

BREAKING NEWS

Flexo Wash celebrates 30-year anniversary

Henning Kongstad has built and led this global supplier of cleaning machines for the print industry.



Henning Kongstad, founder of Flexo Wash

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This year marks the 30th anniversary of Henning Kongstad's founding of **Flexo Wash**. In 30 years this family-owned business has shown significant growth, as it now employs 50 cleaning experts at its Denmark headquarters and produces cleaning machines for the global print industry.

The story of Flexo Wash officially began in 1989 with the invention of the first cleaning machine from a dishwasher. However, the complete story goes back even further to 1977.

Kongstad started a label printing business in 1977 and bought his first printing machine in 1978. It was this business that served as the impetus for inventing Flexo Wash almost 10 years later. During that time the equipment was washed by hand, which was fine with the types of inks used at the time. However, in the late 1980s the business changed to water-based inks due to environmental concerns.

Water-based inks were not easy to clean: "When the change came to water-based inks, my guys could spend all their time in between jobs cleaning the parts because it was so difficult to clean water-based inks. And I had a guy working for me who thought this could be done smarter, so he builds the first cleaning machine prototype from a regular dishwasher. Of course, it was not perfect, but we knew we had something here," says Kongstad.

The journey had begun and the second prototype for a cleaning machine was built at the local blacksmith. Most importantly, it could handle the inks and the intense workload that comes with the repeated cleaning that is necessary at a label printer business.

"During the first year I think we sold 10-15 cleaning machines, and I sold them all to colleagues I knew in business who also wanted a cleaning machine to ease their cleaning. If I hadn't had the network, I had it wouldn't have been possible to do," Kongstad comments.

Both the label printing business and Kongstad's network were key to Flexo Wash taking off and becoming a viable business. But what draws most attention is the resilience and hard work that was put into bringing the machines out into the world. The first name of this burgeoning company was Water Wash, but Kongstad thought it was too generic. The name "Flexo Wash" happened organically, well before they even thought about heading to English-speaking countries or worldwide.

Bringing Flexo Wash around the world was hard work and success did not come easy in a time where they didn't have a lot of the tools we use today. In the early 1990s, Henning and his partners had to take the machine to the customers all around the world to demonstrate how it could benefit them.

"We had a good thing going in Denmark and rather quickly I accessed other markets like United Kingdom and France to get Flexo Wash moving on the tracks – it went well. Then my brother joined to take care of Scandinavia and later he learned German to get Flexo Wash into the German market as well," says Kongstad. "Quite early on I wanted to get a hold on the American market with our cleaning machine, but we just couldn't get anyone to buy one. The market wasn't ready for change – it was different from Europe to my surprise. However, when I travelled America and visited printing businesses, I realized they needed something different – anilox cleaning. It just goes to show that driving 40-50 thousand kilometers, travelling to 53 countries 200 days a year was a big part of evolving Flexo Wash as a business and our machines"

The trip to the United States became the starting point for developing yet another machine that the market had a need for and that has become the essence of Flexo Wash: the anilox cleaner.

"Developing that anilox-cleaner to the concept and stage it is at today of course with more modern solutions took three to four years. And, all this was only possible because I had the label printing business, which could pay me a salary and generate money for Flexo Wash so everything we earned we could put back into the company for development. If I hadn't had that possibility the company would not be having its 30-year anniversary," states Kongstad.

In the early 2000s, Henning's son, Lars Kongstad, became managing director of Flexo Wash while Henning joined the Board as President. Henning explains, "Although I have a lot of companies and projects that I have started over the years, running a company is not what interests me. What interests me is getting out in the world – meet people, their cultures, talk to them and learn. Maybe I see something where I can make a difference, and then I make a move."

In the late 1990s, when the machines slowly became increasingly bigger, the company began growing substantially under the leadership of Lars Kongstad. After almost 10 more years, Lars wanted to bring in his younger brother, Anders Kongstad, as technical director. When Lars Kongstad wanted to step down as director, Anders Kongstad took over.

What Anders Kongstad brought to the company was more focus on technical engineering due to his background. Henning Kongstad had envisioned a tunnel washing concept for cylinders that would create easy handling for the heavy equipment, but the project had not taken off yet. Anders took the lead on the idea and over five years together with the rest of the Flexo Wash team he created the MCC, Multi Cylinder Cleaner, which today is a patented machine that is the largest and most impressive concept at Flexo Wash.

Henning has shown an incredible work ethic through the years and his sons follow the same principle. When the financial crisis hit the world in 2008 there was not a single order for Flexo Wash for six months. However, the company cultivated their leads and network. And after six months the orders started to fly in again and ended as one of the best years ever.

The same goes for the pandemic crisis in 2020. Henning says, "When the lockdown happened, we didn't panic. We already had plans in the work to create a different approach. We just set turbo to those plans. I believe that the world has changed, and as always Flexo Wash has changed with it."

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