

Cracking on with face mask-making machinery

THE COVID-19 outbreak has presented a number of novel opportunities for machinery suppliers to help South African manufacturers to diversify into face mask production, in the face of spiralling demand.

Rotocon has responded swiftly with the introduction of the Ecoline FM machine that's capable of automatic production of 90 to 110 flat masks a minute.

Its design is very simple. First, three layers of material are laminated, folded and seamed. A crimping tool then ultrasonically welds the two sides to the seal; and a die-cutting tool cuts and forms the side seal. Finally, the mask is conveyed to two earlobe string welding stations and then on to the assembly line for collection.

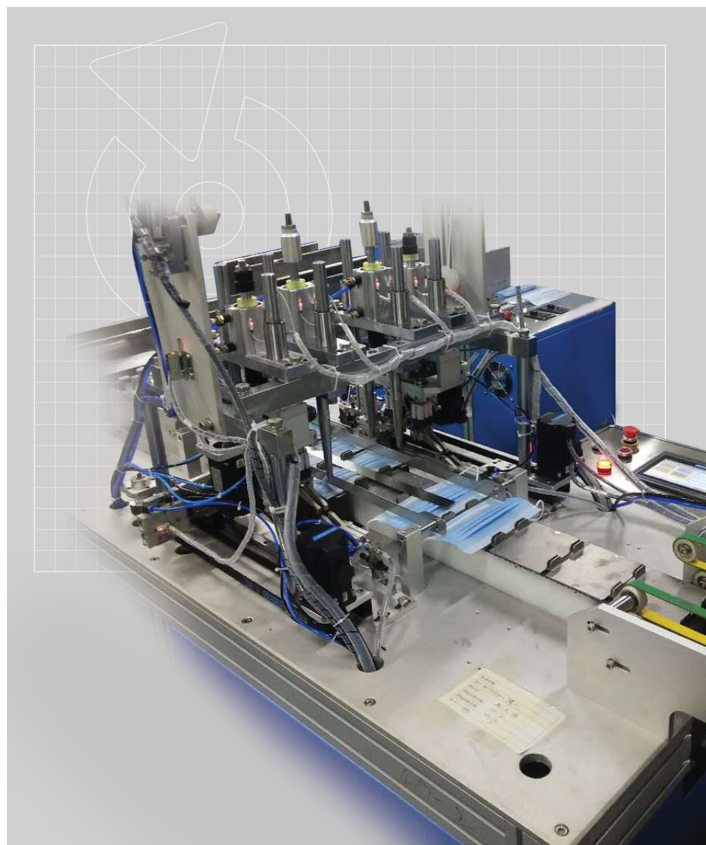
The Ecoline FM machine, like others in the range, is produced according to Rotocon's strict specifications by its Asian affiliate, ticking both the quality and cost-efficiency boxes.

According to Rotocon director, Pascal Aengenvoort, high global demand for face masks has resulted in the Asian OEM's production floor being filled with stock machines.

'At the moment, Rotocon can airfreight, land and install an Ecoline FM machine at a South African customer's facility within four weeks,' he reports. 'However, this could stretch to six weeks if several customers were to place simultaneous orders,' he adds.

Customers are able to justify the costs of airfreighting a machine as they have a short window of opportunity in which to take advantage of current high levels of demand. As Pascal points out, this could rise significantly to around 55-million masks if the South African government mandates the wearing of masks. Additionally, there are opportunities for local businesses to supply masks to the rest of the continent.

To date, Rotocon's primary engagement has been with niche market manufacturers – for example, a manufacturer



of nappies and female sanitary products that's used to laminating different materials; a producer that plans to manufacture mask materials and the end-product; and a supplier of die-cut products to a major health care distributor.

Rotocon also invites its broader customer base and those wanting to produce masks such as the N95, typically worn by nurses and doctors, to request information about a machine with a slightly different construction from the Ecoline FM. Each model comes with a one-year warranty and lifetime maintenance support.



Both sides of the value chain covered

ROTOCON expects stock of disposable BFE 95 face masks and N95 masks to arrive in the country during the last week of April, helping to alleviate market shortages.

According to Patrick Aengenvoort, the company was motivated to draft a business plan for this line of consumables following its Ecoline factory gearing up for mask production, sending masks to support Rotocon employees as essential service providers during the national lockdown, and extending order opportunities to Rotocon's customers.

'We then started receiving enough enquiries from businesses as varied as The Red Cross, to form a new business venture. And invite customers to place a minimum order of 10 disposable BFE 95 face masks with us,' he concludes.