

# Packaging

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Growth & innovation in H1 2020-21

**UFlex takes on the pandemic with full force**

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Uflex – the festive shift from unit packs to value packs

## Festival or no festival, sustainable packaging leads

Mandeep Kaur

**F**estivals in India are known to lift spirits and bring joy to people from all walks of life. For consumer businesses, the festival season is more significant because yearly targets loom large in this period. The GST collection for October has already touched the pre-pandemic levels of over Rs. one lakh crores.

Speaking of the demand during the festival season, Jeevaraj Pillai of Uflex said, "Overall, we expect the demand to go up in certain categories like staples, sanitation, pharma products, and average demand for cosmetics, high-end perishables and other non-essentials. However, the end consumer is still not feeling confident about their purchasing power due to the on-going pandemic and would rather keep their expenditures to a minimum."

### Consumers' buying behavior

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in consumers' buying behavior. The necessities have become the main focus, and non-essentials have been deprioritized. Also, safety, hygiene, and wellness have become permanent factors to consider before making any purchase. Pillai added, "The spends on luxury goods took quite a hit, and although it will take longer to come back to its pre-pandemic levels, we can see a marginal pick up in it during the festive season. Furthermore, consumer values and perspectives are evolving as the younger generation becomes a larger and more significant portion of the workforce."

Pillai says that most of Uflex's FMCG clients target only linear growth without any particular focus on new products and features during this festival season. He also sees a shift from unit-packs to value packs.

### Sustainability

"While sustainability goals got pushed to the back burner during the pandemic, we are now seeing consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands recommitting to these goals, and they prefer to work with companies that can help them achieve these. Irrespective of the festive season, sustainability will drive the conversation in the industry hereafter," states Pillai.

Uflex has been scaling its investments in products and technologies to offer a green solution portfolio and address plastic waste. "Our portfolio of multilayer packs is recyclable. Uflex also recycles PET bottle waste to make packaging films out of it and further uses those films to make labels and packets, thereby creating a circular economy." He explains that the company's approach would continue to be driven by innovating and improving its product portfolio with a high sustainability quotient while being economically viable.

### Impact of Covid-19 on business to date

Covid-19 had brought various industries to a halt and impacted the global econ-



Diwali gift aisle at the Big Bazaar supermarket at Mall of India in Noida. Photo - PSA



Jeevaraj Pillai, joint president - Packaging and New Product Development, Uflex

omy substantially. "During the lockdown and border shutdowns, the consumption levels for life-sustaining commodities such as food and medicines increased manifold, leading to hoarding of stocks, hence the packaging industry that serves these essential industries of FMCG and pharmaceuticals were not affected. On the contrary, packaging companies like ours that were able to service the essential commodity industries to ensure the supply of goods to the public at large witnessed higher demand," he said. "Since packaging is deemed an essential services segment, our plants were running with minimal staff strength and maximum-security measures."

At the beginning of the pandemic, Pillai said the demand curve surged from panic buying and hoarding. "As normalcy set in after the lockdown was lifted, we observed the demand coming back to normal. Overall, our business grew as the demand for packaging also increased due to the safety and hygiene factors attached to packaged goods."

Considering the overall market sentiment, Pillai expects demand to remain constant or experience a slight uptrend without any drastic shifts over this festive season.

### ■ Economy and industry recovery

"Packaging is an essential industry that binds the world together and has truly been a forerunner of the economy and consumption. It is important to understand that packaging serves as a gateway to ensure safe consumption and is necessary for people, especially given the fear of spreading the virus. This is the reason why we haven't seen the industry affected much as other segments." Uflex has diverse clients, including leaders from pharmaceuticals, FMCG, and dairy products.

"With the effect of the pandemic starting to wane and the festive season approaching, we have started to see green shoots of recovery in certain industries that are recovering like white goods, automobile, and retail. However, aviation, travel, and tourism are likely to remain affected till the vaccine is introduced, and the world is free of Covid-19," he concludes. ■

**"As normalcy set in after the lockdown was lifted, we observed the demand coming back to normal. Overall, our business grew as the demand for packaging also increased due to the safety and hygiene factors attached to packaged goods."**

**Jeevaraj Pillai**

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UFlex takes on the pandemic with full force

# UFlex growth & innovation in H1 2020-21

Naresh Khanna

We recently met with Amit Shah, the new joint-president of UFlex and its Packaging Division's chief marketing officer, in his office at the Noida plant. Shah, who has worked for several years with a couple of the other substantial packaging companies in India, was visibly upbeat about UFlex's overall performance over the past six months, following the Covid-19 pandemic and nation-wide lockdown. Speaking to us mainly about the packaging division's performance, he explained that since the company immediately received permission as a supplier to the essential goods sectors, it was up and running right from the beginning of the lockdown.

