

One of a small number of Irish companies in the pressure-testing industry, Somex launched Delta 3000 last year and the machine is being used by Pepsi to test bottles in 16 countries. TRISH DROMEY reports

Somex releases pressure genie from its bottle

ANYONE who knocks back a fizzy drink probably doesn't stop to wonder why pressure doesn't cause the bottle to explode or crack. But in the modern age no one has to, since a whole industry exists to ensure that this doesn't happen.

One of a small number of companies in Ireland operating in this area is Somex in Macroom, which last year launched an unique pressure-testing machine which is now being used in Pepsi laboratories in 16 countries around the world.

Called Delta 3000, it's the first machine which can pressure-test both glass and plastic bottles. It's currently in use in Pepsi bottling operations in Ireland, Britain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Libya, Kuwait, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Pakistan, India and China.

Somex, which specialises in developing laboratory test equipment for the beverage industry, is now planning an aggressive marketing campaign for Delta 3000 and is also exploring the possibility of adapting it for use in the medical and pharmaceutical sectors.

Based at the 'MacroomeE' environmental business park, the company is targeting a turnover of €1 million within three years.

Set up in 2000 by directors Brian O'Keeffe and Michael Wall to build automation products for companies in Munster, the company was initially

€nterprise FOCUS

based in Tralee but moved to Macroome last year.

Mr O'Keeffe had previously worked in process improvement in the electronics industry, while Mr Wall had been involved in design and control automation.

"Between us we had 40 years' experience in automation and decided there was a niche for a company supplying automation products to local industry," revealed Mr O'Keeffe.

It was while working in this area that Mr O'Keeffe and Mr Wall identified a space in the market for a company which could develop higher specification laboratory equipment.

They became aware that Pepsi needed a machine to test both glass and plastic bottles and set out to create one.

A feasibility study grant in 2003 from Shannon Development in Tralee helped get the project off the ground.

Somex then developed a total of four products which are all designed for use in laboratories in the drinks industry.

As well as the Delta 3000, there's a degasser for removing CO₂, a CO₂ tester



Brian O'Keeffe, director of Somex Ltd., which moved from Tralee to the 'MacroomeE' Environmental Business Park last year because the park offered incubation space and had a good range of facilities.

Picture: Gerard McCarthy

and an auto dispenser which accurately provides small volume samples for testing.

By summer 2004 the company's products were ready for launch, but to expand the business Somex needed new premises. With the help of Enterprise Ireland it found a 1,500sq ft incubation unit at Macroome's environmental business park.

"We came here because MacroomeE was one of the few places in the region offering incubation space and it had a very good range of facilities," explained Mr O'Keeffe.

The company now employs a staff of five but subcontracts work to over 250 suppliers around the country. The aim now is to launch a sales and marketing

campaign focusing on bottle manufacturers and users in the drinks industry.

To help with this, Mr O'Keeffe signed up with the Genesis Enterprise Programme for entrepreneurs in Cork last year. One of the key tasks facing the company is to identify a worldwide distributor for Somex products and Mr O'Keeffe hopes to have one in place by the end of the year.

Sales of laboratory testing equipment now account for 60% of turnover and are expected to grow to 80% within the next three years.

"But developing automation products will remain an important part of our business, especially since it helps us identify opportunities for future product lines," observes Mr O'Keeffe.

Factfile

Company: Somex.

Location: Macroome Environmental Business Park, Cork.

Set Up: 2000.

Directors: Brian O'Keeffe and Michael Wall.

Staff: Five.
Exports: 60%.

Products: laboratory testing equipment for the beverage industry.