



# The flight of a family business

Six decades of Universal Paper continues to spread its wings and seek new horizons.

What started out in a garage in 1950 with a few guys converting tissue paper is now a manufacturer of popular household brands of toilet tissue, kitchen towel and paper serviettes. The story of Universal Paper and Plastics (UPP) is a fascinating one. It is at its core a family business, and one with a passion for growth and the agility to make it happen.

The company was founded by Henry Sher, when he purchased shares in C&A Paper. He was swiftly joined by his sons Percy and Phil, the late father of current managing director Barry, who himself has been with the company since 1984. Twenty-five years later it was the turn of Barry's sons Jonathan and David to enter the fold, ushering in the fourth generation of Sher men.

By 1953, the business – then Universal Paper Industries (UPI) – had outgrown its garage days and the company bought property in Pretoria West with 10 staff on the payroll.

Two years later, the original owners were bought out and UPI's Diamond brand was launched. The company sold paper serviettes and paper straws to wholesalers. The company began importing paper from overseas in 1963 due to a lack of quality napkin stock locally. During its former years the company supplied serviettes to the Defence

Force, the iconic Wimpy food chain, the old Golden Egg restaurants, Pick 'n Pay and Shoprite Checkers.

It was 1980 that saw the introduction of the Dinu brand of serviettes and napkins. The handkerchief machines arrived in 1984, adding pocket pack tissues to their Dinu product range.

UPI further outgrew its premises, forcing a move to its current plant in Ga-Rankuwa. By then 60 people were in their employ, and it was at this time that the company effected a name change to Universal Paper and Plastics (UPP).

Six steady years of growth passed, and they eyed an opportunity to invest in leading-edge serviette making and printing equipment.



The entire Universal Paper 'family' in front of the new plant's stock preparation section. ▲

## Adding some colour to the industry

When Plascon closed its water-based ink division in 1998, UPP acquired both its people and equipment. "This led to an interest in ink making," says Jonathan. "We have a successful ink mixing kitchen giving us great flexibility when it comes to colours." Its Universal Inks division sells its colours to the corrugated board and plastics industries.

Craig Foster, operations executive, notes that, "Water-based inks are safer in many respects – it's safer for our employees from an exposure perspective as well as environmentally in terms of disposal, deinking and recycling.

"Legislation is changing and the move from solvent based ink is materialising," he says, adding that some companies are reluctant to change.

The year 2006 was a milestone for the business when it became the first company in South Africa to print on tissue and towel after it purchased a roll machine to satisfy their plans to manufacture toilet tissue and kitchen towel.

Two years later, Universal Paper Manufacturers (UPM) was founded to produce its own jumbo rolls to feed its converting machines and supply external customers.

The following years saw the Dinu brand launch its Professional Brand, Linen Touch napkins, Décor Multipacks and Mega household towel ranges. During this time, UPP and UPM also received certification by the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®). "We were the second South African toilet paper manufacturer to achieve this," says Jonathan.

## New plans take flight

Three years ago, the UPM team set sights on another expansion and started construction of its new plant – the preface for its biggest capital project in six decades and the installation of the first new high speed tissue line in South Africa within last 20 years.

Sharing the challenges of this endeavour, Jonathan says, "The banks wouldn't even look at us. Fortunately with the support of the Industrial Development Corporation, UPM was able to build the new phase of its tissue making plant."

Polish company PMP Group was the company's supplier of choice for this greenfield turnkey operation. This had been PMP's most encompassing turnkey tissue project in its 200-year history. Their delivery scope was extensive. "It was a collaborative effort and we were able to provide our own design and logic," explains Craig.

The paper machine (TM5) was based on PMP's Intelli-Tissue® Advanced 1600 Crescent Former tissue making line.

Dubbed "Project Gold Eagle", UPM sought to double its annual capacity and grow its product portfolio with the addition of ultra-premium tissue products. TM5 now has a total annual capacity of 23,000 tonnes at an operating speed of 1,600 metres per minute, depending on the tissue grade.

PMP supplied the tissue making line comprising a PMP Intelli-Jet V® single layer hydraulic headbox, an Andritz stock preparation system, all auxiliary systems (a lubrication system, a steam and condensate system, a dust removal system, distributed control system, quality control system and mechanical drives). PMP was on hand to provide its experienced engineering services from pre-erection, assembly and start-up supervision.

After a successful and smooth start-up on 19 February 2017 at 11:20 am, TM5 was on a roll.

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▲ PMP Chairman cuts the ribbon at the plant's official opening in September 2017 flanked by Jonathan, young Benjamin, David and Barry Sher.



## Being resourceful

The mill uses virgin fibre – a combination of locally sourced and imported. “This allows us to get a better strength and have control over the grammage,” says Craig. It is good to know that the bulk of its fibre is locally procured.

The mill uses around five cubic metres of water per tonne of tissue produced. “This is considered very good,” explains Craig, adding that they recycle their water around 90-100 times.

