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*English Mountain Spring Water Company  
boosted packaging quality with the installation  
of a blowing line from Flexblow*

## Tennessee two-step

by Ruari McCallion

Ruari McCallion, PETplanet Insider's Editor-at-Large, spoke to English Mountain Spring Water's founder and CEO, John Burleson, about building a brand from a small base and the big step up in quality and consistency and the reduction in costs achieved with the installation of a PET bottle blowing line from Lithuanian company Flexblow.



The Flexblow Auto Quality line was installed in August 2023

English Mountain Spring Water Company faced a range of challenges with its bottles, which it was buying in from external suppliers. Quality issues and lack of consistency were leading to losses of product, refunds to disappointed customers and a cost base that was inhibiting profitability and growth. At the time, the decision to bring bottle blowing in-house seemed a difficult one to make but it turned out very well. The line it bought from Lithuanian company Flexblow has pretty much eliminated quality problems and thus improved relations with customers, as well as helping to cut costs and make budgeting more manageable.

The story hinges on persistence by Flexblow and a willingness to listen on the part of John Burleson, CEO of English Mountain Spring Water, who smiled as he recalls how the relationship developed.

"I first met Flexblow at the NPE plastics show in Orlando, Florida, in 2018. Mr Martynas, the Service Manager, had been emailing me but I'd said that I wasn't ready for a blow moulder at that time. Well, he took it upon himself to drive all the way from Orlando, overnight and all day, and he arrived late in the afternoon, as I was getting ready to go home," he said. He reckoned that he couldn't turn Martynas away as he'd driven so far and listened to what he had to say. Although John Burleson wasn't ready to invest in a blow moulding line at that time, they agreed to keep in touch, which Flexblow did, diligently but not intrusively.

### Meeting customer needs

"In 2022, we started getting serious. Gintautas [Gin] Maksvytis, the General Manager of Flexblow, came over from Lithuania with about four

staff. They toured our facility and he said he really wanted us to have a Flexblow machine. After their visit, we conducted a follow-up to gather feedback. A packaging manufacturer in Georgia assured us that Flexblow produces robust and reliable systems. I still wasn't sure but they put together a very attractive package and, in 2022, we finalised everything," John continued. What English Mountain Spring Water got was a Flexblow Auto Quality, a pharmaceutical grade stretch blow moulding unit that had been shown at Pack Expo 2022. Preferential heating catered for the company's specific bottle shapes. Installation and final commissioning in August 2023 was the latest milestone on a journey that had started in 1992, when John became interested in bottled water as a business. His original intention was to be solely a contract supplier but prospective customers themselves wanted suppliers to have a brand and market presence themselves.

By 1997, he had acquired a 5,000 sq ft (465 m<sup>2</sup>) facility and was soon producing with two second-hand bottling lines. A five-gallon (US) line filled 100 bph; the second line filled one gallon HDPE plastic bottles. A PET line was added in May 1998.

### Building a reputation

"We started selling to small, Mom-and-Pop operations, convenience stores owned by private individuals, rather than corporates, and the like – unconventional outlets, you might think," John said. "One of our products was distilled water, displayed in glass door coolers that we provided and installed." A virtually non-existent marketing budget meant that English Mountain had to build its reputation by hard work and word of mouth. Fortunately, Tennessee is the kind of area where local roots and neighbourly service count for a lot.

"We were growing and the home delivery side was doing very well. Customer service was what we based our business around," he said. "Our big break came in 1999 when we won a water tasting competition in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. It was an international competition; we competed against every Nestlé brand, Boss was there, brands from all over – some from Sweden and Belgium

from Bosnia Herzegovina. We were featured on TV and major news outlets and we found that distributors whose doors we had been knocking on for years were now calling us and wanting to do business.”

For the next three years, English Mountain Spring Water grew at about 300% annually. That rate of growth is extremely hard to maintain and even to cope with but hard work and growing production lines enabled the company to capitalise and stabilise. It continued entering and gaining outstanding results at competitions across the world, including in Paris, France, where it won Bronze Medal three times in a row. There seems to be something special about its water, that it can compete with high-profile French brands in their own country.



