



PRINT BUSINESS

FOR FORWARD THINKING PRINTING

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ALEXIR IS THE PROOF

THAT PRINT NEEDS

GOOD PARTNERS



PARTNERS FOR PROGRESS, PEOPLE AND PACKAGING

**THE ALEXIR PARTNERSHIP IS LIVING UP TO EVERY ASPECT OF
ITS NAME AND AT THE SAME TIME FORGING A BUSINESS THAT
MANAGING DIRECTOR JEREMY KEABLE SAYS GOES BEYOND THE P+L.**





The word partnership is all too often used in error. Not by Alexir, however. The company is itself a partnership: the Alexir Partnership, now underpinned by also being an Employee Ownership Trust. The company also aims to work in close partnership with suppliers and customers. For Alexir itself the Partnership comprises a number of separate and independently managed operating units covering Creative, Digital, Packaging, Co-packing, Gifting and Alexir International which is dedicated to partnerships with outside providers. There are partnerships with key technology suppliers: for example Koenig & Bauer in print and die cutting, Xerox in digital print. Partnership with the board mills which ensured that during Covid and after when material was hard to come by, meant Alexir was able to secure supply.

New customers are left in no doubt. “Alexir Digital is part of the Alexir Partnership and partnership is core to our values” a welcome letter states. It is signed by Jeremy Keable as partnership managing director.

He took over when Robert Davidson relinquished the reins on reaching 65 years old in 2016 after 30 years leading the business. Keable had been running the company’s co-packing operation in Uckfield before stepping up. Davidson remains very active as chairman, taking a roving ambassadorial role, representing the company on trade bodies like the BPIF, European Carton Manufacturers

Jeremy Keable moved from the copacking operation to head the overall business and to lead the transition to an Employee Ownership Trust.

Association and the Independent Packaging Group where Alexir is the only UK member as one of the leading independent carton producers in the country.

Davidson might have sold out to one of the major packaging groups looking to consolidate the sector and as a result received a sizeable one-off payment to fund a lengthy retirement. Other share holding retired directors would have received similar one-off payments for pledging their shares to a new owner.

Instead the EOT deal means that instead of an overseas owner taking over from a handful of ageing ex-director shareholders, there are now 150 very active and engaged employee shareholders. “We were being approached by a number of groups,” says Keable. “The big question was would a predator really have kept us open in an expensive part of the south east or shifted production elsewhere? The EOT structure allows Alexir to remain independent.”

Ahead of the deal Keable attended an event dedicated to companies that have become employee owned trusts where he managed to position himself next to the John Lewis chairman, and took the opportunity of asking for advice. Keable was told to constantly remind people that this was now their company, hence signage around the Alexir factory in Edenbridge that does just this.

Staff are not going to forget that they are the shareholders in the business and so responsible for their own future. Employees attain

LITHO REMAINS THE HEARTBEAT OF ALEXIR

The eight-colour double coater Koenig & Bauer Rapida 106 was the first machine of its type in the world when installed at Alexir Packaging. As well as a range of specialist print and varnish effects the 18,000sph press delivered a marked increase in productivity over the Komori Lithrone that was replaced.

One of the two six-colour Lithrones remains. It is a machine from a different age, still very capable and printing as sharply as ever, but it is not as versatile as the machine it sits alongside nor as productive.

Along with the presses there are three platens, two from Koenig & Bauer and one from Bobst. One of the K&B machines is the first Cut Pro X platen in the UK requiring full logistics to keep the work flowing in and out without stopping.

For this reason Andrew Crack explains incoming pallets are switched from wooden pallets to the robust plastic pallets designed for the logistics system. The pallets flow from the door to the presses to the platens and into the folder gluers before leaving the plant by the same door.

On one side Alexir has installed an ink factory. Its task is to mix the special colours needed without dropping a beat in production terms. "We do all our own mixing," he says. "Before this we were struggling sometime to get ink mixes made up which is crucial because of the fast turnaround in this market. We need to be in control."

The shelves are filled with the base colours and mixed results while the recipes are controlled by the database. These days only very large quantities of special colours need to be purchased from the ink company. Likewise the business is in control of platemaking and cutting coating blankets.

