurred on by the narrow-web self-adhesive label printing sector. But there's also been growth in UV printing for other narrow-web applications such as unsupported film labels, flexible packaging and cartonboard.

UV technology is becoming increasingly competitive as it offers extremely short curing times, which means that further processes can be carried out almost immediately. In addition, UV-cured inks offer high



Peter Thomas founder of Select Inks, has found a niche market in the UV ink sector. He's seen here in the QC laboratory.

scratch resistance, high chemical resistance, and excellent quality and gloss characteristics.

Top local supplier

According to Thomas, Select Inks is South Africa's leading local manufacturer of UV-curing inks for the narrow-web label printing industry, competing mainly with imported inks from multinational suppliers.

'We offer top-quality products and excellent service to our customers,' he comments. 'That's the secret of our success.'

This service ethic is particularly important, he contends, particularly the ability to tailor-make products to suit local requirements. 'The multinational suppliers offer one product to suit all uses, but we can offer enhanced product flexibility to suit a variety of different needs, thanks to our local formulation facilities,' he adds.

Main products from Select Inks are UV-curable inks for letterpress, offset lithographic, waterless offset, and screen (both rotary and flat-bed) printing. The company also produces UV-curing adhesives for cold



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foiling and lamination applications. Another notable market is water-based inks for the narrow-web flexographic market.

Select has recently introduced a new range of low-viscosity UV-curing flexo inks that exhibit high strength at low viscosity, providing excellent adhesion and scuff-resistant properties. At the same time new water-based flexographic inks designed specifically for printing packaging films offer superior colour strength and wet-rub resistance properties on corona-treated materials.

Select Inks' customer list reads like a 'who's who' of the narrow-web label printing fraternity in South Africa — including Rotolabel, Ferroprint, Universal Group/Flexoprint, Tricolor Press, Rebsons and KB Labels. In the area of UV screen inks — of growing importance in the plastics packaging industry, customers such as Plastform feature on the list.

Select Inks runs in-plant kitchens at two of South Africa's major label printing plants — Ferroprint in Durban and Rotolabel in Cape Town. Select Inks' own colour matching staff and technicians are on-site to ensure the right colour ink at the right time for these important customers. Naturally, they're equipped with the latest in computerised colour matching technology.

There's another string to Select Inks' bow. A second division of the business, called Select Graphics, was formed in 2000 to act as importer and countrywide distributor of Jet plate-making equipment and photopolymer printing plates from Japan. These are used for label, can, carton and rubber stamp printing applications. This agency — taken over at the invitation of previous representative, New Force Graphics — has allowed the company to broaden its customer base.

And what does the future hold?

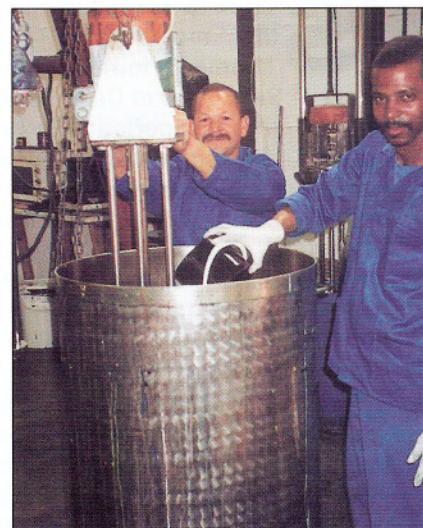
Select Inks, says Thomas, is increasingly turning its attention to supplying the folding carton and flexible packaging markets. By this he certainly doesn't mean he's about to change tack and enter the traditional oil- and solvent-based ink markets for the litho and gravure markets. He's simply anticipating future growth in demand for UV-curing inks as more folding carton and flexible packaging converters make the move to UV flexo technology.

As Thomas points out, future developments in UV curing also include new narrow-web presses being equipped with digital printing units for printing variable information using UV curing ink jet technology.

'We also see a time when UV curing inks for gravure printing will be made available,' he adds as a final note. □

Select Inks

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Mixing ink at the Killarney Gardens factory are Efrid Sauls and Angelo Hannies.

