

# Board Converting

Serving the North American Corrugated and Folding Carton Industries for 40 years

NEWS

## Vineland Packaging: Ongoing Investments = Sizable Dividends

BY LEN PRAZYCH

Southern New Jersey is home to several noteworthy points of interest: Cape May, the Victorian-era resort town on the Atlantic Ocean's edge at the state's southernmost tip; Atlantic City, the gambling and entertainment mecca less than an hour's drive to the north; the Pine Barrens, the largest remaining example of the Atlantic coastal pine barrens ecosystem that spans seven New Jersey counties and is home



**Mike D'Alessandro welcomes visitors and customers into the lobby of Vineland Packaging, his family's 100,000-square-foot sheet plant in Vineland, New Jersey.**

to the fabled Jersey Devil; and Vineland, the city 35 miles to the east of Philadelphia known for its poultry industry – in the 1930's it was referred to as the “Egg Basket of America” – as well as a market center for clothing, chemicals and glass manufacturing.

More noteworthy, for more than 55 years Vineland has been home to Vineland Packaging Corporation, a third-generation independent box maker owned and operated by the close-knit D'Alessandro family, whose synergies have been growing a sheet plant that continues to prosper well into its sixth decade. The company was founded in 1969 by the son of an Italian immigrant, Joesph D'Alessandro Sr., a produce broker who named the company J&I Industries, its stock in trade being the hand assembly of corrugated partitions for an integrated company, as well as customers in southern New Jersey's glass-making industry,

who were first drawn to the area because of its sandy soil.

Joseph Sr. retired in 1994, when his sons Joe Jr. and Dave took over the business and renamed it Vineland Packaging Corporation (VPC). Joseph Sr.'s grandchildren, Joseph III, Michael, Anthony, and Christina D'Alessandro now share ownership and control. Joseph III's son, Joseph IV, at 25-years-old, represents the 4th, generation of D'Alessandro working in the family business.

Mike D'Alessandro wears "a lot of hats," the biggest one being sales. Mike's brother Joe manages customer service, including IT. Christina keeps tabs on accounting and bookkeeping. And Anthony, the Operations Manager who Mike calls the "resident gearhead," oversees plant maintenance and keeps the production floor running at peak efficiency.

"I don't remember a 'you do this or you do that' discussion," says Mike about the appointment of duties amongst family members. "We all just seemed to just gravitate to the area of the business that best suited us. That's worked out well, mostly because the primary thing that all of us in the third generation agree on is continual investment in the company."

### The Spectrum of Converting Solutions

Serving industrial, pharmaceutical and food service markets, Vineland Packaging offers the spectrum of converting solutions. From package design and prototyping, to printing up to four colors on its flexo and rotary die cutter lines, to manufacturing corrugated assembled partitions, Vineland has evolved into a "one-stop shop" for complete packaging solutions and strategies. All of which meant it was only a matter of time before the company



**A Baysek C170 has been a die cutting workhorse that has been on Vineland Packaging's production floor for years.**

would be investing in and growing its footprint, which it did in 2013 by adding 20,000-square-feet to its existing 40,000-square-foot facility.

Two years later, the company added a pre-owned mini flexo and a pre-owned rotary die cutter in what was supposed to be additional warehouse space. But that quick-

ly turned into production space, so Vineland Packaging acquired an off-site, 30,000-square-foot facility, where it does its warehousing and partition work.

In 2021, Vineland began a second expansion that included the purchase of a new 66-inch by 125-inch, 4-color Apstar HG2 1632 Rotary Die Cutter from Haire Group. "When we purchased the Apstar, we decided to add two JB Machinery ColorDry XL 3000 dryer units to enhance our printing capabilities as well as maximize throughput and increase run speeds," says Mike. "ColorDry provided exactly what we were looking for. It also provided the extra capability to print on Kemi, which allowed us to bring in some projects that were just out of our reach before."



**Vineland Packaging added JB ColorDry dryer units (above) and JB KleenPlate 3.0 (below) to its Apstar Rotary Die Cutter.**



A year after the installation of the Apstar, the company added two KleenPlate 3.0 units to the press. "We were constantly stopping to clean the print plates," says Anthony D'Alessandro, Operations Manager. "You lose significant production if you're frequently stopping to remove even the smallest piece of dust." Anthony says that the combination of ColorDry and KleenPlate helped Vineland greatly enhance their workflow and their overall printing capabilities.

Vineland added a brand new Baysek die cutter in 2019 to replace a pre-owned T-series that was installed in 2009.

The 2021 expansion also saw the addition of a Bobst of 820 Flexo Folder Gluer. "We were fortunate because we had the machine installed before lead times got crazy," remembers Mike. "Again, it just came down to continually

investing in our operations. It was really the only way we were going to grow.”

### **The Covid Spike**

Like other corrugated and sheet plants across the country, Vineland Packaging saw a spike during Covid, which included a lot of new ecommerce work for integrated companies. “We went into it clear-eyed and took on



**AG Stacker machinery occupies a prominent place in one of Vineland Packaging's converting lines.**

a lot of new business we knew wasn't going to be here forever,” says Mike. “We knew that some of this business was going to go away but were fortunate in that a lot of it ended up sticking. Then new business began to trickle in from independent corrugators and other sheet plants, which gave us the opportunity to show a lot more people the high level of service and quality we could provide.”

