

"Made In China" still doesn't have the concept of quality, but is perception lagging behind practice? Blow moulding guru Robin Enderby of BMC Controls thinks it might be.



ONCE upon a time machines from places like China were often poor quality and based on old "copied" technology. And this is still true of some machines. But there are now companies in China building blow moulding machines equal to anything produced in Europe and the USA. The trick is finding them.

The overriding reason for buying machinery from an "emerging" economy on the other side of the world is, of course, its low price. When investment cash is tight companies can't be blamed for looking harder at cheaper machines. But the expectation is to get more than you paid for. And as some have found to their cost, there can be some nasty surprises if you don't choose carefully. One example is the requirement to comply with CE.

Some of the very low priced machines might claim to comply but even a cursory glance by a first year electrical trainee at the safety circuit will spot the obvious dangers. For example, one of the cheaper manufacturers allows you to turn off the safety guard switches on the machine control panel. This is really useful if you want to run the machine with the guards removed and mould changes are so much easier without those pesky "life saving" guards getting in the way! Perhaps they think "CE" stands for "China Exempt"?

As one customer for some budget Chinese machines found, the HSE didn't share his enthusiasm, and suggested that his three new machines be shut down immediately pending a total examination and rework of the safety system.

But let's not too quickly tar all producers with the same brush. Shunde-Kautex (Guangdong, China) and FKI (Taiwan), for example, are companies that fully comply with "CE" and have certificates accredited by internationally recognized organizations. And Akei even went to the expense of bringing in a Canadian engineer for 12 months to oversee the CE certification process. The result of the investment was a significant increase in export sales.

Beware of machine manufacturers that produce "unguarded" machines for the Chinese market, and higher specification machines for "Western" customers. The reputable companies

won't make unguarded machines for anybody. This shows they actually believe in safety.

Something old, something new, something borrowed... the steel turns blue

A common perception is that buying Chinese means buying old technology. Looking at some Far Eastern machines you can often see head designs and clamping systems that are incredibly similar to 20 year old Kautex, Battenfeld-Fisher and Bekums. OK, so they copied some stuff, but that doesn't mean that there haven't been design improvements, and some of the best engineers you will ever meet are in China and Taiwan.

And there is the "cheap and nasty" concept that because it's cheap and Chinese, it's not going to last five minutes. You can see mechanical design, but how can you tell what grade of steel was used for the castings or the screw? Remember what we used to call "monkey metal"?

A screw made from "ordinary" steel will wear about 20 times faster than the correct steel, so in a couple of years a cheap screw could exhibit as much wear as one in a 20 year old German machine.

Again, the higher end Chinese manufacturers understand the need to select the correct materials.

How long a machine can last depends on various factors, filtration being one of them. I have seen one Indian machine (India, through some eyes, being the "new China" for industrial machinery) that had no hydraulic filters of any kind. No suction strainer, no pressure filter, no return line filter, nothing. It would only be a matter of time before the pump seized and valves jammed.

But when the expectation is to get more than you are paying for, it shouldn't be shock when you find you haven't.

Quality parts can bring quality support

Virtually all Far Eastern manufacturers have figured out that using well known brand components enhances the quality image of their machines: Rexroth hydraulics, Toshiba PLC, SMC pneumatics and so on. This should

mean that spare parts are not a problem, and there is some anecdotal evidence that getting spares from China can sometimes be faster than from a UK supplier. On a visit to a machine builder in Taiwan, for instance, I was able to get a full set of head heater bands made for a special (USA) voltage and special size within two hours of requesting them. In the UK you have to pay premium prices for 'fast' delivery (two weeks) for special heater bands.

But of course, as in the West, there is no blanket standard of service you can rely on. Getting technical help from some Far Eastern companies is variable. Some have staff totally fluent in English, others work through translation agencies. So, before buying a machine, phone and ask some technical questions - then imagine what it would be like if you really needed help.

Whatever the quality, response tends to be prompt. Remember there is a 12 hour time difference between China/Thailand/Taiwan and the UK. Building in the UK's eight hour working day, this theoretically closes the communication window down to just a couple of hours. In practice e-mails seem to get answered within minutes no matter what time you send them. Compare this with response from German and Italian machine makers.

But established companies such as Automa, Kautex, Uniloy and Bekum may have the upper hand when things get more complex. They have made arrangements to give service support for UK customers - unlike some Far Eastern suppliers who might have a sales agent but haven't arranged local service support. Not having local support might not be a problem if you don't mind fixing your own machines, but with the cost-cutting thinning out of maintenance and project engineers some companies may find that this results in greater down time.

So, how do you separate the wheat from the chaff?

Learn to filter advice from someone who has bought a cheap machine. But judge carefully whose advice you are taking. Over the years there have been at least four blow moulding companies that bought some Chinese machines and also offered to represent the machine maker. You need to consider the impartiality of the manufacturing experience.

Don't shop for the cheapest Chinese machine; take a good look at the most expensive. They are still cheaper than European machines, but made with lower manufacturing costs.

Add in the extra cost of visiting the Far East, which is always more expensive than a Ryanair flight to Italy.

Remember the adage: you get what you pay for; but you can always hope for more.

And if you are in the market for a machine and considering a Far Eastern import, look out for the FKI International (Fong Kee) all electric machine just being launched, Akei's high speed long stroke series and the German-Chinese combination of quality and price with the Shunde-Kautex machines.

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