

Bags of Choice

Packaging is becoming ever more complex as government, consumers and retailers all clamour for environmentally friendly products. David Abbott looks into packaging.



PHIL FURNESS OF IBONHART

Once upon a time life for bakers was much simpler than it is now and packaging was just a matter of slicing a loaf and feeding it into a paper or for the really modern, a polythene bag. Now though the amount of technological change in this part of the bakery industry is staggering, as the industry reaps the benefits of research in materials science and even from defence and security research. At the same time, demands from government, consumers and retailers are increasing. All of this is putting pressure on bakers to think not just about the product, but how they pack it.

The picture that emerges of this part of the industry is one of a large number of locally based packaging and machinery suppliers, concentrating on production for national markets. But at the same time there are a few companies which stand

out from this general picture who are managing to spread their market beyond national borders.

Netherlands based Jangerius Hanco are just one example. They are now working hard to supply baggers and band slicers to new markets in China and Eastern Europe as the European market becomes more competitive. As Richard Van Der Meer, Sales Executive, said, "Let me put it this way – it's quiet. It's a really difficult market you know, more than it was year ago. It's getting more competitive and there are a lot of local suppliers."

NEED FOR SPEED

In Van Der Meer's view, bakeries want the usual requirements; faster and faster machinery; the highest quality and speed and the lowest costs. So no surprises there! Safety though is an area where



ONE OF IBONHART'S IBO BAGGING RANGE

PACKAGING >>>

technology – originally developed for the security industry – has been put to good use in packaging. Loma-Cintex now provide scanners and metal detectors which help to identify contaminants in produce and can also ensure that bread is the right weight and shape, and indulgence products can be checked to ensure that they have the correct amount of filling.

Johnson says that Loma-Cintex is one of around 15 reasonably sized global market leaders. Loma-Cintex does over half its business with Europe, selling directly to Germany, France, Benelux, Poland and the Czech Republic, and has supplied equipment to firms such as Culi d'Or and Quality Bakers (Eindhoven) in the Netherlands. In time, Johnson thinks, the accession countries will be in the market for this sort of equipment. For now though, they will probably have to focus on the basics, such as satisfying the requirements of food safety legislation.

IT'S A WRAP

Packaging machinery though is just one half of the equation. Once bread has been sliced it has to be wrapped in a film of some sort and there is constant

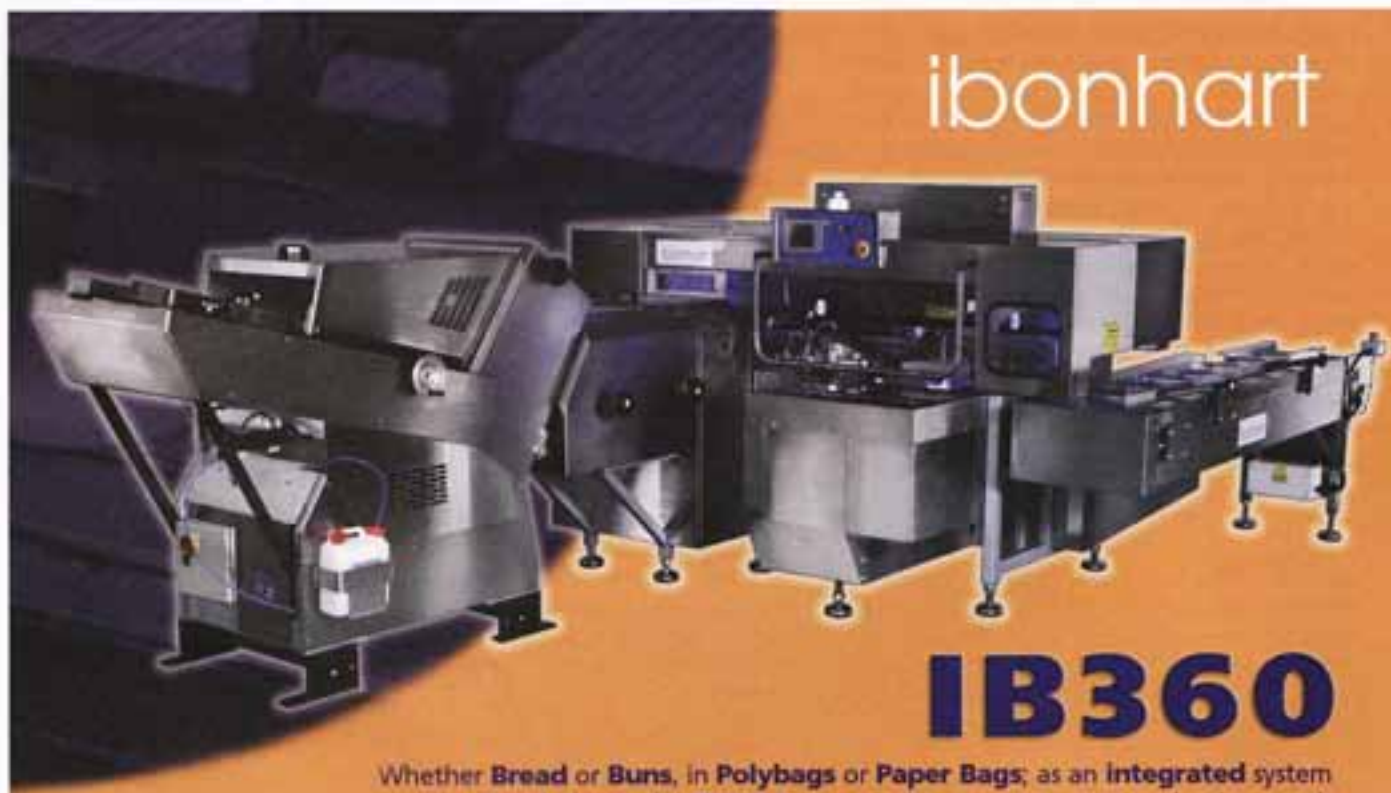
change in this area as the materials scientists develop ever more new products for packaging.

