Earlier this year, Grand Rapids, Michigan based Advance Packaging Corporation celebrated its 50th Anniversary with the completion of an expansion project begun in 2015: it added 75,000-square-feet to the already colossal 425,000-square-foot corrugator and box making facility built in 2006 by owners Don Crossley and Carol Hoyt.

The company was founded in 1966 by Dick Strauss and Franklin “Duke” Gregory. In 1987, the founders began an ownership transition plan that was completed in 1999 when Hoyt and Crossley became 50-50 owners of the company. In 2014, Hoyt retired and the company purchased her stock leaving Crossley as sole owner of Advance Packaging. Today, a full 50 years after the first brown box was shipped, Don Crossley maintains full ownership of the company that is still growing and still independent. His plan is for that to continue.

“The recent expansion is a testament to the company’s commitment to growth,” says Scott Wilcox, Advance Packaging’s Vice President of Sales and Marketing. “It shows our employees and customers that we’re serious about growth and expanding the business and our capabilities, especially now that we’ve made the commitment to digital high-end graphics.”

The Foray Into Digital

Advance Packaging’s foray into digital began in late last year when it installed an HP Scitex 15500 digital press and a Zund digital cutter. The press is capable of printing 7,000-square-feet per hour and according to Wilcox, delivers more vibrant and efficient printing for clients. These include food and beverage companies, medical and automotive suppliers and consumer product companies.

The company offers a wide range of printing options, including flexo direct print, litho laminated and preprinted corrugated packaging and P-O-P displays. “The addition of digital complements our product mix and really rounds out our total capabilities,” says Wilcox. “The one area that we were lacking in was the lower- to mid-volume capability. When we are talking to customers, we want to be able to offer them all of those different solutions.”

The HP Scitex and Zund cutter are centrally located in a temperature-controlled room on the production floor, making it easy to transport digital jobs to analog machines. Since the HP started production, Advance has hired six full-time employees with plans to add more over the next year.

“The HP is so easy to transport digital work to analog machines,” Wilcox says. “We really felt that HP had the best print quality. It is approaching
litho quality, and for most applications like displays and the packaging going into big box and club stores, the quality is sufficient. Some customers still require litho and say digital isn’t acceptable. We are slowly convincing them that the price is right and the digital quality is suitable.”

The company’s investment of approximately $2 million in digital is paying dividends. While the percentage of digital work is still small – 2-3 percent of total sales – it is, Wilcox says, the fastest growing of Advance Packaging’s business segments because it offers a wide range of options and opportunities. “We are now selling digital to almost all of our high-end flexo customers,” he says.

Most of APC’s customers are within a 200-300 mile radius of Grand Rapids but their high-end graphics work has permitted Advance Packaging to ship throughout the United States. This has enabled the company to grow outside of its Midwestern Michigan market, where the downturn of the auto and furniture industries from 2010 to 2012 negatively impacted the region’s economy. “Now that the western Michigan economy has come back, we’ve seen an explosion in growth in both our brown box and high-end graphics work,” says Wilcox. “We’ve taken on some new customers and its great to see a lot of our old customers busy again.”

Flying With The Falcon

Another key element of Advance Packaging’s growth was the addition in 2014 of the Isowa Falcon, a 4-color flexo folder gluer. “It enabled us to go after some business that we weren’t able to be very competitive on before. That was a big investment for us,” says Wilcox, who added that the company’s driving decision on its purchase of the Falcon was the quality of the glue joints and the ability to produce a square box. “We ran boxes on our machines and had Isowa run boxes on the Falcon and had a couple other manufacturers run boxes on their machines. We brought all the boxes in, studied them and compared the consistency of the gaps. After looking all over the world for the machine that would give us what we wanted, we felt the Isowa Falcon gave us the best shot at producing the most consistent high-quality box. It sets up quickly and can produce 350 boxes a minute. I was also very impressed with Isowa America as a company and their ability to deliver exactly what was promised.”

In addition to the Falcon, Advance Packaging has two Goepferts, including one that is 7-color with UV capability. Both are equipped with driers, JB CleanPlate systems and Ducker bundle breakers.

They also have a litho laminator, platen diecutting capabilities, multiple specialty folder gluers and a full range of flexo folder gluers.

Alliance prefeeders are on almost all machines. C&M conveyors transport board throughout the plant and from Advance Packaging’s 110-inch BHS corrugator, which was purchased new in 2006. “We’ve been extremely happy with the BHS,” says Wilcox. “It does a wonderful job with all our graphics board, a high percentage of which is white top or...
coated white top. We also pride ourselves on ‘cool corrugating.’ We try to lower the temperature of the board as well as the amount of moisture and starch required to produce it. Because of that, the corrugator produces very flat board with little washboarding, which is always a concern when doing direct print.”

Advance Packaging corrugates B-, C-, E-, EB doublewall, BC doublewall, EC doublewall, CC doublewall and nothing smaller than E-Flute. The BHS runs two shifts, can achieve a top speed of 1,100 fpm and out-produces the box plant, which runs 3-4 shifts. “It’s scary how much we can produce at top speed,” says Wilcox.

Consistency Is Key

Producing a superior quality of board, however, is only possible by using high-quality paper. For Advance Packaging, consistency is key and is achieved with its TAPPI lab. Wilcox credits Tom Staal, Advance Packaging’s Corporate Quality Manager, for managing the company’s quality system. Staal often visits mills and scores them to ensure that the consistency of their paper is maintained. Wilcox stresses the importance and effectiveness of Advance Packaging’s quality system. “Mills know exactly what we’re looking for and I believe that’s why we get consistent high quality paper,” he says. “If mills get low scores for two consecutive quarters, they are not a paper supplier to us any more. They know someone’s always checking the paper. Our corrugator operators appreciate it and ultimately, so do our customers. If there is one thing we’ve learned from a direct print standpoint, it’s that no matter how good a printer you are, if you don’t have a good substrate, your print results will show it.”

All of Advance Packaging’s coated stock is Kemi Light and Kemi Graph. “We’re super happy with the paper, the supply and the inventory they keep,” says Wilcox. “They’ve been a great supplier for us.”

Sales Force: Technical Experts

Advance Packaging employs 250 and has openings for another 50, from general production and machine operators to salespeople and everything in between. The company has seven designers on its staff and three in the graphics department. All are technical experts, as is the company’s sales force. “They have sales skills, of course, but they also need to be problem solvers,” says Wilcox. “They understand the equipment, the importance of design and I’m proud of the way they’ve grasped all this new digital and direct print technology. They can help our customers understand the big picture and provide options and solutions that will allow them to make a knowledgeable decision.”

With its expansion and investments in new state-of-the-art equipment, Advance Packaging now has the capabilities to deliver from 10 to 100,000 pieces. From low-end digital to mid-volume digital and from litho-lam or direct print to pre-print, Advance is always looking for the newest machine with the latest technology that will allow them to be better, faster and more flexible. “We’ve built our business on flexibility and shrinking lead times,” says Wilcox. “As we keep growing, we’re able to offer our customers a variety of options and short lead times. None of this could have been possible without investing in the latest technology, establishing the proper procedures and having the most hardworking and dedicated production employees to pull it all together.”