In May itself, the company came up with a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) solution in collaboration with IIT Delhi that it called 'Flex Protect.' The company describes its PPE, saying, "The protective coverall is made from a combination of Non-Woven Polypropylene Fabric and further impregnated with Anti-Microbial PPCoating through a special process to increase its breathability. As compared to other PPE Kits, the Flex-Protect Coverall Standard is made of 70 GSM, which makes it very comfortable and flexible, and fit to be worn for long hours."

UFlex responded to the frontline health workers' requirements and the food and pharma industries with equal immediacy and agility. As opportunities arose for new products such as sanitizers and liquid handwash, it quickly developed new flexible packaging solutions – especially for branded suppliers. New pouch laminates and shapes and innovative closures



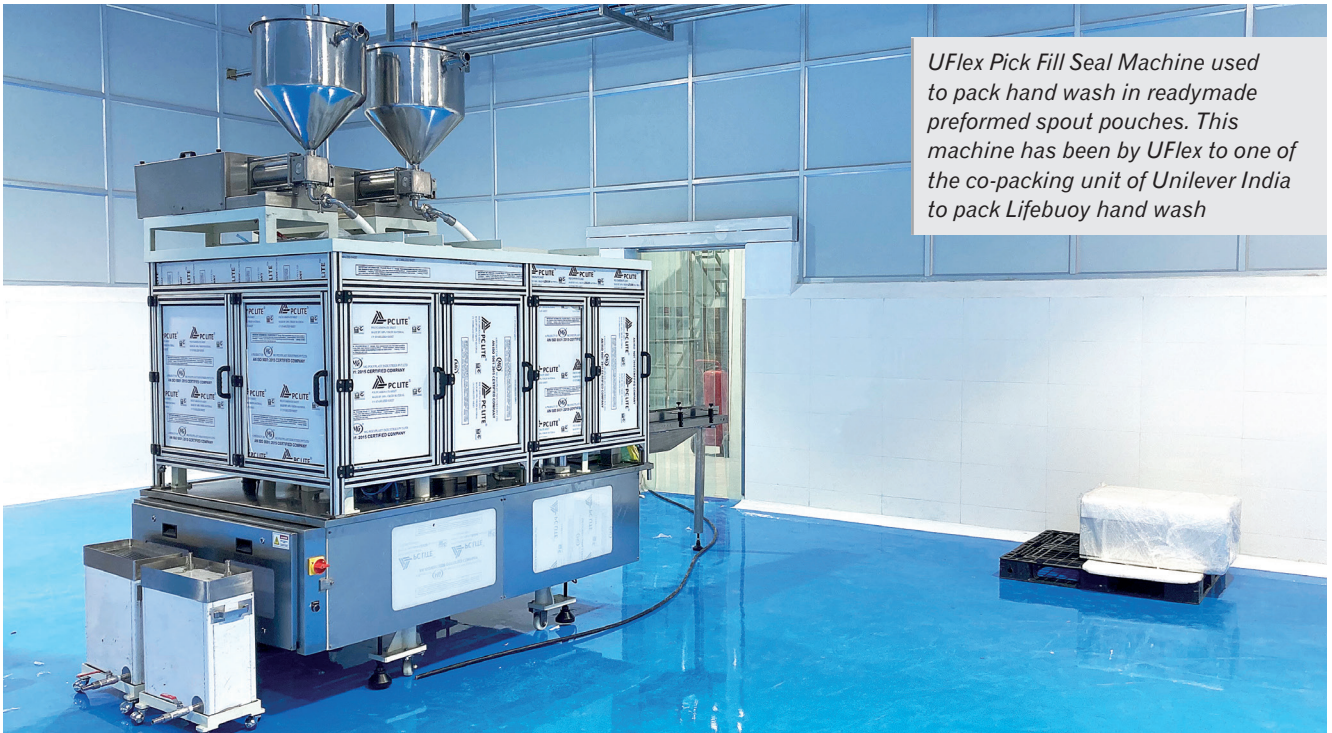
*To help meet the sudden demand for the new hygiene products during the lockdown and after, the UFlex engineering division could come up quickly with several modifications and innovations of existing machines. These gave the company an edge – a comprehensive packaging supplier of both components and finished pouches for the new category.*



Amit Shah, Jt. President & Chief Marketing Officer - Flexible Packaging Business, UFlex



Ajay Tandon, President - Engineering & New Product Development, UFlex



*UFlex Pick Fill Seal Machine used to pack hand wash in readymade preformed spout pouches. This machine has been by UFlex to one of the co-packing unit of Unilever India to pack Lifebuoy hand wash*

and caps were created and launched to help deliver distinct branding for the new and booming category.

