

Plastic Card Services rewriting the script through digitalisation

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A Macclesfield-based plastic card manufacturer has secured a £1.5M contract after financial backing from Made Smarter enabled it to invest in game-changing digital printing technology.

Plastic Card Services (PCS) was launched by Rob Nicholls and Tim Holt in 1993 after they spotted a gap in the commercial card market. Run from their bedrooms the business initially operated a service model, but gradually evolved into manufacturing.

More than a quarter of a century later and the company's 50 staff produce 50 million plastic cards each year for FTSE 100 companies and household names including Harrods, Booths, Cineworld and Pets At Home.

Spotting changes in customer demand PCS invested £1M in new digital printing facilities, which has seen workload increase by almost 25%.

Now, with help from Made Smarter, the business has invested again, this time to secure a sought-after identity card contract.

The Challenge

Historically, PCS targeted large organisations requiring high volume lithographic print runs of 5,000 cards to multi-millions.

Advances in technology and a shift in customer demand for smaller, more frequent and more personalised orders inspired the company to expand into digital printing in 2017.

The investment in a new digital production facility saw a 23% increase in the volumes of digital

work in its first 12 months and inspired PCS to set its sights trying to secure a lucrative card contract.

Adam Unsworth, Managing Director, explained: *“Our new digital press allows us to print full colour personalisation with variable images and data on both the face and reverse of the card. Each side is printed separately in large sheet format (21 cards up) and is subsequently collated with clear protective overlay and magnetic stripes. The multiple layers are then laminated under heat and pressure before the final stage of punching into individual cards. However, there was no way of encoding the magnetic stripes during this process meaning the only feasible solution was to reorder the cards visually - by hand - and then run them through an encoding machine. Not only was a staggering workload, but more importantly was extremely prone to error making the contract commercially unviable.”*

The Solution

PCS took the conundrum to a German machine manufacturer and created a bespoke solution which can read the individual cards, check against the data file in real time, and then encode it.

PCS also had to write a new software solution to be able to interrogate its customer's database for the personalised data for the card and organise print jobs for the day.

The unit has been operational since July and can encode up to 3,500 cards per hour, up to 28,000 cards a day.

Adam said: *“Thanks to the software solution we have been able to fully automate the process collecting the data needed and organising the print jobs. Then when we arrive to work in the morning, the job is ready to print. Once the individual cards are punched out from the initial sheet format, they can be placed in any order because the machine takes the card through, uses OCR (optical character recognition) to read the number, verifies it on a database and then encodes it.”*

The Benefits

Ultimately, without the new reading and encoding unit, PCS would not have been able to win the contract which is worth £500,000 each year for the next three years – an 8% increase in turnover.

This has a positive impact on the regional GVA of £143,000 over the next three years.

Crucially, it has opened a whole new market for PCS in terms of photo ID cards and it has already had additional enquiries for similar contracts.

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PCS has already taken on three new staff and expects this to rise by another five in the next three years.

The Future

Moving forward PCS is looking at implementing photo ID cards onto its web-to-print ecommerce site.

PCS has also identified other potential opportunities to increase efficiency in its other production-line processes.

“I have worked at PCS for 18 years and this is the most complicated job I've ever been involved in,” Adam said. “But it's also taught us so much about streamlining processes and improving efficiencies through digitalisation, as well as the volumes we are capable of manufacturing.”

“And then there's our reputation. This identity card contract is a big deal in our industry. From a credibility point of view, it really does demonstrate to the world what we can do.”