"It means we can deliver a rush order of

2,000 sleeves by tomorrow if needed," he says. The bulk of the work is longer run than this, is for food and other FMCG companies. It produces the Halopack cardboard punnets used for fresh foods on 800 micron boards. When printed on the Koenig & Bauer these run at 14,000sph. On the older Lithrone production drops to 7,000sph. "The quality is still good on the Lithrone," he says.

The technology though does not match that on the Rapida. Once a sheet is signed off, the inline camera and inspection software takes control of the press, Crack explains. The operator still pulls sheets to check the colour by measuring control strips in the time honoured fashion.

Koenig & Bauer is very much a partner to Alexir, not only for the press but also for two of the platens. The second of these, the iPress was needed in a hurry after an existing machine suffered an irreparable problem and had to be removed.

In the room next door, three Bobst glueing lines, one MasterFold and two ExpertFolds, complete the jobs. Crack has

switched from having people try to keep up with the folder gluers and loading boxes to a system using Emposa take off conveyors from iPack. These turn the units through 90° and make it comfortable to take off and load the boxes.

"We put them in to prevent RSI and it has worked. We have not had one case of RSI since installing them."

The place is filled with incoming board almost as if there is no space for any more raw material. "This will be processed by tomorrow," he says. That is possible because the factory hums with efficiency.

There is a sprinkling of the young blood that is recruited through the Alexir Academy from those that shine when working on a temporary basis. Crack points out those that are now running a carton line or who did not show the aptitude to run the press, but who are excelling in finishing.

When Crack first joined Alexir he was on the presses, moving upwards steadily until becoming operations director and in charge of the largest part of the business.



shareholder status after one year in the business and like those that work for John Lewis and Waitrose can receive a tax-free annual dividend of up to £3,600 as a result.

There has been little shop floor resistance to the transition which was completed in 2019 and accompanied by publications of what was an ambitious five-year plan for growth. “We reached it in 2023 in terms of both sales growth and profit,” Keable says. Sales have grown sharply to £50 million. “The first goal was to remain proudly independent, next to ensure customers would never have to go elsewhere for their packaging. We want to be the broadest, not the biggest.”

This does not mean the company is pausing for breath. “The strategy is to grow all the businesses we have.” Being the broadest means being able to source every aspect of a packaging need through Alexir.

The customer journey starts with Alexir Creative where designs are worked out, concepts and mock ups produced and presented to graphic designers. The concept can be brought to life with a 3D printed representation of the product within the carton. It is led by group marketing director Claire Summersby, a long time member of staff. Ruth Lusher heads Alexir Digital which handles short run production, perhaps for challenger brands, perhaps for rapid turnaround, perhaps for product launches or specials. Alexir Packaging runs two B1 presses for mainstream printing into three die cutters and three Bobst folder gluers to supply customer ready boxes. It is led by Andrew Crack who has worked his way up from press manager to running the litho operation.

For most businesses that would be the end of the journey, not for Alexir which next has Alexir Co-Packing to mix ingredients and fill the carton with whatever products are needed before delivery to a location that has been specified. “They give us the recipe, we buy and mix the ingredients and then fill the packaging.” Keable says.

There is also Alexir International to manage relationships with outside suppliers, perhaps overseas and including foil blocking for example and to source materials and other products that might be needed. An example might be a product where Alexir has created the carton, printed it and filled it and which needs a plastic spoon. Alexir International is there to find that spoon and take a headache away from the client. The newest business is Alexir Gifting which creates bespoke hampers, presentation packaging for bottles of wine and



The entire team of Alexir Digital can work all the equipment in the self contained unit under the direction of Ruth Lusher. Printed sheets awaiting their turn through the platens.

other corporate presents. Its busy period is logically in the run up to Christmas.

The offering includes a strong sustainability message which plays well with brands and retailers keen to be replacing plastic with recyclable fibre and organic materials. Design is about sustainability, another area where Alexir Creative is able to help with advice to customers. “We are very very focused on producing sustainable packaging,” he says. “It’s so important for the supermarkets. We walk the walk as well as talking the talk. They are keen to invest in carton board options rather than plastic.”

The Government’s decision to judge sustainability by weight, which favours lighter weight plastics rather than more easily recycled cartonboard, is not welcome.

Each of the business units operates under independent management teams with specific goals and targets and with strong communication between them. The obvious

connection is between Packaging and Digital where jobs can move in either direction, longer runs from digital heading to the litho presses and jobs needing almost instant turnaround being supplied from Digital. The knowledge flow is perhaps more important. Alexir Creative is uniquely placed to understand the requirements of a carton when it reaches the packing step and can specify the structural design and material to account for this. Potential issues later in the process are identified before they become problems.

