



Inventive solutions

From its standing start in 2004, Somex now employs eight people at its facility in Macroom in Co Cork, while its equipment operates in 20 countries across three continents

'We want to be a recognised supplier into the beverage industry of innovative test equipment'

Brian O'Keefe

BEING customer rather than product focused is a key competitive advantage for this automated solutions provider with Somex counting some of the world's biggest companies amongst its client list.

Managing director Brian O'Keefe explains that there are two distinct strands to the company's business: "The design and build of laboratory test equipment for the beverage industry and the design and build of automation used in manufacturing type industries. Our core skills and strengths are in the area of design; an essential requirement for our customers who are leaders in their fields."

Operating across the pharmaceutical, medical, plastics and electronics sectors, Somex delivers innovative automation solutions to a range of commercial partners. "We tend to get involved where there's a difficult situation and an innovative idea is required to solve it. We've often been brought in when another machine hasn't been working to the required standard. Typically, this would involve taking several parts of a process and automating them in one machine. You start with a blank sheet and a concept, agreed with a customer, work it through to a prototype to demonstrate the principle and then through to a fully functioning machine that is installed." In just one example of how this works in practice, Somex, with support from Siemens, has provided a pharmaceutical company with an automated multi-axis servo-controlled prototype machine to package a controlled drug, where the absolute count accu-

racy required had not been available from other suppliers.

The company's second area of expertise centres on the beverage industry. Somex has developed a range of solutions for both package and product testing in the sector. Listing PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Carlsberg, Britvic and C&C among its clients, the company's five products are currently used in beverage laboratories around the globe.

Somex was initiated when O'Keefe and technical director Michael Wall got together to provide a specific automation solution to PepsiCo in Cork. Having steadily expanded both sides of the business, turnover in 2006 rose by some 35pc. Today, the company has outgrown its Macroom facility and is currently planning the design and building of a new premises to facilitate future growth.

Innovation lies at the heart of the company's activities. As O'Keefe explains: "We now have a research project in training with UCC where we have a master's student starting to investigate one particular area of beverage test that we can use to drive the industry forward and help with some of the issues that they currently have in the testing area." In addition, the company has committed to reinvesting 15pc of its turnover into the development of new products.

O'Keefe is keen to stress, however, that Somex is client rather than product focused. "Typically, a company, which might need to sort out a particular automation or throughput problem, would seek proposals from several companies and they would pick the solution to sort out their particular issue at the time. When we establish a rela-

tionship with a customer, we tend to become the single source supplier. We're very customer focused and that stands to us."

Given its high level of specialisation and the niche in which Somex operates, the company's marketing is generally reference based. "Often, the Irish base for a manufacturing company would install a piece of automation and then the other companies within the group would request it as well. We have done that twice in the UK and potentially now in the US as well."

Working with Enterprise Ireland's foreign offices, the company has established sales and technical support partners in Australia, New Zealand, the Nordic countries and Japan, while similar arrangements in other regions will come on stream in the coming months. In addition, the company aims to push ahead with further innovation and product development across both sides of the business. "We want to be a recognised supplier into the beverage industry of innovative test equipment and to continue to work with our customers through research projects in sorting out quality issues or new test methods to simplify quality control. We will continue to run both streams in parallel. It's the core skill of design and ideas that feed into both of them."

Entering the SFA National Small Business Awards, according to O'Keefe, is all about one thing: recognition. "Our employees have strong core skills and they're very committed. This is really recognition for them that their efforts are worthwhile."