Shah explained that many of the innovations were possible because UFlex has an engineering division that manufactures a range of equipment from gravure and CI flexo presses to pouch-making and pick, fill and seal machines. To help meet the sudden demand for the new hygiene products during the lockdown and after, the engineering division could come up quickly with several modifications and innovations of existing machines. These gave the company an edge – a comprehensive packaging supplier of both components and finished pouches for the new category.

### UFlex Engineering Division feeds innovation

UFlex is perhaps one of the most intensely vertically integrated packaging companies in the world. From films to packaging and equipment for packaging printing, lamination, pouch-making, pick, fill, and sealing equipment. Purposeful action across divisions that manufacture machines, films, and packaging materials made the company the most reliable supplier during the pandemic lockdown.



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Whatever component or machine was in short supply could be made in one of the plants in Noida. Innovative pouch shapes could be designed because pouch-making machines could be modified. Caps and closures could be manufactured in-house because there was an earlier plan to produce them. The dies had already been imported.

We took up the discussion with Ajay Tandon, president, UFlex Engineering and New Product Development, a few days later to better understand his division's essential support for innovation, especially during the pandemic and the lockdown. Tandon said, "In the past three years the Engineering Division has delivered four new and high end machines to complete the gamut of liquid packaging, lamination, filling and sealing and recycling machines. These are its extrusion coater and laminator, its Aspeto liquid filling and sealing machine, its highly automated CI flexo printing machine and flexible packaging waste recycling machine. Also, it has improved its PFS and VFFS machines with higher speeds. All of these projects are fulfilled and launched in the domestic and export markets."

### Special pouches, spouts, and caps

There was a sudden spurt in the requirement for spout pouches to maintain the supply chain in the lockdown for the new product categories of sanitizers and hand washes. UFlex has been making pouch-making machines for over 25 years, with more than a hundred supplied within group's converting division and similar number to outside customers. The upsurge in demand for special pouches for sanitizers and liquid soaps meant that brand owners wanted a pouch that increased their shelf impact and customer convenience to use as re-fills, with various shapes and spouts. The engineering division was able to adapt the punching dies for pouch making machines using the Thomson blade tooling technology.

UFlex already had multiple injection moulding machines it uses for moulding sliders for ziplock type of pouch. And since the company's chairman had planned to enter the spouts and caps segment long before the pandemic, the imported dies and molds from Husky's factory in Austria and special spouts technology from Pöppelmann in Germany were available. Different designs and diameters of spouts and caps could be produced on a short notice to fulfil the requirements of spout pouches.

### Spout fixing, capping and filling & sealing machines

Tandon explained, "The next challenge was to adapt and increase the capacities for spout-cap assembly, spout fixing/sealing and capping machines with automation. Different types of automation were needed to suit the specific requirements of customers. For certain customers, to allow the filling of pouches with the spout on the corner of the pouch the pick, fill, and seal (PFS) machines required modifications. The high demand required modifications to make the PFS machines faster and with special conveyors. The pouches' feeding and holding mechanisms also had to be modified to achieve speeds 40% faster than before. New machines had to be designed and made for automated fixing of separately moulded caps and spouts. All at very short notice.

The introduction and mass supply of pouches with special spouts and automation in spout and cap fixing assembly gave the company's packaging division vital leverage during the lockdown and even after. As Amit Shah and Ajay Tandon explained to us, not only all the major brands but also packaging material competitors were supplied by UFlex to meet the demand. The UFlex PFS machines were supplied in many numbers not only to brand owners, but to their co-packing units also.

### Sustainability

Lastly, both Shah and Tandon mentioned the company's many-sided approach to sustainability. Shah reminded us that its innovative bio-degradable laminate is still under trial with a brand owner. In closing, Tandon explained that Mixed Plastic Laminate (MPL) which are and will likely remain dominant in the flexible packaging industry, need to be recycled. UFlex engineering has built machines to recycle this MPL waste which includes metalized polyester laminates, and has already placed around fifteen of these in the field. It is in keeping with a company that thinks of the entire packaging process and is now compelled to take on the industry and society's biggest challenges. ■



UFlex has come up with new shapes for pouches with reclosable closures and caps. Photo UFlex



UFlex's higher speed Collar Type Form Fill & Seal machine CT 120 is a completely servo driven vacuum pulling, smooth-motion cross and vertical seal technology that delivers superior quality seal with high seal integrity. At a speed of 120 PPM with a very low rate of on-line rejections on snack packaging applications, this is the first Indian continuous type VFFS machine running at this high speed with minimal rejection.