The collection of services also means that Alexir can give a client a single per-unit price covering all the processes on the journey rather than a collection of invoices that tend to obscure the true costs rather than illuminate.

On paper this would be highly attractive to the smaller customers and less so to the bigger brands where there are procurement teams able to manage the separate processes. “Not so,” says Keable. “The smaller brands are run by individuals who obsess over the details while the larger brands are so hard pressed they don’t have the time to examine every detail. We came up with the right answer, but perhaps for the wrong reasons.”

DIGITAL DELIVERY FINDS ITS PLACE

IT'S A COMPUTER THAT HAPPENS TO PRINT SAYS RUTH LUSHER, BUT ALEXIR DIGITAL IS FAR MORE THAN THAT.

Alexir was one of the first UK carton printers to install a digital press. And as the majority of the dozen or so competitors that followed suite have now given up, it is one of the few that continues with the technology.

It has not been plain sailing, the company, like others, considered digital to be the same as litho but for short runs, or else that they would be producing highly personalised printed cartons. That market did not in reality exist Alexir lost money. Until it changed the approach and now Alexir Digital is thriving. "We lost a lot of

blankets that are needed by the Rapida and Lithrone presses and has been used to produce mock ups for Alexir Creative before it gained its own Zund cutting table.

The first press was an iGen3. It is now an iGen5, one of the last to be made. "It was a natural progression for us to stay with the iGen and to stay with toner for our customers," says Ruth Lusher who heads Alexir Digital.

Those customers are the reason for the turnaround in fortunes. They are generally small businesses that have grown in many cases to the kinds of orders that are

handled by mainstream litho printing. "They have grown as businesses and we have had a part to play in that," says Lusher.

The unit remains small with each partner able to operate any of the equipment and produce any of the cartons required. The Tresu enables flood varnishes, with a water based or UV gloss varnish as standard and a soft touch varnish joining the menu.

The Kama is simply for die cutting, any foiling is sent out and with the small format and shorter runs, there is no need for

automated blanking. The Boomerang can deliver both crash lock and straight line cartons. It can run a double glue line to enable the set up to cope with whatever is thrown at it. "We really do not have a standard product type," says Lusher. Nor is there a standard customer.

There are existing customers of the business wanting to produce limited edition versions of their packaging. Others are new companies with a great idea and a need to buy cartons in small quantities until they become established. Many are

new to print altogether and are invited in to get a better idea of the process involved as well as the investment that Alexir has made. The digital division therefore sits behind glass and has a comfortable seating area to make them welcome when they do.

These visitors are not the only ones who have no experience of print. Neither did Lusher. She had joined Alexir in a sales role, became part of the training scheme and was put in charge of the Digital operation in 2020. "I love problem solving," she says.

And there were plenty to solve. Among the first steps was analysing the spreadsheets on the business to see the costs, the margins and where money was being made or not.

"That was really important to do and I really enjoyed that, putting in the changes needed," she says. "And now I'm a packaging geek."

Alexir Digital gets its board from the same sources as the litho businesses albeit that the sheet format is somewhat smaller than the B1 sheets it buys by the tonne for litho printing. It tries to limit choice to three board types which works well for the customer base.

However, it is also willing to push the boundaries. It is currently looking at printing on uncoated boards for a tea business that wants an organic look and feel she explains.

Inevitably there is some crossover between Digital and Packaging with work going one way or the other depending on loadings, or as sometimes happens production needs to happen overnight or in a very tight window that litho cannot manage. "We help each other out," says Andrew Crack, head of Alexir Packaging.

Where this happens, the colour for a job is approved on the digital press which only has four-colour process. "It is easier to match litho to digital than the other way around," she says.



money to start with," says Jeremy Keable. "We needed to find a market for it and since we have done that, the business has grown year over year."

It is housed on the floor above the main. Factory with a Xerox iGen5 in line to a Tresu coater with a Kama ProCut die cutter and Signature Boomerang folder gluer as the production tools. A Kongsberg XN cutting table adds to the set up to handle the shortest runs where it is not cost effective to have the necessary dies built. It is also used to cut the coating

The EOT status is proving to be the right answer for the business. There are examples of other print businesses that became trusts, but not necessarily for the right reasons. If the company cannot find a trade buyer, the transition allows founders to extract funds but might leave a business under invested and without the necessary resources to reinvest. This does not apply to Alexir, but as Keable was warned, complacency is not the right approach. “He told me you have to beat staff over the head constantly with the message and then the culture will eventually change,” Keable says.

