Company Profile: **Uflex Ltd**
Written by GEMMA KENT

FRESHNESS PRESERVED

Since its inception in 1985, Uflex Ltd has grown from strength to strength to become a billion-dollar business and India's largest multinational flexible packaging materials and solutions company. Mr Ashwani Sharma, President and CEO of New Business Initiatives at Uflex, speaks to Food & Beverage Networker about the company's foray into aseptic liquid packaging – a sector that holds enormous potential for the future growth and development of this dynamic player.

Flexible packaging is gaining ground in the field of primary packaging. This substantial growth is the result of rapid advancements in material science, allowing manufacturers to create flexible packaging that caters to the food and beverage industry better than ever before. Indeed, the latest market trends indicate particularly evident growth in aseptic packaging worldwide, especially in the emerging markets of Asia-Pacific and South America. Furthermore, food safety concerns, the rise in demand for convenience products and ready-to-eat foods, and the need for extended shelf life are the driving factors behind this upsurge in demand.

Cognisant of this potential – and incentivised by the government's 'Make in India' campaign – India's largest multinational flexible packaging material solution company Uflex Ltd recently invested INR 5.8 billion (US$89.2 million) in a state-of-the-art aseptic liquid packaging plant, which it commissioned last year in Gujarat under the brand name Asepto, derived from the word 'aseptic', meaning 'sterile'. With that new facility, Uflex has achieved a 360-degree approach ↘

Mr Ashwani Sharma, President & CEO of New Business Initiatives at Uflex

to servicing the global flexible packaging market, enhancing its product portfolio to encompass end-to-end flexible packaging solutions for solids, semi-solids, powders, granular material, non-aerated liquids, pastes, gels, and viscous fluids.

The growth story

Uflex was originally established in 1985 when Mr Ashok Chaturvedi embarked on a journey to redefine the contours of the flexible packaging industry in India – one that would see single-use pouches for mouth fresheners, shampoo, candies, and tomato ketchup launched in the country for the first time. A new plant for packaging products was set up in Noida in 1989, and in 1994 the company installed its first biaxially-oriented polyethylene terephthalate (BOPET) film line.

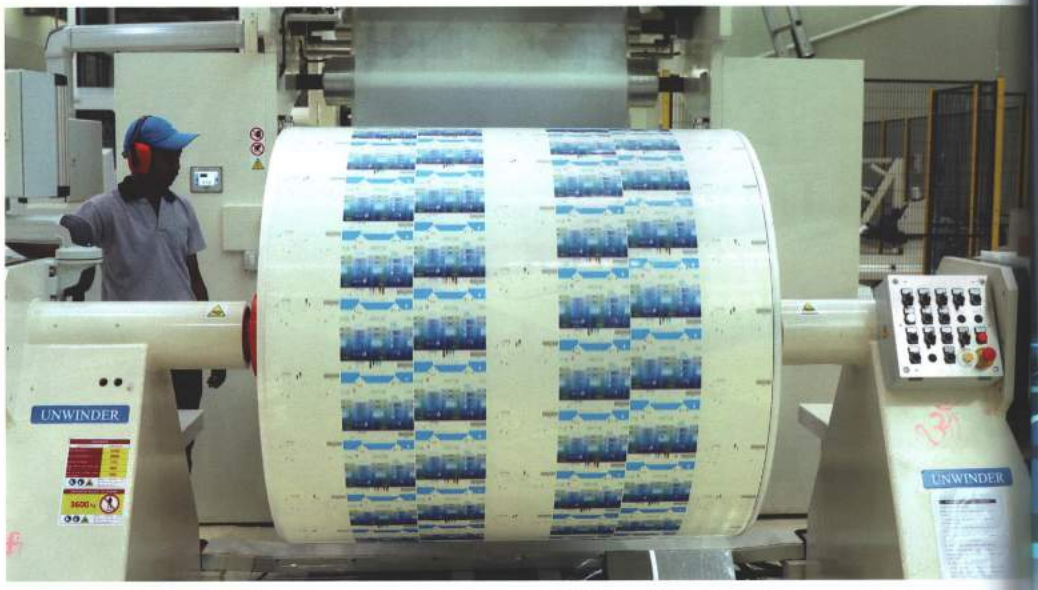
Several new lines have been added to the Noida plant over the years, including a further two BOPET film lines, two biaxially-oriented polypropylene (BOPP) film lines, two metallizers, and a cast polypropylene (CPP) packaging film line. In 1998, Uflex set up a plant for manufacturing PET chips in Malanpur.

