

Global expertise, local flexibility – the perfect mix

In today's world of market-driven production, just-in-time delivery and optimized manufacturing techniques, the term "economies of scale" has acquired almost religious significance. This is often interpreted as "the bigger the better". "Scale", of course, is a relative term – it depends on your perspective. "Small" can still be beautiful, while "downsizing" can pose a direct threat – if your job is on the line. BeckryMix combines the best of both worlds, combining rapid and flexible local service with the advanced technology of an international paint group.

Established in Stockholm in 1865, Beckers can point to one of the longest traditions among independent paint manufacturers. In the mid-nineteenth century, painters commonly purchased linseed and similar oils, as well as pigment and various additives, to mix their own paints, based on formulas passed from father to son, from one generation to another. Beckers' innovative business concept was to provide trade painters with ready-to-use paint and related materials. The advantages were obvious. Trade painters could get on with the job, instead of making materials, while paint could be produced more economically and effectively, thanks to centralised manufacture and economies of scale – a win-win situation.

This radical departure from tradition initially generated strong resistance from the more conservative trade painters who, even after the Second World War, still insisted that their own paint formulas were superior to "factory made" products. Atti-

The BeckryMix system offers total flexibility, from manual mixing (as here) to fully-automated industrial-scale units for major manufacturers.





A semi-automated colour bank provides access to the global resources and support of the Becker Group for a marginal investment.

A fully-automated mixing unit, featuring online access to the Beckers support team, combines immediate on-site industrial mixing capability with full technical backup. Just-in-time paint!



tudes, demands and techniques have changed beyond all recognition since then, of course, and the use of anything but “factory-produced” paint is inconceivable, apart from the special products mixed by professional restorers and nostalgic hobbyists.

In contrast to the trade-painting sector, the transition to “factory-made” paints was accepted much earlier as a natural consequence of industrial production, in both the wood and metalworking industries. Nevertheless, in the early days of industrialisation, it was not uncommon for companies that consumed high volumes of paint to manufacture it for their own needs. This initially derived from a belief that in-house production would cut costs – which was probably true in the short term. In the longer term, however, these non-specialist in-house production facilities found it increasingly difficult to maintain quality, while the operational costs of such small-scale activities eventually outweighed the theoretical gains.

“Economies-of-scale” promised a new industrial utopia, where large modern plants with integrated R&D units would churn out vast volumes at competitive prices. It worked, too. Henry Ford and his continuous production line had changed the world.

Back to basics

So: how can we explain the fact that the coil-coating industry now appears to be turning the clock back, reverting to practices common a century ago? The answer can be found (as so often) in the USA. This huge, dynamic market plays a leading and innovative role in so many industrial sectors: the coil-coating industry is no exception.

In the 1970s, industry was becoming frustrated with paint suppliers’ long lead times. A turnaround time of 6 to 8 weeks was not uncommon. Yet an ordinary consumer could walk into a paint store, explain his requirement and leave with a custom-mixed paint ten minutes later. And consumers were not the only ones enjoying faster service. In the body shops, panel beaters were equipped with on-site mixing facilities to meet their immediate needs. Because the technical demands of the coil coating process made drastic reductions in lead-times unrealistic, a number of “in-house” mixing facilities were installed. The benefits of reduced lead-time outweighed the additional cost incurred.

In Europe, things moved in the same direction, if for different reasons.

French lead in mixing technology

In a recent interview, BIC Magazine



Operating personnel can attend a one-week training course at a Beckers production facility.

discussed the latest developments in mixing technology with Jean-Pierre Genevay, who heads Becker Industrial Coatings/Coil Coatings in France.

“The current advances in mixing technology reflect the lessons learned in telephony. Bell invented the phone, but Ericsson made it user-friendly: it’s that simple,” states Mr Genevay. “Originally, paint mixing facilities were very basic and inflexible. Our state-of-the-art BeckryMix system is not just flexible and computerised, it’s highly user-friendly.”

“The current concept, established more than a decade ago, has become a major success for both our customers and for Becker Industrial Coatings.”

Mr Genevay explains: “The benefits are straightforward. The customer minimises operating costs (high yield on small series, reduced operating capital) and expands market share (as does Becker Industrial Coatings). Looked at in detail, it is as if you were buying the paint in a kit, reflecting trends in the furniture industry. There are two major differences, however. You need more than a screwdriver, and a helpline is always at hand, to help resolve any difficulties that might crop up when mixing specific products.”

And this is not all. Once the BeckryMix project has proven its feasibility, a close dialogue is established between customer, equipment supplier and Becker Industrial Coatings. Each mixing facility is unique



in some respect, custom designed to specific requirements: manual, semi-automated or fully automated. Initial production capacity ranges from 300 to 1400 tonnes. Should the customer choose to start with a manual system, the concept's flexible design permits trouble-free upgrades to semi or fully automated operation and expanded capacity, on a simple add-on basis.

Training and on-line support

"The operating software demands no more than basic computer skills, and the financial investment is marginal. All that is needed is a standard PC and a colour screen. The customer's operating personnel are invited to attend a one-week training course at one of our production facilities," Mr Genevay explains.

