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Interview – Anantshree Chaturvedi, vice-chairman & CEO, Flex Films International

It's a race for survival, not just for profits

Correspondent **Priyanka Tanwar** recently visited the UFlex offices in Noida for an interaction with **Anantshree Chaturvedi, vice-chairman & CEO, Flex Films International**. Chaturvedi holds a graduate degree from Babson College with a triple major in finance, global strategic management, and economics. He learned the trade of flexible packaging both in India and internationally with hands-on experience as a trainee and apprentice in India, Mexico, Poland, Egypt, the UAE, and the USA; and subsequently spearheaded the expansion of UFlex in the US. He is vested with the responsibility of global product stability, R&D, and HR protocols and dons the hat of the chief cultural officer at UFlex. Here, he speaks about sustainability, plastics, his company's future plans, and the industry in general.

Packaging South Asia (PSA) – There is a lot of talk about plastic recycling and waste management. What's your take on the global plastic recycling initiatives?

Anantshree Chaturvedi – There's a lot of talk and discussion on plastic recycling, in general. But is a real and practical solution being applied to solve the plastic crisis? I feel the world is still debating that. There are a couple of reasons for that. The biggest reason is that anything we need to do to solve the plastic crisis will require capital allocation. The stakeholders are waiting to see whether that comes via the government and regulations or if consumers, through their buying patterns and habits, force the industry to change and spend that capital. Either way, the solution will come. We know that the problem is unsustainable.

At UFlex, we have a Plastic Fix program – covered by *Packaging South Asia* before – that applies mechanical recycling, pyrolysis for energy, a biodegradable enzyme, and other various practical solutions. Some are waiting for a magic material to replace plastic. Or an alternative with the benefits of plastic but without its negative effects. Others are working on chemical recycling and other means. However, at UFlex, we are not staying quiet and applying whatever practical solutions are available.

I always have had this stand that plastic is a solvable problem. It just requires continued effort and commitment.

In 1992-93, when we were contemplating a large packaging plant, packaging consumption in India was around 2-3 kg per capita compared to more than 100 kg in developed nations such as the United States and Japan. We realized that when India starts substituting paper, tin, and glass with plastic packaging material, there will be a lot of waste. It would have been a huge challenge to manage that waste because our country had a rudimentary infrastructure for waste collection.

This is when we thought about building a packaging manufacturing plant that has zero solid waste discharge. We realized over a period that recycling itself is a self-sustaining business model with a reasonable ROI for sustenance. This was the vision of our group chairman and managing director Ashok Chaturvedi – that when India goes to 12-15 kg per capita consumption, we should not face a situation where we don't have the technology to recycle plastic waste.

PSA – What strategies can packaging companies adopt to deal with plastic pollution?

Anantshree Chaturvedi – Strategies, I would say, is a loaded word. A practical approach is – how does a company deal with its waste? Does a company have ways and means to deal with the waste it produces, and the plastic waste generated by a consumer after using its products?



Anantshree Chaturvedi, vice-chairman & CEO, Flex Films International

FLEXIBLE PACKAGING

If you are making, let's say, flexible packaging or flexible packaging materials – do you have sustainable ways of dealing with the waste you create inside your facility? After the end consumer is done using your product, it generally enters the waste stream. How do you go from waste to wealth? How do you provide value to that product so that it comes back to you for recycling and reuse? Or can it go to a recycling facility that applies a rupee value to it?

If each company applies this approach – applying internal value as well as the external value after the end application – that is, I think, a very, very effective strategy.

But again, the approach would be very different if you are making, let's say, injection-molded products or other kinds of polymers than for someone who's making PET plastic bottles. It would be easy for the PET bottle maker to follow the plan because these bottles have a waste value – there is an established recycling stream for them.

PSA – What are the recent developments in Flex Films concerning your sustainability initiatives?

Anantshree Chaturvedi – At UFlex, we have Project Plastic Fix and our initiatives under that bucket. We have scaled that initiative now. Initially, we started as a beta plant in India. Today, such facilities exist in Poland and Mexico. Similar facilities will come up in Egypt, Nigeria, and other places where we are producers.

We recycle post-consumer MLP mixed plastic waste into granules; upcycle recycled resins into PCR (post-consumer recycle) PET films, and partner with brand owners to create sustainable packaging solutions to reduce the use of virgin plastic at source. Our goal is to reach 1,00,000 tonnes of recycling by building additional recycling capacities across global locations.

We are in the phase of scaling the initiatives that work. We are in search of better enzymes, molecules, degradation, and compost technologies to add to this portfolio. We are at an advanced stage of development of enzyme-based biodegradable polymers, and this reaffirms the company's vision and focus on sustainable packaging. Enzyme-based technology breaks down uncollected flexible packaging waste into biomass in the soil under ambient conditions.

For us, the aim is clear. We need to break this inertia – in the market and the general polymer ecosystem – of not dealing with this problem. It is similar to how people don't want to deal with and accept climate change or infrastructure issues or food security and water security. Plastics is one of those things. It's easier to debate and talk. But the actual momentum on the ground is what's missing. UFlex is focused on how to break that lack of momentum and get things moving.