"2005 was the beginning of a new type of expansion for the company," recalls Mr Sharma, "as we set up a plant in Dubai for manufacturing polymeric films. It was our first overseas facility followed by similar plants in Mexico, Egypt, Poland, and Kentucky in the US. In 2007, we added another plant in Jammu, India, for new packaging and holography, and in 2008 we began manufacturing woven polypropylene (WPP) bags."

With humble beginnings, Uflex has now grown to become India's largest multinational flexible packaging materials and solutions company, achieving consolidated revenue of around US$1 billion in 2016-17 – 75 per cent of which was derived from the food and beverage sector.

Competitive edge

Today, Uflex is a fully integrated, end-to-end flexible packaging solutions provider with nearly 10,000 employees, longstanding business relationships with multinational brands, and a formidable market presence in over 140 countries worldwide. The company offers technologically superior packaging for a vast array of products ranging from snack foods, dairy products, confectionery, sugar, vegetable oil, meat and seafood, rice and other cereals to beverages, soaps and detergents, beauty products, pharmaceuticals, pet foods, and automotive and engineering components. "Our international clients include P&G, PepsiCo, Tata Global, Mondelez, L'Oréal, Kimberly Clark, ↘



Ferrero Rocher, GSK, Nestlé, Agrotech Foods, Coca-Cola, Wrigley and Johnson & Johnson," adds Mr Sharma. "We have been proactively catering to a huge variety of food brands for more than 30 years – and with the new aseptic packaging plant, those relationships will only get stronger, as our existing clients consider procuring packaging solutions for their non-aerated liquid products from Uflex, too. Therefore this is an extension of our existing relationship."

The company's six strategic business units certainly provide a competitive edge. The Polymeric Packaging Films business includes BoPP, BoPET, CPP, metallized films, and other specialised films, whereas the Flexible Packaging business produces flexible packaging laminates in roll form along with prefabricated pouches, laminated flexi-tubes, big bags, and aseptic liquid packaging material. "We also have an Engineering business unit," he asserts, "wherein we produce a wide range of packing and flexible packaging converting machines; a Cylinders business for the production of rotogravure printing cylinders, flexo polymer plates, elastomers and sleeves; a Holography unit for producing anti-counterfeiting and brand protection solutions to help prevent counterfeiting that erodes the hard-earned brand equity of our clients; and last but not the least a Chemicals business, which produces inks, adhesives, coatings and polyols used in the printing and lamination processes."

Aesthetic rejuvenation of aseptic liquid packaging

The first of its kind in India, Asepto is the aseptic liquid packaging brand from the House of Uflex, and the latest example of the company's commitment to innovation backed by research and planning. "Our visionary thinking before conceiving the project was to study trends in the aseptic packaging market in order to assess whether it would be beneficial to acquire an aseptic packaging company outside India," explains Mr Sharma. "Interestingly, we discovered there has been virtually no development over the past 30 years on the aesthetic side of the liquid packaging, particularly pertaining to brick cartons. The only variation we found was in pack size and shape," he emphasises.

"Packaging for products such as perfume or alcohol, on the other hand, tends to utilise advanced effects such as embossing, foil stamping, and holography, which further enhances the visual appeal of the product to create an impeccable shelf impact," he reflects. "We believe that aesthetic rejuvenation can also be applied to brick packs where the product packaging becomes a prime mover at the point of purchase. By drawing on our in-house holographic prowess we were able to introduce mesmerising, never-seen-before effects on aseptic brick packs that enhance their aesthetic appeal and have a major impact at the point of sale – this is basically how the Asepto brand was born." ↘

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Asepto is a six-layered packaging material comprising paperboard, aluminium and polyethylene, and is designed to deliver user convenience, ease of opening and optimal shelf-life for goods such as milk, juices, dairy products and distilled beverages. With its promise of 'Freshness Preserved', Asepto ensures that food remains free from bacteria and other harmful micro-organisms for a longer period of time at room temperature, without any need for refrigeration or cold chain like reefers in the supply chain. "Preserve, Protect and Promote – these are the 'three Ps' of packaging and Asepto covers all three," affirms Mr Sharma. "Our product portfolio offers Asepto carton sizes from portions to family, trio, and pillow packs, which are equally in high demand globally.