It is and seems to be working. The new status is encouraging the business to come together both during working hours and also socially.

There is an EOT day to celebrate employee ownership where staff from the different sites, from office and shop floor, come together and not just inside the business. As part of a commitment to community engagement there is support for the St Piers residential school for children with epilepsy and similar conditions in Lingfield, located midway between Uckfield and Edenbridge where four teams from the company maintain the garden and grounds in turn.

It is greatly appreciated by the charity and very well supported by Alexir’s people. “We are trying to be more than a P+L business,” says Keable.

It works. Even the Christmas party which had been suffering over the years is now a sought after ticket and has become an over subscribed event. People from different parts of the company will greet each other in passing. It spills over into other interactions.

Lusher says: “The social activities are bringing people together and bridging the gap between office and shop floor and building relationships.”

Keable adds: “When we had a BRC audit recently, the comment that came back from the auditor was that they had been made welcome across the business, people asking if they needed help. They reported that ‘everyone is charming and delighted to meet you. We have never seen anything like it’. We must be doing something right.”

The attitudes apply to customer relationships which in many cases extend back through the years. It means that Alexir can work on new products and materials knowing that being able to work with a plant based lidding film or working to replace a plastic tray with a fibre based tray will be welcome.

With suppliers the approach is also working. Its production equipment is geared towards



The team at the top: Claire Summersby leads Alexir Creative; Andrew Crack at Packaging; Ruth Lusher at Digital; and MD Jeremy Keable.

Koenig & Bauer. The Rapida was the most sophisticated press of its type in the world when first installed. As well as eight printing units there are two coating units which open up creative effects using varnishes and coatings. It has more than lived up to expectations.

Demand for such effects at the time was low, but Keable points out that the press will need to last 10-15 years. “We have to think what we will need in the future,” he says.

The partnership has extended into finishing where the company has the first CutProQ platen in the UK and more recently installed an iPress106 platen. “They are like a Ferrari and a Ford,” he says, comparing the two platens. The Ferrari platen comes with full logistics to load and unload pallets of work, to strip and unload carton blanks without stopping the machine.

Alexir was one of several carton printers moving into digital printing, following forecasts that the technology was up to the mark and that there was a market ready to be exploited. Claire Summersby was very much involved in the initial project. She says: “We knew there were a dozen or so of our competitors investing in it. Most have since stopped. I think that at that time the industry made a mistake of trying to turn digital into litho-lite. That’s not what digital is for, but for two to three years that what we tried to do – and lost money doing it.

“It is easy to keep going with something that wasn’t working hoping things would change. We decided to stop and do something different.

We had to find the markets for digital. There are lots of really interesting small niches.”

That realignment has been led by Lusher. “It’s for faster turnarounds, for start ups and others,” Lusher says. “The volumes have been built up well in the last couple of years.”

Digital is now growing at around 20% a year and is involved in some really interesting products, many start ups that become litho products as they become successful. It applies in the reverse direction. Summersby says that Alexir was frequently approached at exhibitions and asked whether the company could produce fewer than 10,000 units. “Until there was digital, we had to turn them away. From a marketing point of view we had a gap.”

There is a whole swathe of products that suit digital printing. These span the range from cartons for health and supplements, vapes and e-liquids where digital can cope with the multiplicity of skus and combination of numbers, to luxury candles and artisan products.

Alexir Digital has a collection of carton type samples to show prospects and those it meets at exhibitions what is possible with digital printing. It did something similar when the Koenig & Bauer was first installed says Summersby. “We used the press to print all kinds of swatches of different inks and varnishes over two days giving us some amazing samples which we can go out and show what can be done,” she says. It was not a cheap

THE BRIEF THAT DELIVERED

The rebrand of Alexir is strikingly different to any other carton printer. And that was the plan.

The decision to change the visual identity of the business was a natural culmination of the transition to an Employee Ownership Trust, the formation of the Alexir Academy and the growth of the business into the future. It was a way of showing the world that things have changed.

"The old brand simply was not representing the business as it is today," says Jeremy Keable. "We are more than a carton company that does other things. And we were not projecting that well into the market."

