



RollsRoller machines in situ

# On a roll

In the mid-1990s, the idea for a flatbed applicator was devised. Today, its creators explain how it is now a familiar – and well regarded – sight

Words | **Emma Nilsson, RollsRoller, Sweden**

In 1996, the flatbed applicator was just an idea, but by 2012, it had become a widely used tool – in history lies the future! The past helps to define our world today. Past events and proven products give us confidence and stability; they lead us forward and give us new opportunities. Inventions through the ages have one common denominator: they make life easier. Inventions that have revolutionised and simplified life are a natural part of our world today, giving us products we take for granted and find difficult to live without. In the sign-making industry, Reklamidé feels confident in saying that the RollsRoller has such a place in sign production, and therefore a natural place in the future.

Most products, ideas and inventions result from a single thought: 'There must be an easier way of doing this.' This is certainly true for the RollsRoller. In 1996, a wild autumn hurricane rolled in over the west coast of Sweden. At one of Sweden's leading petrol retailers, the storm destroyed many of its forecourt signs. While biting, wet winds tore apart the acrylic signs and rained sharp fragments of plastic on busy

streets, the Johansson brothers' own flexible-face EZ system was making inroads across Sweden. As pioneers of flexible signs, Reklamidé and the brothers Göran and Patrik were faced with a real challenge: to manufacture 100 new signs at very short notice.

## Lateral thinking

Göran Johansson recalls: "It was easier said than done. At that time, all the parts were laid out by hand. We rented a school so that we could roll out the material on the floor and get the right fit, then do the lamination with soapy water and hand-held spatulas. It was heavy work and very time-consuming. And there was always the risk hanging over us that we would not finish in time."

That was when he thought 'there must be a better way of doing this'.

Thought was soon converted into action. His idea was to fit a table with a traverse and roller to simplify application on the substrate. Using parts bought from a scrapyard, Johansson developed



(Left) **Multiple units being put to work** (Above) **Happy customers admire their machine**

the first flatbed applicator himself in just one week. Reklamidé was able to complete the remaining 80 signs in a fraction of the time it had taken to make the first 20. It was afterwards that Johansson realised that simply by trying to make things easier, he had invented something completely new.

The RollsRoller became a patented product that was ready to take on the sign-making market. Reports from customers confirmed time after time that it was changing their entire business from the ground up. By the start of the year 2000, a detailed business plan had been set up – a plan that resulted in machines reaching sign makers in every corner of the world. From the company's production plant in Sweden, it has now supplied more than 2,800 machines, many of them to manufacturers of road signs. In the past 10 years, more than 150 road sign manufacturers have boosted their productivity by over 100%, thanks to RollsRoller.

In 1999, Plast & Plåt Vägmarcken in Sweden was the first manufacturer of road signs to invest in a RollsRoller flatbed applicator. Since then, many more road sign manufacturers have followed this example, first in Sweden, and a few years later by the rest of Scandinavia.

To further improve production, capacity companies that invest in the system, such as Plast & Plåt Vägmarcken, generally ensure that every employee who applies film to road signs has their own machine as a work table and application table.

Companies outside Sweden have followed the same path in sign making. Road sign manufacturer Euroskill is in neighbouring Norway. The company serves more than 80% of the Norwegian market and owns over 20 RollsRoller tables. "As an

owner of so many tables you will understand how delighted we are with the results that RollsRoller produces. We have production facilities in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, and in every location the system has helped us to improve efficiency and increase our output of road signs," says Trond Aamodt, production supervisor at Euroskill.

Further south, in Germany, big investments have been made in these machines since 2004. Production efficiencies have particularly improved in the manufacture of large guide signs.

Commenting on the system, Bruno Neuschwander, from Alpha Sign in Switzerland, says: "It is one of my most profitable investments. Our previous production method (hand roller) is like something from pre-industrial revolution times when comparing with the industrial production the RollsRoller offers us."

Greek road sign manufacturer Zafeiropoulos Cristos also reports positive feedback. The company's Andreas Sarlis says: "Our production has increased and the quality of signs is much better. The workers' lives are made easy. This was one of the best purchases we have made."

The German sign maker, Schilderwerk Beuth, applies film to traffic signs using a RollsRoller. The machine improves production efficiency and guarantees that road signs meet high standards of quality. It optimises the working process in road sign production and is the key element in the process of film application.

The system helps to contribute to a more modern approach to producing signs and road signs. Many road sign manufacturers now use from two to seven applicators, and the biggest manufacturers have as many as 23. Together, the 19 largest manufacturers in

Scandinavia have now invested in more than 75 applicators.

### **Digital printers double productivity**

New technology is now starting to replace the electronic cutting overlay (ECOF) method. Increasing numbers of road sign manufacturers are now switching to digital printing directly on to reflective film. Once the printed parts have been cut out, the reflective film is then applied very easily with a RollsRoller to various substrates.

This method enables sign manufacturers to apply foil with millimetre precision to panels measuring up to 10m in length. The new technique permits application of the full roll width (e.g. 120cm) in a single stage to a number of joined panels. With the introduction of digital printing in combination with flatbed applicator technology, a single operator can now produce up to 60m<sup>2</sup> of signage in one day.

Jonas Forsvall, CEO of Blinkfyra, comments: "We are the fifth company in the world to introduce fully digitised road sign production. We are now using third-generation technology consisting of printers, applicators and cutting equipment. We invested in our first RollsRoller 10 years ago and it's still in use today. It works beautifully with the new technology and this is another area where we make big time savings. We save time and we've more than doubled our capacity. We started with a single machine and now we have seven."

The use of the flatbed applicators in the road sign industry is spreading. They can be found in central and eastern Europe, in North America, Australia, Africa and Asia. The method that RollsRoller represents has led to a paradigm shift in the way road signs are produced. ■