That's perhaps partly because bakers are asking for a lot from packaging. Bread has to be packed quickly and efficiently, and packaging must not only do its' key job of keeping produce fresh, but now, more than ever, producers are aware of their environmental responsibilities. This means that much more thought has to be given to how much packaging is used as well as to finding the best materials to make the packaging with. The pressure is on to reduce oil based products and to find more environmentally friendly materials.

As Merijn Bos, Product Manager at Oerlemans, says, this means that it's vital for packaging producers to put a lot of resource into R and D. Oerlemans uses its R and D facilities to produce its own materials as well as producing tailor-made items for particular needs. Oerlemans, working with Dutch bakers such as Bake 5 and Bakkersland, have coped with the big demand for environmentally friendly packaging by developing products using PLA (polylactic acid, which is biodegradable).

According to Mike Hill, European Market Director Bakery for Amcor, bakery packagers are under

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A HALF-LOAF BAGGING OPERATION

there is new and increasing concern and here Hanco have profited by developing tamper proof devices.

But according to Van Der Meer, there is simply less money available for investment in packaging at present. This is especially true for medium sized bakeries, where the turnover is insufficient and the investment budget is low. This presents an added challenge though, says Van Der Meer, because current production techniques, involving the generous use of improvers and glutens, makes the bread softer, more sugary, and therefore harder to slice.

The extent to which packaging machinery suppliers have to tailor equipment to particular market needs is well illustrated by the experience of Ibonhart, a British firm based in Norwich.

IN THE BAG

Ibonhart's Technical Director, Phillip Furness, is in agreement with Richard Van Der Meer's assessment of the market for packaging machinery. He believes that investment on packaging does not come high up on the list of priorities for many bakeries and over recent years, much of Ibonhart's new production has come from European, rather than British markets.

Ibonhart have recently completed a £1m order for 10 bagging machines for a group of bakeries near Moscow and now have a new order from expanding Finnish bakery group Fazer.

Producing machinery for the Russians has provided quite a few technical challenges for the

team at Ibonhart. The difficulties in slicing heavy Russian rye bread, led Ibonhart to develop a special lubricating system on the reciprocating slicers which they supplied the Russians with. The Russian order also involved making a bagging machine that could use either paper or polythene bags. Furness says that its this willingness to be flexible which has helped Ibonhart compete with other, perhaps more well known names, such as Hartmann's, who made a rival bid for the Russian contract which Ibonhart won. "We can adapt to suit particular requirements for the customer," said Furness.

But slicing and getting bread into the bag is only a part of the art of packaging. Alan Johnson, Group Product Marketing Manager, at Loma-Cintex (Spectrum Inspection Systems Ltd), points out that applied scanning

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pressure from all quarters to produce a more environmentally friendly product. There is pressure from government – in the UK particularly, to reduce packaging in order to reduce the amount of landfill waste. Then there is also pressure from retailers who want to be seen to be striving to be environmentally aware. Finally the bakeries themselves want to be responsive to retailers concerns in addition to the particular packaging requirements for their own products.

That sounds like a lot of pressure, but Hill is upbeat: "We have to deal with it, because we're trying to lead."

In Amcor's case they are meeting the pressures by investing heavily in R and D, and this, says Hill, provides access to a tremendous amount of information.

"We have developed a detailed and in-depth information bank and we are now being seen as a benchmark for ideas and innovation in this area," said Hill.

STAYING AHEAD

This quest to keep ahead of the competition has seen Amcor produce innovative products such as stay fresh and re-sealable packaging and developing materials which are biodegradable or recyclable.

At present though, Hill says the most successful products are those that focus on packaging minimisation. He admits this is partly because it is relatively easy to do. Here Amcor have developed packaging products which use Novamont's biodegradable and compostable Mater-bi or degradable materials from Symphony. But Amcor tries to use these generic products innovatively, as well as working to develop their own solutions.

The upshot is that Amcor finds itself in a lead position in terms of environmental film solution, and has a wide range of film products: "We are in a predominant UK position and we're now growing into a European position," said Hill.

He believes that in a highly competitive and changing market, Amcor can offer a

compelling high-value offering: "We've got a dedicated business to serve and we are trying to offer all bakeries something that's a bit more cutting edge."

If it seems from all of this, that it is possible to invest a lot of time and money in getting the best



AN IBONHART BAGGING SET UP

packaging equipment, it is of course, also possible to ignore it and to make do, and to put resources instead into the product. That must be very tempting, but that would be a false economy according to Philip Furness of Ibonhart. Electrically and mechanically, packaging machinery can be made to work for over 10 years. But it's inevitable that they will wear out and that better machines will become available.

For Furness, it's clear that taking short cuts will cost you one way or the other: "You've got to consider what you are going to do after ten years. If you change, it will keep efficiency up and with the price of flour now, you don't want to waste any."

So it's for bakers to pay their money and take their choice: but then, who ever said business was easy? ■

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