

International Greetings celebrates 12 years of growth and evolution with Preactor



International Greetings PLC is one of the world's leading designers, manufacturers, importers and distributors of giftwrap, stationery, gift bags, crackers, greeting cards and accessories. The £70m turnover company has its 2 printing and manufacturing sites in the UK and employs an average 470 people although this rises to approximately 520 in peak season. 70% of all products manufactured are design and manufactured to order for global brands such as Ikea, Costco and Tesco with the remaining 30% being standard lines distributed by wholesalers, garden centres etc.

Juggling orders with values ranging between £2000 and £10,000,000 where delivery date is mission critical requires a planning and scheduling solution that is completely dependable. For the past 12 years during significant business growth and change, International Greetings has been rewarded for putting its trust in Preactor Advanced Planning and Scheduling (APS) from SFJ Systems.

Christmas may start earlier each year for the end users of International Greetings products yet for its customers, the process starts anywhere between 6 and 14 months before the Christmas its goods are intended for. A considerable amount of time is spent in the specification, design and approval stage before an approved product can be then confirmed as ready for production.



Given the sheer volume of product that needs to be produced - single orders of wrapping paper can be measured in tens of millions of metres alone – and it becomes easy to appreciate why the company's busiest time of year is from mid June to mid November. Production is essentially a 2 stage process which begins with printing the required pattern on the appropriate stock. After this the printed material is taken to the converting stage where it is cut to size and undergoes any other processes that may be required before being packed and dispatched.



Technical Director Mike Harris has been with the company for 12 years and describes why the commercial driver for the business is getting the right product to the right customer at exactly the right time. “Basically, if you miss the delivery, you’ve lost the business and on the rare occasions this isn’t the case, there’s invariably a substantial financial penalty incurred.” He continues, “With over 1000 SKUs and approximately 10,000 orders a year, you can see why effective planning and scheduling is central to our ability to do this.”

The sheer volume and size of goods produced also impact every stage of the manufacturing process from raw materials storage through Work in Progress (WIP) to finished goods storage and delivery. According to Harris, the speed at which some of the converting machines (the cutting and rolling stage) operate, they could physically fill up the converting premises in less than one day which would mean having no room to keep on working. Accurate timing and visibility of incoming paper and card stock from suppliers, the delivery of the printed product to the cutting and finishing area product and the swift despatch of the finished goods are all vital, as is the smooth flow of orders through the company’s range of different printing, cutting and packing machinery.

It is not just the availability of incoming materials that operates as a serious planning constraint as Harris explains. “For us the cardboard core is absolutely critical and we manufacture this on site, as fast as we can. In short, if we run out of core, we can’t produce anything.” To add to all of this there is the complication of a large number of products having set up times that may be many times longer than actual production times. Certain products require specific machines and routings while others can have a variety of potential combinations of machines and routings. Each SKU can also contain up to 4 or 5 different individual jobs, for example wrapping paper, cards, ribbon etc, all of which must be available together in order for the order to be shipped On Time and In Full. And if that isn’t enough, 85% of the entire annual production has to be despatched in just 4 months!

Given the complexity and centrality of planning and scheduling to International Greetings, it comes as no surprise that the company has been using Preactor’s production planning and scheduling technology for 12 years. This replaced the company’s former reliance on multiple spreadsheets which had replaced an entirely handwritten system. In fact, International Greetings began with 4 individual Preactor systems that looked after the processes of printing, conversion, packing and outwork.



During this time however the overall Preactor system has considerably evolved as a result of Harris working together with Preactor reseller SFJ Systems and for Harris this has been at the heart of the company's success. "Our business has grown hugely over the past 12 years as well as changing direction in a number of different ways. The inherent flexibility of Preactor and SFJ's understanding of the way our business works has meant that at every step of the way Preactor has helped us grow."



He breaks down the evolution of the system into 5 key stages, the first of which was to rewrite the interfaces between Preactor and the company's in-house Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system so that data could be pulled directly into Preactor from the ERP system. Stage 2 involved developing the interface so that Preactor could push up-dated information back directly into the ERP system. "At the heart of each of these stages was a drive towards automating data input and transfer which in turn meant massively increasing the speed and accuracy of data exchange and the subsequent ability to plan" comments Harris.

The third stage was linked to the installation of an automatic Bar-coding/Product Tracking system which working with Preactor gave greatly improved real-time visibility of what was happening and where as well as what had been completed and when. "At a glance we could now see how far through any given order we were and compare this to the projected plan" explains Harris. This was complemented by the fourth stage which enabled order updates to be actioned at a system level as opposed to an individual order level that could then be imported into Preactor which would allow the planners to immediately see the impact this had on the overall schedule and to make decisions accordingly. The final stage has been to establish a detailed matrix of operational setup times that takes into account much more production information than previously had been recorded with the company's ERP system. The 4 separate plans have also been linked together and now feed an overall master plan which offers 100% company wide information.

Unsurprisingly the benefits International Greetings have achieved through Preactor have also evolved over time. Harris reiterates the biggest cumulative benefit has been the fact that the business has grown while the actual time and staff involved in planning have been markedly reduced. "We have grown from a £20m company to a £70m company, doubling the number of our converting machines and handling more SKUS with much, much larger jobs while reducing our Planning department from 12 to 5." He cites the case of finished goods tracking out of the many such examples that exist. "People used to have to manually collate all the work sheets from the production floor and manually update the plan which would take in excess of 2 hours each time this needed to be done. Not only does this now just take 2 clicks of a mouse button, because the information is all stored within the system, it is also always accurate."

Another example would be the improved speed of issuing individual job bags to the production floor. A job bag is a very large envelope that contains everything relevant to a particular order including swatches of materials, Bills of Material (BoM) and routing information etc. This used to have to be manually collated, written on the job bag and then manually entered into Preactor which routinely took about an hour. As Harris explains, “We had people whose sole purpose was to update the job bags. Now this is all automated, including the updating of Preactor and printing the information onto a label which is attached to the job bag. Each job bag issued therefore has a time saving of one hour.”



Planning Manager David Davies singles out Preactor’s ‘What if?’ capabilities for praise. “With such finite capacity constraints and a very intense peak period, Preactor is invaluable for letting me know whether any given job can be done by a certain time. If it can’t, I can look at different ways of adjusting the schedule and seeing the impact on other jobs. This is vital when we have to deal with short term changes to very large orders or when one of our major clients has delayed signing off an order and needs to know that we can still deliver on time.”

Both Davies and Harris also make mention of the valuable role of SFJ systems to the overall success of the Preactor system. At the heart of this is SFJ’s deep understanding of the way International Greetings operates and what its changing requirements are. As Davies enthusiastically comments, “SFJ always gets things done” to which Harris adds, “quickly and cost effectively” He continues, “And because we have developed a very strong relationship with them over the years, everything always works. I haven’t had to call for a support issue in well over a year.”

The evolution of Preactor is set to continue with Harris investigating ways to further improve Shop Floor Data Capture (SFDC) as well as upgrading to the very latest version of Preactor which will allow even tighter integration with the company’s ERP system. Both Harris and Davies confidently anticipate that this will only serve to further enhance the benefits Preactor has delivered for the past 12 years. As Davies concludes, “Preactor really is a dream for us – it has enabled us to grow in terms of size and success, and has proved time and time again it is flexible enough to grow with us.”