

PRESS ARTICLE

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ASEPTICALLY BOTTLING DRINKS IN PET BOTTLES UNLOCKS SOKPOL'S SUCCESS



A Polish family company surfing on the beverage growth

With over 400 employees, the family company Sokpol is one of the top Polish co-packers, producing sensitive beverages like nectars, fruit juices, vegetable juices and teas in carton, glass, and PET containers. "Since the company was established in 1992, the Polish market has developed fantastically well. Today, the food and drinks segment has sped up considerably. A lot of shops opened and many big discounter chains appeared everywhere to serve the local demand", explains Roman Sobczyk, President of Sokpol. "Since the beginning, our strategy is to support private beverage labels. They represent 80% of our business today and they require a very high level of product quality and flexibility."

While becoming the number one player in Poland in the private label sector - based on its production capacity and quality - Sokpol has started to develop its own brand and new product recipes, benefitting from its own concentrate production factory. Three quarters of the company's overall production is delivered to the Polish market, serving all the international hard-discount chains as well as some German, Portuguese and French retailer brands, based locally. Sokpol also exports to Bulgaria, Romania, and other countries, and even to the US.

Contact:

Public Relations
Tel: +39 0521 999 452
press@sidel.com

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Aseptic PET bottling, the obvious choice

25 years ago, Sokpol started producing its beverages in carton and glass, which were very popular packaging materials in Poland at the time. Since then, it had to quickly adapt its production to the changing market demand. “As the consumers’ expectations have been changing rapidly over the two decades, we started producing our drinks aseptically in PET bottles in 2008. We wanted to delete preservatives from the beverages, while taking full advantages of the PET bottle marketing assets and design freedom - something the carton package could not offer. We also needed full production flexibility to handle all types of beverages and bottle formats. At this stage, we chose Sidel as no other competitor could propose the same aseptic PET filling technology. This was a crucial point in our history, as we were the first to introduce sensitive beverages without preservatives in PET bottles to the Polish market. Now, we can bottle all the products we were previously packaging in carton in PET – with no limitation”, explains Roman.

The fact that Sokpol is largely recognised for the beverage quality it provides is explained by Jerzy Urbanski, CEO at Sokpol: “When we are talking about aseptically filling any juice, nectar or tea in PET bottles, the production conditions are extremely demanding as food safety is key. We need to ensure complete beverage integrity to deliver the final good product, which everyone expects.” He continues, “Ten years ago, we were thinking PET was the best packaging solution. After the installation of three aseptic complete PET lines during the last decade, billions of bottles produced, and our business growing, we are completely convinced this is the right choice. We can credit this success to three crucial points: excellent water quality, the best technical equipment, and our people.”

A huge and flexible production capacity

Today, Sokpol produces around one million packages a day and supplies a wide beverage portfolio. By featuring many different flavours and recipes, package types and formats, representing over 500 Stock Keeping Units (SKUs) in total, it is perfectly established to answer any consumer demand. “More than 50% of our SKU production is bottled in PET and this figure is constantly increasing for simple reasons: you can see the drink inside the PET bottle, you easily open and close it. You can achieve practically an unlimited number of shapes, which offers great package differentiation”, adds Jerzy. To be successful, the company is taking into consideration the changing market demands to quickly adapt its production in terms of beverages’ recipe, bottle and cap shapes, production volume, and shipping conditions.

Sokpol is able to serve this growing market thanks to the huge production capacity offered by the three aseptic PET lines, provided by Sidel during the past ten years. Two lines are running at 15,000 bottles per hour each, whereas the third line is running faster, producing over 30,000 bottles per hour. “To answer an ever-shifting market and offer even more relevant and cost-effective solutions, we have to be very flexible. For instance, we initially delivered our beverages

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Tel: +39 0521 999 452
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on European pallets, whereas today we deliver them on half pallets and even smaller ones. In some cases, we pack different beverages' types on the same pallet, as the mass retailers want to diversify their drinks offer in a quite limited distribution space."

A safe and simple aseptic packaging solution

When it comes to its investment in PET packaging equipment, Sokpol was truly visionary and innovative. In 2008, they pioneered in acquiring an aseptic PET packaging line from Sidel but not just any aseptic line. "This was the first aseptic line with the Sidel dry preform sterilisation in Europe and the second one worldwide," Blazej Pluta, Member of the Sokpol Board and responsible for Investments, comments proudly. "With the Aseptic Combi Predis™, we can safely and simply produce any extended shelf life beverage without preservatives, offering great advantages from a health and marketing point of view." After some months of operating and learning this new industrial production set-up, Sokpol was convinced of the efficiency and the simplicity of the solution with no need of complex aseptic blowing. The best demonstration of this trust was the repeated orders for this Sidel aseptic technology. "With the dry preform sterilisation before the oven, nothing can go wrong. Within the past 10 years, zero unsterile bottles occurred."

