



(L-R) Essemtec Marketing Manager Florian Schildein and COBRA Project Manager Rolf Hochstrasser

Essemtec shows what counter-cyclical action is: The Swiss manufacturer recently introduced a completely new pick-and-place machine, COBRA, at SMT Nuremberg 2010 in a booth almost twice as large as in 2009. Adrian Schärli spoke with Marketing Manager Florian Schildein and COBRA Project Manager Rolf Hochstrasser about the newest Essemtec product and its development.

Rolf, your task was to demonstrate the COBRA to customers at SMT Nuremberg. Were you busy?

Rolf Hochstrasser (ROH): Oh yes, there were not many breaks. At almost all times a customer was in front of the machine.

What makes this machine so attractive?

ROH: The design. Everybody confirmed that the developers took both time and effort to make the COBRA look good. Many people stood still watching it just because they were impressed by the design. It is a beautiful machine.

And what about inside?

ROH: The inside is just as good-looking. The main features of the COBRA include the latest technologies and newest materials, high flexibility, high feeder count, the Eplace software, and Swiss quality. The machine features the best and most modern that is available today.

What kind of customer was interested in the COBRA?

ROH: A full range: everybody from subcontractor to end-product manufacturers. For example, a sensor manufacturer has directly compared the COBRA to competitor machines and he was really impressed with it.

What inspired him the most?

ROH: The flexibility because he produces about 2500 different boards and changes over his machine multiple times daily. On competitors' machines this is not simple and it takes a long time.

Why is that?

ROH: Because competitors' systems only have approximately 100 feeder slots, therefore, they must completely dismount all feeders and set them up again every time the product changes. Not so with COBRA, which offers 240 feeder slots. The next job can be set up while the current one is running.

Florian Schildein (FLS): COBRA is principally a new machine species. Before, there was only either fast or flexible, but the COBRA builds a bridge between the two extremes. It is both highly flexible and fast.

How long was the development time?

ROH: The kickoff meeting was almost exactly three years ago. Before that I had six months of preparation time for customer interviews, writing specifications and project orders. We first got started in 2007.

Were there key moments during development?

ROH: It has always been exciting. Especially when the industry slipped into a crisis it was important that we continue our development without restrictions. Otherwise, we would have lost knowhow and time, and could not present the new machine today. But now, we could even surpass the goals. For example, we have predicted a throughput of 10,000 cph, but we already are at 15,000.

FLS: And we have even pushed a machine in between - the PARAQUADA.

What is the PARAQUADA?

FLS: It is the connection between the FLX and the COBRA. We first showed it at Productronica 2009. It is faster and bigger than the FLX but still below the COBRA. And the best thing is that the customer can use the same feeders on all of the machines. In this way, we can offer investment protection for the customer. For more power only the platform needs to be changed, the feeders not immediately.

Not immediately, what does this mean?

ROH: The FLX feeder concept was introduced 10 years ago. At this time, the feeding speed and precision requirements were not as high as today. For the COBRA, there is now a new generation of feeder in which the machines can do double and quatro picks, in other words pick up four components at once. To make full use of the capacity of the COBRA, simply switch to the new feeder type, but there is no obligation to do so.

And now the COBRA's development is finished?

ROH: I believe the COBRA is a base for the future. This also is an important message for the customer: With the COBRA, he gets a top, modern platform on which further developments will take place. We have prepared the playing field for the next 10 years or so, which can be adapted for future requirements. COBRA is not at the limit, it has potential.

Essemtec's machines are getting faster and larger. What happens to the small machines such as the manual EXPERT placement system?

FLS: We follow the "real turnkey solution concept" with no compromise and offer our customers complete production solutions from small to large. With the COBRA, the new reflow oven RO-VARIO and the new printer TUCANO we have just expanded our turnkey offerings on the upper end. However, entry-level and development solutions are just as important and are developed further, too.

The booth at SMT Nuremberg was almost double last year's booth. So, Essemtec does not feel the crisis at all?

FLS: Of course we have felt it, but we do not moan, we leave this to others. Within just one year, Essemtec has introduced two new assembly machines, the new software eplacer, the printer TUCANO, the new AOI machine TRAQU and other devices. Our product range has grown, so must the floor space to show it. We want to demonstrate that we are a reliable partner for our customers even in difficult times.

Does the effort pay off?

FLS: I believe so. Feedback from our customers, from the press and from the competition confirmed that we are doing the right thing in both development and marketing.

ROH: I agree. With the COBRA we now have the most modern pick-and-place platform in the market. It is ideal for Essemtec's customers and it is introduced just at the right time - now - when market is picking up again.

Florian and Rolf, many thanks for an interesting interview.