"The fact that our BeckryMix team serves both the customer and our five in-house mixing units is also crucial. This eliminates preferential treatment and limits on the exchange of technical information," notes Mr Genevay. "We also hold regular seminars to maintain contact with our customers and facilitate mutual updates on progress. The fact that it is the customers themselves who operate all external BeckryMix stations cannot be stressed too strongly."

New options still classified

Hardly surprising that the number of BeckryMix installations is growing all the time. "Currently, we supply tinting pastes and intermediates to Morocco, Syria and Dubai, as well as to several customers in Europe,

totalling nine units in all. The latest unit, installed at the Arcelor coating facility, offers a new level of flexibility – a 'micro-mix' system," says Mr Genevay, with a conspiratorial smile.

"Does this mean the customer will be able to make on-site samples for his end customers?"

The conspiratorial smile returns: "We shall be announcing more details in the near future. The BeckryMix system was not a response to any perceived dissatisfaction on the part of our customers. Lead-times within the European coil coating industry have traditionally been commendably brief. In extreme cases, turnaround time for an order from our factory could be a mere 24 hours. We simply sought a more efficient system for manufacturing paint in small batches."

"The reason for installing a BeckryMix system is cost efficiency. We now have ten BeckryMix facilities in operation, and the economies of scale are self-evident. All the intermediates are produced in rational production batches. In France alone, our own organisation numbers four operating units, with a further six installations, in various configurations, at customers. The key factor is economies of scale, as noted above, but the speed of communication assured by BeckryMix' fully computerised interface is also of crucial importance. Whether the demand to formulate a new colour originates from Becker Industrial Coatings or from a customer with a BeckryMix unit, the new formula can be available in hours."

Although fully computerised, BeckryMix need not be fully automated. Several customers have no

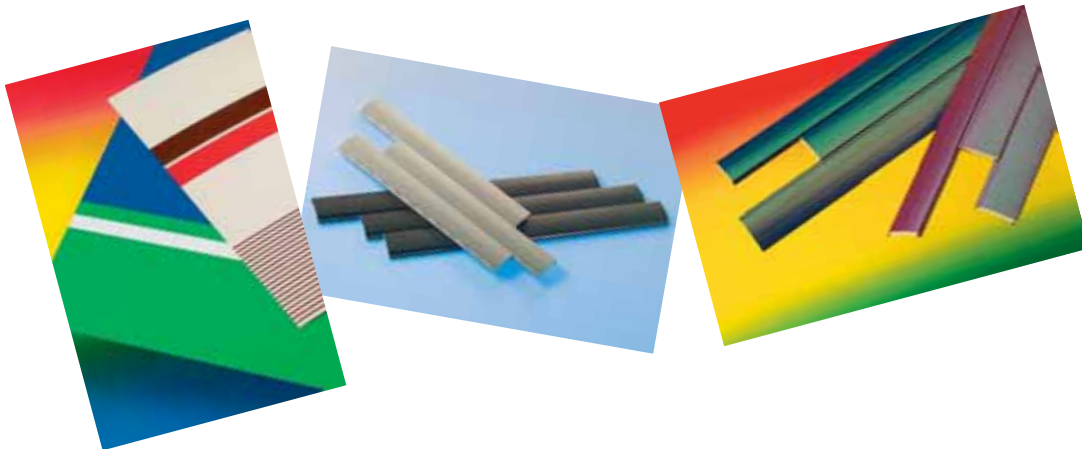
need for very high output and prefer to operate with a certain degree of manual control. The BeckryMix hardware installed at customers is an in-house asset. Even so, technical communication between customer and Becker Industrial Coatings remains intense, and regular seminars help keep both parties updated on progress and developments.

Ongoing training and close cooperation is a key ingredient of the BeckryMix business concept, to ensure that the customer benefits from the very latest technical advances in paint chemistry, while providing crucial feedback on technical challenges and market trends to Becker Industrial Coatings. Everyone gains: better products, enhanced performance and faster service.

Dynamic relationship for better results

"Economies of scale and the intimate relationship between Becker Industrial Coatings and its customers create the dynamic for developing new technologies. At present, we offer BeckryMix for three basic application technologies: BeckryTech, BeckryTech ARS and BeckryFluor," says Jean-Pierre Genevay.

"Becker Industrial Coatings France has most BeckryMix units in operation. However, at least one BeckryMix unit is in operation at every main Becker Industrial Coating production site. Whatever their location – in Europe, Africa, Asia, Dubai or in the mountains of Nepal – our customers have already embraced the benefits of the BeckryMix system."



Becker Industrial Coating France is naturally very proud to report the installation of their latest BeckryMix unit in Spain. Bancolor has been a key Becker Industrial Coatings customer for many years. This made the decision to invest an easy one. Both parties are convinced that this investment will not only optimize and rationalise material handling, but also promote still closer cooperation between both companies in several other respects. The unit is designed for an annual output of 1000 tonnes.