“The quality of our effluent water is more than compliant and we experience minimal fibre loss. We have a dry yield of around 99%,” he adds.

On matters of energy, the mill makes use of coal-fired boilers and standard electrical supply. Unfortunately gas is not available in the vicinity of the operation resulting in the hood being steam driven. Nevertheless the mill has been designed with energy and water consumption foremost in the engineers’ minds.

From an electrical energy perspective the mill has consistently returned consumption figures of around 800kWh/tonne. The mill team appears extremely happy with the choice of boiler as they are generating just over eight tonnes of steam per tonne of coal. This is further assisted by excellent drying efficiency within the plant. Currently the mill reports 2.6-2.8 tonnes of steam per tonne of paper.

Overall the electrical energy saving is in excess of 20% when compared to the existing operation and the specific coal consumption is less than half that of what was previously experienced when running the older machines.

The new plant offers exceptional drying efficiency with the use of the first steel Yankee dryer in South Africa. The installation of an insulating head on the dryer cylinder has resulted in a 3-5% energy saving. It is also safer than a cast iron Yankee.

## People power

Today UPM employs 325 people, most of whom are permanent staff and occupy around 35,000sqm in Ga-Rankuwa. “Some 70% of our employees come from the local community,” notes David.

The mill also employs four hearing-impaired people who fulfil roles in a number of different departments.

“We believe that our investment in our people is one of the reasons we have a low staff turnover. We have a number of people who have been with the company for over 30 years.”

David explains that they have apprentice programmes in all departments. David says, “Upskilling is an important factor for us in terms of building our people and our business. We are continuously grooming people into management or supervisory roles.”

◀ **FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:** Jonathan, Barry and David Sher; UPM operator Dumisani Mosambuka carries out an inspection on a jumbo roll; Dinu Kid’s Collection.

This year the company celebrated 68 years in business. “We have celebrated our birthday on an annual basis around the time of my grandfather Phil’s birthday,” explains Jonathan. “Since his passing, it has always been important for us to mark both his commitment to the company as well as to celebrate the people that make our growth today possible.”



UPM team on the occasion of the new machine’s 10,000 tonnes milestone.

“There are many examples of people who have progressed up the ranks such as general workers, moving up to packers, then to machine operators. We have had machine operators moving up to assistant electricians and then to qualified millwrights.”

“We have a driven, high performance culture at the centre, but it is rooted in family values. In the tissue industry, one has to be dynamic and agile to keep up and stay ahead of the game,” says David.

Health and safety is a top priority. The company has never experienced a fatality and its lost time injury and near-miss rates have seen a big improvement since the implementation of conscientious safety training and supervision. One’s first impression of the plant is its impeccable housekeeping which many will tout as one of the cornerstones of solid health and safety. The health and safety of consumers is just as important. UPM’s Rose Collection pioneered dermatological testing of toilet paper. Its kitchen towel product has been certified by ISEGA as safe for use with food.

## Functional novelty

UPP’s bathroom tissue brand has made some impressive developments of late. The team exudes pride over its new limited edition of its Rose Collection bathroom tissue which is packaged in a vivid metallised foil wrap. “It’s eye-catching on the limited shelf space that we have. We have our own design department which furthers adds to our cost efficiency and responsiveness.”

With its printing capabilities, the company seeks to take tissue design to the next level as can be seen with the Décor Kid’s Collection. According to the team, it has generated a lot of interest and almost too pretty and interesting to use.

Sold in fours, each toilet rolls features a different print such as maths sums and bonds, nursery rhymes, random facts and trivia, and tidbits of science and nature information. This is done by using 26 unique designs along the printing sleeve, resulting in 26 different prints along the web.

The end product is a colourful novelty. “We also want them to be educational with the power to change mindsets,” says David.

“We strive to be different and distinct by offering the consumer a range,” adds Jonathan. “We are still the only company in South Africa that is able to print on toilet paper and kitchen towel.”

UPM seems to be on a mission to become the preferred tissue supplier in the Southern Africa region, offering a wide span of ultra-premium, 100% virgin fibre tissue paper products. “We are developing innovative products for the most demanding consumers by adding creativity and education, and we are always launching new things,” remarks David.

It might just be toilet paper, but anyone in the sector knows that the consumer wants a good product. “We are also dealing with a younger, trendy generation, and having the facilities to offer something different is inspiring.”

The management team also values the fact that there is very little ‘red tape’ allowing them to be flexible and make real time decisions. If it makes sense, it gets done. “If we were saddled with corporate red tape, we wouldn’t be where we are today. A stoic culture would stunt us!” states Craig.

However operating a lean culture means that succession planning is vital. “We try and bring in the best of the corporate way while still keeping the family way,” says Barry.

Despite working together, they hardly see each other at the plant. “We drive to work together every day and this gives us time to connect,” adds Barry.

There is an adage that warns against working with family but the Sher family seems to get it right.

David and Jonathan agree that they are all very different in their ways of working and skills, and this diversity brings new thinking and strength. To the business and to their family. ■