"Moreover, as a result of our extensive research into innovations and solutions designed to help our customers' businesses excel, we have added two ranges to the new brand: the Asepto Spark, which also received the 'Flexible Packaging Technology Innovation Leadership Award' as part of Frost & Sullivan's 2017 India Best Practices Awards, and Asepto Premium."

Asepto Spark offers a unique range of holographic and metallic packs, providing Uflex's customers with endless opportunities in terms of modifying their existing designs or creating a new brand proposition for their existing line of products. "This helps in enhancing the aesthetic and functional elements of the aseptic carton packs, giving them a distinct identity at the point of sale (POS)," he adds.

In the Asepto Premium range, the metallic look achieved through flexo printing technology is further accentuated by foil stamping, embossing, multi-lens, holography and other effects, making the packs absolutely unique. "These are some of the very many features providing a much-needed facelift to aseptic packs that has been lacking for all these years," he remarks. "Indeed, the real innovation that separates Asepto from other beverage packaging manufacturers is its unique ability to offer smarter pack versions that promise to deliver high visibility value coupled with a strong attraction quotient."

Seamless experience: a total system supplier

The company's innovative new brand is complemented by Asepto Smart 78 aseptic filling line, engineered in-house by Uflex in order to provide customers a seamless, one-stop-shop experience. "That is the real advantage of dealing with a fully integrated flexible packaging materials and solutions company like Uflex," states Mr Sharma. "We are the only Indian OEM to have manufactured the path-breaking Asepto Smart 78 machine, which, with its delivery output of 7,800 packs per hour, performs much faster than the previous-generation aseptic filling machines. Additionally, its high level of automation and ability to integrate with other cutting-edge technologies allows for a smart approach to operational efficiency. Therefore, beverage manufacturers from across the world can rest assured that the machine has a much lower operational cost as well as a lower total cost of ownership (TCO) as a result."

The new plant is strategically located in the industrial hub of Sanand, close to Mundra Port, which is one of the fastest growing and recently expanded seaports in South East Asia. The Sanand Plant for manufacturing aseptic liquid packaging material is spread over 21 acres on a 72-acre parcel of land. "Over the next two to three years, we plan to invest a total of INR 15 billion (US$230.7 million) in the plant in a phased manner – including the INR 5.8 billion (US$89.2 million) already spent on setting up the plant," he explains. "The balance will be spent on modernising our manufacturing systems, processes, and on R&D to manufacture even better flexible packaging solutions using the most contemporary technology and some of the sharpest brains of the industry by our side. Eventually, the facility will provide direct employment for around 2,000 people."

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With the brand name Asepto, Uflex has ambitious plans to tap into the Indian market where the aseptic liquid packaging sector is currently growing at an impressive 17–18 per cent per annum, and the overall demand is expected to double in size in the next five years to around 20 billion packs. "Our capacity to manufacture seven billion packs per annum covers around 90 per cent of the domestic market at present," Mr Sharma tells us, "while there is a bright scope for Asepto to expand globally as well. In the next three to four years, we forecast additional revenue of around INR 12 billion (US$184.6 million) coming from the sales of aseptic liquid packaging material, and around INR 3 billion (US$46.1 million) from the sales of aseptic filling machines."

The best of the best

Backed by a rich industrial experience in flexible packaging, Uflex uses best-in-class raw materials from reputed manufacturers and suppliers who are recognised for their quality and performance. High-specification paperboard sourced from industry-leading European suppliers is the main material for aseptic packaging and forms 70 per cent of the final product, as Mr Sharma elaborates: "While we use water-based ink, the polymers used in structuring our six-layer packaging are procured from Dow and are known for their excellent resistance. Our large printing machines are from the world-renowned German brand Gallus and include a high-speed printing machine with 100-per-cent defect inspection, which can detect even the smallest of defects at its peak speed," he outlines.

"Our fully automated Davis-Standard lamination machine, equipped with high-tech accessories for manufacturing superior-quality aseptic packaging material, comes fitted with an inline defect detection system from ISRA Vision AG to check both the sides of the laminate," he continues. "Then our slitting machine is from IMS, Italy, and is able to produce maximum variants of packaging formats with exceptional slitting accuracy. We also have a packaging machine from US-based Signode with a handling capacity of 120 reels per hour, automatic palletising, and a robotic procedure that prevents human intervention, thereby protecting the product and keeping it bacteria-free," confirms Mr Sharma.

