

BUCHER EMHART GLASS and Novaxion partner to create FlexRobot



The glass industry, like all manufacturing industries, is in the midst of a paradigm shift. Purely mechanical equipment is gradually becoming a thing of the past, and the spotlight is shifting to robotics

and automation for key tasks, sensors to monitor operations, and data science to analyze and improve performance.

In theory, a maker of industrial equipment could develop and build all this technology from

scratch. But to acquire all the necessary skills and then carry out all the development takes a great deal of resource – not to mention time. And in a fast-moving industry like consumer goods packaging, time is never on your side.

FlexRobot, Bucher Emhart Glass' solution for automatic swabbing of IS forming machines, was developed through a major strategic partnership with Novaxion. Glass Machinery Plants & Accessories takes a look at the origins and progress of the collaboration.

"Our ambition is to make glass more competitive with other packaging materials," said Martin Grönblad, Product Manager at Bucher Emhart Glass (BEG). "Both our customers and we can clearly see which technologies are state-of-the-art right now. So we focus our efforts on partnering with the companies who can provide them."

"We bring the technologies into our own ecosystem, and combine them with our own R&D expertise in automation. That's where we can add value."

FLEXROBOT

The most recent fruit of this approach is FlexRobot, BEG's automated system for swabbing blank molds and neck rings. Although the device is branded as a BEG solution, it was developed through a strategic partnership with French technology startup Novaxion.

The FlexRobot system is mounted on the blank side panel and swabs blank molds "on the fly," helping to increase output, reduce wear and tear, and prolong mold lifespan. It also saves material and cost by using less swab liquid than manual intervention. Consistent swabbing by FlexRobot helps to achieve outstanding process stability, reducing the incidence of certain defects and improving pack-to-melt ratios.

SEARCH FOR A PARTNER

The project began when BEG saw the potential of an automatic swabbing solution. "We wanted something that would improve the process, but also make the user's life easier by enhancing the safety and ergonomics of the machine," said Martin.

The search led to Novaxion, who offered the perfect mix of technical and commercial skill. "Our technical assessment concluded that spraying in closed blanks was and is the superior technology for lubricating blanks and neck rings – and the market agrees. On top of that, Novaxion's employees showed a real entrepreneurial spirit, and they shared our passion for great customer service, so the cultural fit was perfect. The collaboration between the Novaxion and BEG service organizations has always been excellent."

CONSTRUCTIVE COLLABORATION

The two firms signed an agreement in 2018, and the cooperation began in earnest in the following year. The partnership team included Martin





Grönblad, Inge Friberg, Leo Diehm and Christian Modula from BEG, and the founder of Novaxion: Christophe Duplan. Additionally, Jean-Baptiste Echevin and Mathieu Dumnesy were part of the team.

While the collaboration was always constructive and trusting, there were some challenges along the way. That's hardly surprising, given the sharp contrasts between the two firms: while BEG is an established multinational with over a century of experience behind it, Novaxion began life as a start-up, founded in order to develop

and market advanced swabbing technology. (The firm's slogan is "We swab smart.")

BUILDING TRUST

While the two firms shared a common goal, the partnership still took some effort. "What you have to understand is that for these three entrepreneurs, Novaxion was their life's work," Martin said. "Being courted by a giant like BEG may have been flattering, but it was probably intimidating too – and it's only natural to question what intentions might lie behind the approach."

Trust always takes time and effort, but the two firms have worked hard to build a strong relationship based on openness. "We had to get to know each other well, and we had to put the right structures in place too," said Frédéric Nio, Managing Director of Novaxion. "But the collaboration has been open-minded from the start. For us, the deal has brought us new customers, but it's also allowed us to grow on the technical side and the way we organize our business."

WINNING FORMULA

"We've defined our vision, we've agreed the strategy to achieve it and we apply that strategy in our daily operations," said Martin. "That's the winning formula that has allowed us to scale the business to a new level. We've enhanced the basic technology and the integration with BEG machines, reaching milestones like developing the first hanging robot."

With Novaxion's technical capabilities on board, BEG has been free to focus on refining the user experience. "The great advantage of FlexRobot is that customers can buy everything from a single source," Martin explained. "When they take delivery of their forming machine, the swabbing robot is already integrated and ready to go."

FlexRobot is available on all new IS forming machines from BEG. ■

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