

Paws for thought

With a brand new factory in the middle of Kentucky's 'Japanese Valley', Takigawa is aiming to turn profits from pets in North America. **Dominique Huret** visits the new plant

In front of a modern white building in Bardstown, Kentucky, three flags are floating: the Stars and Stripes of the USA, the red 'sun' of Japan, and Takigawa's corporate flag. The building is Japanese pouch maker Takigawa Corporation's new factory and represents a firm commitment to the US market.

"About eight years ago, our Vietnam plant started exporting high-quality multilayer pouches and laminated bags to North America," explained Kensuke Yamamura, president of Takigawa's US business. "And export volumes have been growing ever since. Today, 50 per cent of this factory's capacity goes to North America. We received 150 site offers across the US, but for us three main criteria were essential. It had to be a location within 24 hours' drive from existing customers, a

good employment market and some tax incentives from local government. A site in Kentucky about 40 miles south of Louisville was selected and building work started in the middle of 2018."

In a town of 13,000 inhabitants, there are signs of Japanese influence. "Toyota used to have a factory nearby, but today several other Japanese packaging and printing companies have located here including Fuji Seal and Inoac Packaging Group. Local people are very dedicated, which is crucial for us Japanese," added Ryo Takigawa, third son of the founder and president of the Japanese business, Hiroyuki Takigawa (featured in *Plastics in Packaging*, March 2019).

Built at a cost of around \$30 million, the 148,000 sq ft greenfield site is



Above and inset right: Ryo Takigawa, the third son of company founder Hiroyuki, pictured in the US factory and a local pet shop



located on an 18-acre field, and an additional investment of \$15m is likely to follow for expansion of three sides of the plant. During the site's inauguration and as a sign of long-term partnership, people were invited to plant a Japanese cherry tree or 'sakura' on the front field.

European and Asian technology

At the end of July 2019, the factory was still in the final stages of testing equipment, producing sample material and obtaining customer approvals.



Above: President Kensuke Yamamura (left) and Ryo Takigawa in the 148,000 sq ft factory in Kentucky

Above left and left: Pet shops across the US and Canada offer an astonishing range of services for much-loved pets

“As Takigawa is producing the highest quality laminations and films in flexible packaging, we take the utmost care in our production,” said Yamamura. “We do not own the truck fleet or extrude films, but buy mainly US two- or three-layer PE and PET, and vacuum metallised (VM) PET. Two main hallmarks of our products are: they are the result of the highest hygiene standards, which go beyond a US food-grade factory and follow or surpass Japanese cleanroom requirements; and we are operating with gravure printing, which is uncommon in the US – traditionally a ‘flexographic’ country.”

For Takigawa, gravure is superior in terms of quality, but the company does have to explain to customers that the technology is not without some constraints, the price of the cylinders being one of the more significant barriers in the US.

and to allow full latitude to operate quickly. The 10-colour press is German-made, 30m long and required just one month of adjustment by a German engineer.”

As expected in a high-tech Japanese factory, quality control is very important, and Ryo Takigawa explained: “Our objective is to equal the ultra-low rejection rates for flat-bottom or side-gusset bags rejection at the other two Takigawa factories. We are aiming for one reject per 20 million bags, using a carefully monitored process including inspection machines.”

Three ambitious development phases

During the pre-operational phase, a team of 30 local employees and five expatriate Japanese will lead the business and produce an expected output of 2.5 million bags a year. For phases two and three in the years 2020-2023 and

“To maintain our competitive advantage, we are diversifying our sources with cylinder imports from overseas,” explained Yamamura. “For optimal printing, we have our in-house ink station, allowing us to prepare inks on demand. This is essential for proprietary-colour printing

beyond, the factory and storage capacity will probably be increased with an additional investment, as mentioned, of \$15m. This will then accommodate a total of 180 employees and produce more than 75m bags.

“We are sure to find qualified personnel in the area, which is not a worry for us as local authorities give a helping hand with training,” said Kensuke Yamamura. “Over decades, Takigawa has developed wide experience in the pet-food field here in the US with our best-selling product, the 2kg pet-food bag. Our customers expect superior strength, print quality, lamination and seal. Pets have a terrific nose and are very demanding. A tiny leak or off-odour and their food quality tarnishes. Pets make themselves understood very easily!”

The retail visit that followed the factory tour took us to one of the 1,500 PetSmart stores across the US and Canada, which are much more than shops for food and commodities. They house an astonishing range of services including grooming, petsHotel, doggie Day Camps, dog training, adoption and vet care.

Today, Takigawa products are proudly standing on the shelves of this pet paradise. But whether it is pet-food, human-food or even medical pouches that are the order of the day, the American market presents interesting challenges for these Japanese entrepreneurs.

More information from Takigawa Corporation USA, 1365 Parkway Drive, Bardstow, KY 40004, USA. Tel: 1 502 350 6483. Web: takigawa-corp.com