The highly sophisticated nature of the machinery, materials and technology utilised by Uflex also plays a key role in the company's environmental policy. It places particular emphasis on product and process innovation to reduce toxicity, foster recycling of materials and minimise emissions. "As a responsible business unit, we accord a very high value to environmental sustainability and ensure that all our business operations live up to the ethos of protecting and conserving the environment," emphasises Mr Sharma. "The new liquid packaging plant is equipped for reducing waste and reusing water, and therefore has zero liquid discharge, while our green building design minimises the need for air conditioning and an advanced LED lighting system further reduces energy consumption. Energy loss during transmission has been considered a major issue, but our transformers are ranked among the best across the industry for efficiency, reducing no-load losses as per the guidelines of IS 1180."

Together with official Indian standards, Uflex is certified in accordance with the international ISO 9001:2015, ISO 14001:2015, ISO 22000:2005 and OHSAS 18001:2007 management systems, as well as the BRC Global Standard for Packaging and Packaging Materials. "We are also about to obtain further accreditations that are very important for aseptic packaging – namely, FSC and SEDEX," he informs us. "Quality checks are clearly an integral aspect of our operations and are conducted at various stages of the manufacturing process. All raw materials to be used in production go through rigorous tests for certifying their identity and quality; checks are also performed during manufacturing for ensuring consistency and quality. Finally, each finished product is tested to check that it meets all regulatory requirements. Our new quality control laboratory is fully equipped to handle such tasks, while timely audits ensure that we deliver the most safe and hygienic aseptic packaging solution."

Tapping into a global market

Reflecting on the differentiating factors that have contributed to the growth and success of Uflex over more than three decades, Mr Sharma highlights the company's fully backward-integrated setup and robust sales and distribution network, which enables it to fulfil any order and ensure just-in-time delivery to its client-base spread over 140 countries. "At Uflex, we pride ourselves on our ability to efficiently commission projects in the shortest time and with the lowest capital cost," he comments. "Our world-class manufacturing facilities are based in strategic locations around the world that forever keep us close to our customers, and they are staffed by highly technically competent teams featuring some of the sharpest minds in the field of flexible packaging. In FY 2016-17, 51 per cent of our group's revenue came from Indian operations, while 49 per cent came from overseas operations."

In addition, Uflex maintains an unwavering focus on innovation to create value-added differentiation. "Our R&D team is structured in a way that brings together a rich integration of functional experience for various facets of flexible packaging, further allowing us to strengthen our position in the market – Sanand Plant, our latest venture in the field of aseptic liquid packaging material manufacturing, offers a perfect example of such innovation in action," observes Mr Sharma. "Retail shelves the world over are inundated with mundane aseptic liquid packs. There is a great sense of global deprivation on the aesthetical side in terms of such packaging. However, through in-house innovation and making the most of our holographic and engineering capabilities, we have been able to introduce aseptic packaging that not only looks unique but is also impossible to copy. The cost of setting up an aseptic liquid packaging plant with unique machinery like we have commissioned is steep enough to work as an entry barrier for the counterfeiters. Indeed, marketers of non-aerated liquid products from across the world can rest assured they will receive an absolutely bespoke, one-of-its-kind brand experience with Asepto."

The company's newly expanded range of flexible packaging solutions certainly puts Asepto in good stead to supply a growing market and tackling associated challenges. Moreover, the firm is particularly geared towards meeting the demand of 'millennials' – a substantial and vitally important demographic segment for any company in the FMCG segment. "Asepto offers longer shelf life and ease of handling for on-the-go foods throughout the supply chain," the interviewee assures us. "The aesthetic uniqueness of our packaging drives impulse buying at POS, giving strong impetus to the rank and profile of the brand."

Mr Sharma is understandably optimistic about the company's future, which will see Asepto showcasing its new packaging at various exhibitions and events. "Our debut participation at Gulfood Manufacturing in 2017 in Dubai witnessed our official launch of the Asepto Spark and Premium to a global audience," he adds. "The response was overwhelming and our innovation was highly appreciated by visitors from 28 countries, half of whom were from the Middle East, with 30 per cent from Africa and the rest from Asia. This year, we have already participated in Anuga Foodtec in Cologne, Germany – and later this year we shall be exhibiting at Propak in China and Pack Expo in the US, which will further impart a wider geographical perspective and reach to Asepto," Mr Sharma concludes. □