

ALMAC GROUP

Almac Group boosts blister capabilities

Romaco Noack's 623 blister packaging unit has given contract pharmaceutical company Almac Group a competitive edge in terms of format flexibility. *Lynda Searby* caught up with the firm to find out more

Who Almac Group

What Romaco Noack 623 blister packing machine

Why To give Almac greater flexibility to produce larger blister sizes and multi-unit blister formats

When October 2012

Challenge

In 2012, growing client demand for enhanced flexibility led Almac, a provider of contract services to the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, to look at expanding its suite of commercial packaging technologies with a new blister packaging machine.

One of Almac's key customers, a Japanese company, had come up with a blister design that included desiccant inserts per capsule cavity.

And this customer wasn't the only one moving towards more complicated product formats.

"Blister size and dosage formats are becoming increasingly complex. This is particularly true for the niche orphan drug products we process that are high value and low volume and require innovative blister design. Additionally, product handling for innovative new molecules often requires enhanced environmental controls," says Geoff Sloan, vice president manufacturing operations, Almac Pharmaceutical Services, at the Northern Ireland-based company.

For Almac, this trend demanded greater flexibility with regards to larger blister sizes and innovative multi-unit blister formats. It also necessitated non-permeability and enhanced environmental protection, particularly product humidity control, as packed under the wrong conditions, it was possible that some of these moisture-sensitive products might degrade over time.

Strategy

Romaco was the natural choice for the supply of this new machine, as the two companies have a relationship that goes back more than 20 years.

"We have a long established relationship with Romaco and have numerous Noack packaging units throughout Almac Group for both clinical and commercial packaging," says Sloan. "Having multiple units across the site provides scalable solutions to our clients as they progress through development to commercialisation."

He adds that from an operational and maintenance point of view, the



Romaco Noack 623 blister packing machine has provided flexibility for Almac Group

commonality of equipment facilitates deeper knowledge of Almac's in-house engineering team and enables the use of inter-changeable parts and spares.

Almac already had several Noack DPN 760 blister machines, which it uses for clinical trial products, where flexibility takes precedence over speed. It also had four Noack 623 machines on site. These platen sealing machines are Almac's

model of choice for commercial production. With a maximum speed of 70 cycles per minute, the Noack 623 is designed to produce up to 400 blisters per minute, depending on size. It is said to provide quick format changes through quick release tooling, easy operator access and the capacity to store and recall parameters and settings for each format.

The Noack 623 is also equipped with laser pocket detection – Romaco's so-called QuickAdjust system. This automatic station control system enables extremely short run-in times after product changes, thanks to servo controlled auto-adjustment at the sealing, perforation and die-cutting stations of the blister machine. It compensates variations of the foil advance which are caused by temperature ranges.

The flexibility of the Noack 623 convinced Almac it was the model that best met the requirements set out in the URS (user requirement specification) for this project.

"This highly flexible, cGMP compliant technology can be configured to process both thermoform and coldform materials, with maximum blister sizes of 220x155mm. With its automatic feeding system, filling inspection and ejection station and shorter set-up times, the line provides increased productivity, processing up to 5,000 blisters per hour, including multi-product blisters," says Sloan.

Implementation

A Noack 623 with modified outfeed was installed at Almac's MHRA/FDA approved UK commercial packaging

facility in Craigavon in October 2012.

"We increased the length of the outfeed belt to allow the installation of a printing unit," explains Horst Nieder, Almac key account manager at Romaco.

The newest Noack 623 is currently being used for a number of Almac's key commercial clients from Japan and North America for the blister packaging of orphan drugs and humidity sensitive drug products.

Results

"The Noack 623 has been a valued addition to the blister packaging technologies at our commercial facilities at Craigavon. It has allowed us to process alternative blister formats and sizes to what was available from our original blister technologies," says Sloan.

He adds: "With the installation of the Noack 623 we have been able to meet the increasing client demand for flexible commercial blister packaging solutions."

But Romaco's involvement hasn't ended with the installation of this latest model. Engineers will shortly be going in to carry out an electronic upgrade of some of its older Noack 623 machines, to bring the control systems up to date. This PLC and HMI upgrade will include the implementation of the QuickAdjust station control system.

"Like all of our customers, Almac expects to get many years of life out of our blister machines. This comes back to our philosophy of ensuring equipment doesn't become obsolete. Rather than having to invest in new machines, our customers only have to invest in retrofits and upgrades," says Nieder. ■

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