Vineland Packaging does not have a corrugator, nor is it affiliated with a sheet feeder; the company has relationships with both independents and integrators for its containerboard. 65 employees work two shifts. In addition to ecommerce, pharma, and food service, many of its customers are in the glass industry, which is still prevalent in southern New Jersey. “You name it and we probably do it,” says Mike. “I see Vineland Packaging as your typical industrial mix sheet plant.”

He also knows his company's “lane” when he says, “We're not going to do anything in bulk and we've never had a flexo larger than 50-inches, so we're not going to need a jumbo. We have three 4-color machines but we don't feel that that puts us in the POP space. I just think that in today's corrugated market you have to walk that fine line of POP and brown box because everything is kind of blurred from the standpoint of display ready shippers.”

### **Growth In Sales Force**

Expansion and new machinery investments also meant growth in Vineland's sales staff. To help manage that critical task, Mike D'Alessandro turned to Mark Neely of Mark Neely Seminars, a consulting organization dedicated to designing and presenting sales skills training to companies of all sizes.

“I attended a Sales Manager's Conference at an AICC

national meeting in 2011 and Mark Neely was one of the instructors,” says Mike. “I really enjoyed his program and had read his articles in Board Converting News, all of which helped me realize that we had to have a clear-eyed understanding of what our shortcomings were, what our strengths were and what are weaknesses were with everything involved in hiring new salespeople.” Mike felt that by not bringing in a professional like Neely to help with advertising, interviewing, onboarding and training, he was



**The Apstar's extended and print feed sections. Inline sheet cleaning and chamber ink metering with twin ink pumps has allowed Vineland Packaging to grow its marketing opportunities.**



setting Vineland Packaging up for failure. “I had to realize that I couldn't do everything. I've had success as a salesperson but that didn't mean I was a good sales trainer,” he says.

In 2017, D'Alessandro reached out to Neely, who asked about Vineland Packaging's goals and what he could offer the company. After agreeing on a business relationship, Vineland Packaging published an ad for a sales position. “As applicants came in, I would look at the resumes and if they looked interesting, I'd shoot them over to Mark to take a look,” says D'Alessandro. “Most of the time we agreed on an applicant, but in some cases, Mark would ask ‘have you considered this?’ or ‘have you noticed that?’, which forced me to rethink my decision. It was great to have that second set of professional eyes on this and Mark's perspective was very helpful.”

From the first round of recruiting came three candidates and D'Alessandro hired all three. Neely then trav-

eled from his headquarters in Texas to Vineland, New Jersey, to conduct onboarding and sales training. As it turned out, one of the new hires didn't make it through the first week. Neely continued working with the remaining two – neither of whom had sales experience or corrugated industry experience – on how to generate leads, how to use LinkedIn to develop business relationships and added some "Corrugated 101" classes. The second hire lasted a couple of months when Neely and D'Alessandro determined he wasn't really working hard enough to be the success he needed to be. The third candidate has performed extremely well and seven years later, in 2024, continues to be a valuable and productive member of Vineland Packaging's sales team.



**The SQ4 can strap and bundle up to 24 units per minute.**

Earlier this year, one of the company's existing salespersons retired and another one was in his 70s and "knocking on the retirement door." D'Alessandro decided it was time to hire two new salespersons, which meant another call to Mark Neely. "We had a great experience the first time around so I said, 'let's do this again,'" says D'Alessandro. "Mark visited to help train and onboard them and got them up to speed as quickly and as efficiently as possible."

This is, in fact, Neely's primary goal. "Building success early helps to develop a confident and productive sales professional," he says. "For a newly hired sales rep, getting started on the right foot and then getting comfortable enough to move forward quickly through the early stages of a new job can be challenging. It's a big investment for both the new hire and the employer. Increasing the likelihood of success through immediate and comprehensive training helps to ensure that both parties succeed in their goals."

Both salespersons, who became Vineland Packaging employees in May of this year, are still with the company, are enjoying their jobs and starting to build strong sales numbers. "I understand it's only been a few months and it's going to take time, but I have a very good feeling about both of them," says D'Alessandro. "And I know Mark is just a phone call away to help with anything I need."

To that end, Neely stays in touch regularly with a "scorecard" to track appointments and sales and continues to serve as a second set of eyes for Vineland Packaging and the D'Alessandro family, who are increasingly busy with their ongoing growth initiatives and of course, continual investments.

"Helping the rep to create a repeatable sales process that works is the aim," emphasizes Neely. "Working together with company managers, the cycle from the point of hiring the new sales rep to getting them to a place where they are contributing to the profit of the company is significantly shortened."

#### **A Productive Future**

Since "continual investment" is the company's mantra, work at Vineland Packaging is ongoing: recent projects include two dryers and two JB clean plate systems to the Apstar. "They worked out really well for us we decided we want to do the other two as well," says D'Alessandro. "We're also replacing our cyclone, which is being done by Air Systems Design. In addition, we're getting ready to upgrade our Amtech software to Encore. We're adding Top Gun, we're adding Scorekeeper and several other modules that we didn't have prior. There has been a lot of ancillary investments but no flagship machinery investments."

Yet, D'Alessandro says that in 2025, he's looking to buy more converting equipment to replace Vineland Packaging's 50-inch machine.

"We've more than doubled in size since 2017. We've put more middle managers in place and we're looking to get a third-party certification, possibly ISO," he says. "We're just looking to grow in every way, shape and form and I don't necessarily just mean by volume, square footage per month and sales dollars. We're looking to grow as an organization by the same method that has gotten Vineland Packaging this far: continual investment."