

PackSmart's impressive device for placing covermounts is likely to pay its way in more ways than one **By Rod Hayes**

Why buy... Rotary Placer

Viewing the magazine racks at any branch of WH Smith it is impossible not to appreciate the overall sophistication of the display. Displays are topic driven, ensuring little difficulty in seeing if the magazine of your choice is there. Also the sheer quality of the cover printing is a dominant feature. There is a riot of colour and graphics that is eye catching and yet there is an individuality that allows each magazine to establish its own personality.

Pretty smart operation

Magazine selling is a pretty smart operation, but a new phenomena is now becoming well established. Virtually any special interest magazine feels obliged to have an attachment on its cover these days as a supplementary aid to drive its purchase. It may be a CD, possibly a gimmicky golfing aid; the fact is that attachments are big business.

Frankly I love it, and this has driven me to investigate how easy is it to get an attachment onto a magazine? And why stop at magazines? After all they are but one example of bringing together two fairly distinctive consumer interest items.

Much of this type of work is still done by hand, suggesting why attaching has not spread far from magazines. It also suggests that anyone prepared to invest in equipment that automates placement tasks at a rate that is more cost-effective and competitive than doing the tasks by hand could make an extremely effective niche business.

The most effective placement tool I have seen to date is a machine developed in Canada called the Rotary Placer. It is manufactured by PackSmart and marketed in



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the UK by GaVehren International in St Albans

Visually, the Rotary Placer looks a little like a cross between a Ferris Wheel and a Dutch windmill. At the end of four arms are mounted a series of suckers which will draw the item to be placed, hold it and then rotate to place the item onto the prime carrier.

Intuitive features

A number of extremely clever and intuitive features make the Rotary Placer stand out. The sucker arms are articulated and can emulate the actions of a person's fingers. The amount of suction can be infinitely varied and because of the servo drive, the point at which a product is actually picked up and placed can be controlled with astonishing precision.

Accuracy to fractions of a millimetre can be obtained, regardless of the speed of operation which can be of the order of at least 9,000 cycles per hour.

Because the Rotary Placer has its own servo drive, it can be

used across a wide range of equipment. Ideally it works best on a platform basis, a system where the prime carrier such as a magazine is fed onto a moving suction belt in precise register. The Rotary Placer is mounted above the belt and is supported by adjacent hoppers. The hoppers generally are fairly simple, little more than adjustable tubes capable of holding anything from a tea bag to a CD.

GaVehren is able to supply a variety of platform modules, but what appeals to me about the Rotary Placer is the ease at which it can be integrated into a folder, a mailing line or perhaps an inserter line such as those produced by Buhrs and PitneyBowes.

Inline solution is easy

The unit can take a signal from the main drive of any equipment it is to be linked with, making it particularly easy to create an inline solution. A good example would be mounting a Rotary Placer on to a Sitma line prior to wrapping.

When not required the unit can be wheeled away and will sit in a corner till the next job comes along, forlorn and disconsolate perhaps, but who cares? For the boss it is sans holiday pay and sans sickness benefits. Now don't you just love that?

Downsides? None that are related to productivity issues, but a Rotary Placer does represent a reasonable investment. There would be little change out of £50,000 by the time a controller and a selection of hoppers are included.

Potential to boost margins

But is this really the way to look at such an investment? £50,000 spent on a Rotary Placer has the potential to generate margins disproportionate to the size of the investment. A new mailing line, a new press, a further fold stitch and trim line will generate a predictable return that is directly proportional to the amount of work pushed through.

In other words, more of the same. The only thing that will change following this type of investment will be the margins will be smaller.

An investment in a sophisticated tool like a Rotary Placer may initially be driven by the need to place a CD on a magazine, yet I suggest with some certainty, almost invariably the work such a machine is doing when it is first installed will bear little resemblance to what it will be doing in 12 months' time.

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Summary

● The automation of hand assembly tasks is key to market growth.

● There are new levels of versatility and flexibility still to be explored

● Making an investment in a Rotary Placer is little more than the cost of one employee

Dearth of natural rivals

The Rotary Placer is marketed in the UK by GaVehren International, Unit 10, St Albans Enterprise Centre, Long Spring, Porters Wood St Albans AL3 6EN



Selling point: the Rotary Placer can be moved around a site

● The Rotary Placer has at present no natural competitors given the way that it can be moved around a finishing or converting site. However, MBO, via Friedheim International, has units designed to work in a broadly similar way, using a vacuum belt platform.

● SmartPack Canada, developed the Rotary Placer in response to growing demand for attaching unrelated and awkward shaped products onto a carrier.

● Research suggests this concept is in its infancy and a trend is certain to see consumer goods being sold with additional incentive attachments.