Alexir called on the services of a marketing agency as well as a design agency. "Their brief was to frighten me," he says. "I needed to feel slightly uncomfortable about it. But I'm not the audience."

The design company compared Alexir to its competitors and says Claire Summersby, "they were shocked at what they saw". No company in the sector had a strong visual identity. Alexir was going to stand out whatever it did.

The marketing agency was chosen after a beauty parade to find the best for the job. That too was tough on the business as the team carried out in-depth

research, interviewing customers asking them what they really thought of Alexir and why they did business with the company. "They asked some hard questions and got to some fundamental truths," she adds.

Ruth Lusher joins in: "The feedback made us sit up. We were a well kept secret. We needed to tell people about us."

The design fulfils the brief and more so. The almost pop art feel of the 3D lettering literally stands out, shouting about the company, in primal colours.



The Alexir name is repeated across all activities using the same in your face bright colours statements.

The messaging is geared towards the end user, not the managing director. If he still shifts a little in his chair it is because nothing like this has been done before, not because it is ineffective. He need not worry as Lusher reports: "The feedback has been excellent."

exercise. "People are generally not prepared to take the press down for a couple of days."

"In digital," says Lusher. "We have the ability to talk to customers to understand what they might want. They can come in with ideas and ask us for ideas. We can come up with concepts and with the cutting table turn them into CAD design."

Lusher is already preparing to take on responsibility for Alexir International as a beneficiary of the company's internal development programme, the Alexir Academy. This is a response to recruitment issues for both shop floor and management level recruits.

Edenbridge is not a hot spot for the printing industry with skilled staff able to move between employers. The town's print history includes commercial printer Cripplegate and later St Ives Westerham. Both are long gone. It means that there is no local pool of print talent or experience of print. Keable recognises the problem. "Print is a very old industry and set in its ways and it is difficult to attract younger people."

"This is why we started the Alexir Academy. We can get youngsters to come in as temporary workers and then can invite those that show an aptitude to join the Academy. There are ten on the two-year training course with three expected to become full time workers."

"As such the average age of our cutting and creasing operators has dropped from 60 to 35 years old. And the younger people that have joined are really good. And are IT proficient which the existing operators could struggle with."

"We recognised that we had to do something different and employ some lateral thinking."

The thinking applies too to management positions where the problem is slightly different. "We can attract young people with management training, but we can't keep them and as the average age of the management team is 55 we have had to do something." That has been an unusual set up, creating a two way contract – you stay with us and we will look after you – arrangement.

"We identify the people with skill sets, the drive and ambition and make a deal. They get professional training, the chance to take charge of a project to help the business and those on the programme are on an escalator. We tell them if you commit to us, we will commit to you. It's up to you how fast you climb up to senior management, but we will never appoint someone above you. It has worked really well," he says.

Ruth Lusher has been a beneficiary as has Jacob Cook who is head of Alexir Gifting. Her position at Digital is being back filled and says that taking on Alexir International is "a big step up". "It's my commitment to them," says Keable. "We haven't lost anyone since starting this. We used to train people for a few years before they were off. That doesn't happen now and as a result we have a great group of thirty somethings."

A new five-year plan is now in place and is no less ambitious than the first. That could include further Alexir businesses. The business has recruited a further sales lead

from a background in flexible packaging. It provides a list of contacts that Alexir has not had and a way of thinking that is slightly different. "Expansion into flexibles is definitely something we have looked at," he says. He has also considered labels, but has not been convinced the opportunity exists. There will be investment in machinery particularly where a has a need and can commit to the business. "We always try to create a partnership over a couple of years," says Summersby, meaning that the risk is underwritten by a long term contract.

"We will find other partners where it's not worth investing ourselves through Alexir International," says Keable.

One area that will not be shirked is its own security. The business suffered a hacking attack in 2018, forcing the company to switch off its IT and dust down paper job sheets and ways of working. "We were hit at 7am and by midday had the paper based system in operation. That was a caused by someone working from home," he says.

The guard rails have been raised and they work. There was a further attempted attack a few years later using the telephone systems, but was successfully repelled. "It did no damage at all. Our defences worked," he says.

He though prefers to be on the front foot, leading Alexir to take full advantage of its status as the only independent business able to provide every service a customer might need to get their product to market. And to do so with a business that walks beside the customer in real partnership. ★