PSA – Where do you see growth in the global and South Asian context for Flex Films?

Anantshree Chaturvedi – For Flex Films, I would say India is already a vast market for us. We have a new plant in Dharwad, Karnataka.

South Asia and Southeast Asia are excellent markets with a strong population that drives polymer, glass, and aluminum packaging. We've always been bullish on these markets. The key is how to balance growth with sustainability. You cannot have unsustainable growth. You cannot have a pure fossil fuel-based ecosystem that will provide non-future-proof products to these markets. That's always the challenge as these are typically low-price or low-cost markets. You will see further expansion not only by Flex Films but by other companies as well in this segment and in this space.

PSA – Where are you planning these investments?

Anantshree Chaturvedi – We have expanded in Egypt and our Panipat facility. We have expanded CPP in India and Dubai. In Mexico, we have added a PCR facility recently. For us, one big part of our growth story right now for a different part of UFlex, is the aseptic packaging division or Asepto. That has gone from 7



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billion to 12 billion packs in the existing plant – 35% of that material gets exported to neighboring countries.

There's room to expand certain parts of our existing portfolio as well as our foray into PET chips to secure our raw material cycle, something we realized during Covid. There are several projects in play. We are in an expansion drive like everybody else. In the packaging film business in general, not just Flex Films, the market is in a deeply fragmented state at present. There are many new, small players and niche players. We will see this fragmented cycle transit into a consolidation cycle.

I do feel that in a year or a year-and-a-half, your journal will be reporting on mergers and acquisitions, takeover bids, and consolidations in this industry. I feel that a lot of inorganic growth as well as merger and acquisition-based growth will start happening as opposed to greenfield growth in this segment.

■ **PSA – What are some of your innovations in the flexible films division?**

Anantshree Chaturvedi – For us, it's all about adding barrier properties. Our metalized, high-barrier, easy-tear polyester has been a great innovation as well as our transparent, high-barrier, easy-tear one. But our focus today, if I may generalize, is to add the maximum number of properties to our existing films to provide a wide range of applications for different market segments to a product. All our products today are compatible with 100% PCR. So, there's no film in our portfolio that we can't convert into a 100% PCR film. That's been a big focus for us.

We have an ever-reaching goal of having the highest barrier property possible. We do it through a combination of applying coatings as well as making molecular and structural changes to our products so that we don't have many second or third manufacturing offline add-ons that add to the cost, complexity, and a closed delivery cycle. We think we can do it in line, or closer to in line – that's what Flex Films' focus is.

■ **PSA – Would you like to shed light on innovations in other departments?**

Anantshree Chaturvedi – If you take chemicals, for example, our focus has been on going away from PU-based inks and adhesives to going water-based. We have a goal of being completely water-based by 2025. That's been a key focus for us in that segment. It is the same with packaging. We want applications of sustainable films and technologies. We want to reduce our carbon footprint in the best way possible.

■ **PSA – Your expansion plans for the entire UFlex portfolio?**

Anantshree Chaturvedi – Our expansion plans are varied. If you look at our structure and our business, we want to be a material solution provider. In India, we're a packaging company. We have a wide array of products and services. And then, of course, there is an expansion of capacity and product portfolio. Eventually, we want to get into the cycle of being a material science, and a material solution provider to the industry.

■ **PSA – Anything you would like to add?**

Anantshree Chaturvedi – For companies in the polymers space, this is not just a race toward profitability, it is a race for survival. What most companies forget is that if we don't make this change today, and don't initiate these changes towards sustainability and a more carbon-neutral future, the industry's survival will be at stake. That's a key thing I think that gets forgotten.

The reason why UFlex invented these technologies and has been working on them since the early 90s was that we were worried about the future of our industry even back then. That's something we very actively pay attention to even today.

I feel many in the industry and a lot of machine and technology suppliers simply choose to blindfold themselves. A journal like yours can help highlight that a little bit, identify trends, and reinforce that change in the industry. ■



Project Plastic Fix

UFlex runs a global sustainability initiative called Project Plastic Fix. The initiative is aligned with the company's sustainability approach of 4Rs to tackle the challenge of reducing stock and flow of plastic waste in the environment.

■ **The key principles are:**

- 1. Reduce** plastic at source by manufacturing and using films made from PCR. Flex Films offers a whole line of post-consumer grade PCR Films with up to 100% post-consumer recycled PET content under the brand name Asclepius.
- 2. Recycle** via upcycling and downcycling of MLP (Multi-Layer mixed Plastic) and PET containers, covers, other articles and bottles.
- 3. Reuse** as source substitution via Pyrolysis. In order to eliminate the need for energy-intensive machinery, UFlex converts the discarded plastic waste material generated daily by printing, unused trim, laminates, tubes, and other unprocessed materials at its Noida Packaging plant into liquid fuel, hydrocarbon gas, and carbon black.
- 4. Return** Flexzyme is an enzyme-based technology which, when it comes in contact with soil, completely breaks down uncollected flexible packaging waste into harmless elements such as water, biomass, and carbon.