The Sokpol management team also considered many other advantages of this technology. "Traditional bottle decontamination consumes a huge amount of water, whereas the dry preform sterilisation system requires no water and very few chemicals, representing the best solution in terms of environmental footprint and cost in our opinion." To complete this approach, the company is now considering to lightweight its bottles. "We are really well prepared to decrease the bottle weight with the great lightweighting potential Predis offers. We also implemented a nitro-dosing system on our three aseptic lines to ensure a better bottle performance and a better consumer experience when handling it". As Sokpol is constantly looking for any improvement opportunity in order to increase its business performances, it implemented a new raw material magazine, a new automatic warehouse, an automatic picking station and mixing station and that is not all. "During the next three years, we are planning to double our production capacity. Our competitors do not sleep, so we have to be ready in the next years to increase and diversify our production, while improving our efficiency."

The collaboration with Sidel, a good insurance for the future

A partnership between two companies is not built in a day. The shared experiences are instrumental in reinforcing the needed trust, which is what happened between Sokpol and Sidel concerning packaging line supply, new product and bottle developments, skills sharing, after-sales services, and the collaboration thus achieving today's top level. Whereas the first aseptic PET

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line acquired by Sokpol was supplied by two companies, the Polish co-packer decided to rely exclusively upon Sidel for the full delivery scope of the other two lines. “Having one unique supplier was the right decision, as the responsibility for the complete packaging line performance is fully in the hands of a single player. We are really happy with this solution,” explains Jerzy. Sokpol also awarded some bottle developments to Sidel, from the bottle design to the beverage and package evaluation, from the blowing process tests to detailed technical feasibility reports. “Our Marketing Department works very closely with the Sidel Packaging team to develop new bottle shapes and new beverages’ tastes. We particularly appreciate the understanding of our requests and the very short time needed to develop a project.” Sidel also provided intense periods of training to the Sokpol team at the customer’s production plant. “During two years, we invested a lot of time performing advanced training for our technicians and our maintenance team, together with Sidel. The training sessions held on our equipment in our factory were really well done. This was the best solution to gain experience according to a step-by-step approach. Our skilled employees are now more efficient and can reduce the time required for many activities.”

Based on this positive experience, Sokpol already proposed new ideas about how to cooperate with Sidel for advanced technical training in order to achieve better performance and efficiency on their Sidel aseptic PET bottling lines. For example, by using remote control systems to help the maintenance team and solve any problem they may face easily and quickly. In addition, due to the proximity of the local Polish office, the Sidel Services team is there to support Sokpol, whenever it is needed. “The Sidel after-sales department made a huge step forward in providing very reactive and qualitative services. Their technicians are now very quick in solving the questions or issues we are raising. Our collaboration with Sidel is a good insurance for the future; this is a crucial point,” concludes Jerzy.

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Tel: +39 0521 999 452
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For editorial, advertising and sponsorship enquiries, please contact:
F&H Porter Novelli
Katherina Riesner, Junior Consultant
Tel: +49 (0) 89 121 75 180
Email: sidel@fundh.de

For any other enquiries, please contact:
Sidel Group
Lucia Freschi, Public Relations Manager
Tel: +39 0521 999452/Cell: +39 3472632237
Email: lucia.freschi@sidel.com

Contact:
Public Relations
Tel: +39 0521 999 452
press@sidel.com

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About Sidel Group

The Sidel Group is formed by the union of two strong brands, Sidel and Gebo Cermex. Together, we are a leading provider of equipment and services for packaging liquid, food, home and personal care products in PET, can, glass and other materials.

With over 37,000 machines installed in more than 190 countries, we have nearly 170 years of proven experience, with a strong focus on advanced systems, line engineering and innovation. Our 5,000+ employees worldwide are passionate about providing complete solutions that fulfil customer needs and boost the **performance** of their lines, products and businesses.

Delivering this level of performance requires that we continuously **understand** our customers' challenges and commit to meeting their unique goals. We do this through dialogue, and by understanding the needs of their markets, production and value chains. We complement this by applying our strong technical knowledge and smart data analytics to support maximum lifetime productivity to its full potential.

We call it **Performance through Understanding**.

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