

MACHINERY

Members of the R&D packaging solutions team include (from left to right) Dave Wescoat, Robert Schiavone, Rex Luctel and Corwyn Strout



At a time when companies are restructuring in order to survive, it is easy to overlook businesses that are undergoing change as part of their evolutionary process. One such business is R&D Tool & Engineering, which has now rebranded itself as R&D, Integrated Solutions in Plastics. The new image serves to highlight a portfolio of services that reach beyond the manufacturing of high quality blow moulding, injection-moulding and silicone moulding tooling. It has also created interlinked but separate environments at its Lee's Summit, US base to offer one-stop mould manufacturing and product design. Chief executive Rex Luctel says: "We have adopted this new integrated approach to create designs that are truer to the brand essence, and to enhance production."

Global marketing director Robert Schiavone puts this into perspective by comparing it with what others perceive to be his company's market position. "We are not just a tooling company, but a full service packaging solutions company. Re-branding is just part of diversifying our company's capabilities to adapt and thrive in an evolving industry by bringing solutions to both brand owners and converters."

The heart of the change is the creation of a new industrial design facility – Leverage, Integrated Industrial Design – that enables all of the elements within R&D to become involved in a project at an earlier stage and allows the company to offer itself as a full-service industrial design house.

Creative director of Leverage, Corwyn Strout, says: "Our industrial design component is in a separate encampment – and we have a markedly different approach than our

FULL HOUSE

Printz Holman visits a tooling company keeping its eyes down for a full design house in order to get the key to the door of brand owners and converters

counterparts in tooling design and manufacturing."

Services now include industrial design, consumer validation, consumer insight, retail audits, graphic branding and package prototyping.

"What we have done is to put the power of industrial design into our business and make it the logical first step to take in engineering product development. We deliver a unique approach that balances the brand equity and operational goals of a product, how it looks and how it is manufactured."

One of the many obstacles that R&D faced was that of explaining exactly what it did. Product design and industrial design are so closely linked that each relies on the other for the final success of a project. But the word 'design' is often misunderstood and presumed by most people to be something that relates to a purely artistic concept. However,

product design and industrial design encompass a much broader range of disciplines, and their combination by R&D into a fully integrated service made things even more difficult to explain. "That," says Schiavone, "is why we lean on the word 'leverage' to explain what we do."

"It is no secret that we do compete with full-blown design houses," adds Luctel. "But we also up everything a notch with the integrated engineering approach and our ability to move things further in-house."

As with conventional design projects initiated by a brand owner, the company begins with a product brief. This stage will also include front-end research which includes retail audits, ethnography and consumer brainstorming sessions, before moving onto the concept and product development phase. At the same time, the designers will be working with the engineers and mould

design experts to gain an understanding of how to maintain all of the manufacturing parameters and to use the packaging to create brand equity.

After marketing validation – which is carried out with re-focus groups or online – the design reaches the technology stage where prototype or production moulds are manufactured and run to produce samples for further consumer validation, feedback, or to move on to commercial production.

Working in a similar way to many dedicated design houses, the leverage team may also conduct a retail audit of competitive products or create aids that help them get into the character of the target audience. But when it gets down to creating packaging concepts and prototypes, the differences in the R&D approach become apparent.

“Because leverage allows engineers and designers to work with each other we can create ideas that are manufacturable,” says vice president engineering Dave Wescoat, “and that saves time, effort and ultimately improves speed to market. It is not unknown for independent design houses to spend months creating a design that a brand owner likes, only to find that it cannot be manufactured within budget, if at all.

“This also works the other way round, because we can often point to new packaging ideas or technology that a design house may not know about. This is specialist knowledge that can add that extra ‘something’ that makes a product stand out on the shelf. We can also leverage the essential properties of a package – the vital elements that give it its strength and form – so that they become an integral part of the design.”

One way in which R&D believes that it can make a real difference, is by breaking down the traditional routes that are used to arrive at the tool-making stage. “What usually happens,” says Schiavone, “is that a brand owner will approach a packaging manufacturer with an idea and then either one of them will go on to a design house. It is only when someone wants to see an idea taken to the prototype stage that the toolmaker comes into the story. If the toolmaker finds a problem with the idea, then the design will have to go back to be re-worked, creating additional and

unnecessary expense.

“The leverage approach means that brand owners can come to us as a one stop-design house knowing that their packaging manufacturer will be able to handle every idea that we produce. What we are offering is changing the way we do business. It’s moving a high-end tool manufacturer further along the product development process to a point where both converters and brand owners will be able to partner with us. This is an advance over the system where the disciplines of design and manufacturing are carried out by separate companies. What we are offering is the first of its kind in the business, and it’s not just for the USA, it’s a global offering.”

Strout sums up the current design route succinctly. “Who cares if it flies off the shelf but is a pain to make? And what if it is easy to make but won’t fly off the shelf? We bring it both together for our clients.”

Outside of the US, R&D has a facility in Nottinghamshire, UK. Managing director (UK) Alan Tolley explains that this unit is a vital component in the leverage system. “We are not just a satellite sales department, we have a fully fledged manufacturing and engineering base here that is able to offer this same leverage service to customers outside of the Americas. We know that this is going to drive the industry forward by allowing it to think out-of-the-box and move towards packaging that is dynamic and has real shelf appeal.”

One question remains to be asked: Would R&D ever make such a radical change in direction again? The answer seems to be yes, and no. “If you don’t change, you become very stagnant,” says Strout. “I see this continuing more and more – pushing engineers further. We must ask them, ‘What can you do today? And if you don’t know how to do it today, how can you do it tomorrow?’

“Yes we will change, but there is a core value and structure that is there. We are a full-service industrial design house, but we are also a one-stop mould manufacturer. That is what we do and I don’t see that changing.”

More information from R&D – Integrated Solutions in Plastics, 1009 SE Browning Ave, Lee’s Summit, Missouri, 64081, USA. Tel: 1 816 525 0353. Fax: 1 816 524 5086. www.rdleverage.com



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