### Natural goodness

“Our source is a natural spring. We sit on about 145 acres (around 60 hectares) of land which is covered in virgin timber. The mountain is mostly limestone but there’s no hard water. It’s naturally alkaline – it comes out at about 7.8 pH – and there’s no industry close to us,” John continued. “The spring has what I would deem a perfect mineral blend. The key to water is having no taste; you don’t want it to leave an aftertaste, you want it to refresh you. Our slogan is ‘engineered by nature, bottled with perfection’; we say God made it, we just clean it up and put it in a bottle!” At many competitions, English Mountain was the only entrant that was packaging in PET and HDPE, rather than glass. Its early adoption of plastic packaging made it something of a pioneer.

“A five-gallon (US) bottle made of glass is pretty heavy. It weighs in at around 80 pounds (36 kg) and it’s potentially dangerous. I met someone at a show who had a scar on his neck from a bottle that separated while he

was carrying it. We decided early that we were not going to use glass, if it could be avoided.”

### Setting trends

English Mountain’s five gallon bottles were made of PC (polycarbonate) and they deliberately went with clear plastic, rather than the fashionable cobalt tint, because they didn’t want customers to think they were hiding anything. PET was selected for smaller, eight-ounce (250 ml equivalent) bottles, for presentation and flavour; John found that there was always a residual plasticky taste in foil-topped HDPE packages. Whether PCB or PET, the packages are lighter to transport than glass and there was hope that they would be recycled.

“I looked at buying bottling lines at the time but the cost was just prohibitive,” he explained. “I went round a number of factories that bottled for Pepsi-Cola, for example, and I was advised that I needed an annual output of around 10 million units to make it worthwhile. That has always been my benchmark.”

### Stepping up a gear

By 2017, English Mountain had reached 10 million/year and it was time to look seriously at blowing their own bottles. But John didn’t build up his company by rushing headlong into things and this was no exception.

“There were some smaller units coming in from China but I was in contact with people who used them and had some bad experiences. As time went on, the equipment started to work better for small bottles and prices began to come down. That potential investment began to make more sense.”

Apart from the economics of buying in, English Mountain was finding that quality and consistency of bought-in supplies was, increasingly, leaving something to be desired. There were too many failures and loss of product. It was getting expensive and was beginning to have a reputational impact. Flexblow came onto the scene at just the right time.

“When their team came to see us, Gin was particularly impressed with

how we manage our facility and he made clear that he wanted to make English Mountain Spring Water a showpiece. They listened to what we wanted, brought us a newly-designed moulder with preferential heating for a specific shape of bottle that I requested, and adapted their machine to suit. I decided that I could not pass up the opportunity and that’s when we pulled the trigger,” said John.



The Flexblow Auto Quality line was installed in August 2023. It consists of a linear blow moulder, infeed system, compressor, chiller and fully automatic bulk packaging system. As its name suggests, it has fully automatic operational package: the operators simply input bottle parameters and the machine calibrates automatically. The machine also features integrated automatic quality assurance systems that eliminate any defective bottles, ensuring that only quality products proceed down the line. It is currently running in four-cavity format, producing 6,200 20-ounce (one Imperial pint or 568 ml) containers per hour. It can also produce 12 fl oz/340 ml packages at 6,000 to 6,200 bph.

“Altogether we have six model sets: 12 fl oz, 20 fl oz, a couple of versions of 500 ml and a 1 l. We have just ordered four more mould sets and we are bringing in tall and slender bullet bottles,” he said. “Our family of packages goes up to 1.5 l, all with 28 mm neck finishes. But, with this machine, we can also run 38 mm neck finish, which we can use with a one-gallon PET mould that we propose to roll out in the Fall of this year.”

English Mountain Spring Water ran about 2.5 million bottles through the Flexblow machine from August to the end of 2023 and it is on track for five million before the end of July 2024.



### Flexibility and fast changeovers

"This is across all sizes. That flexibility is very important to us and it's not something you always get in the medium to low production end of the market. We run in weights from 17 g to 35 g, and around 23.5 g for the half-litre and 20 oz bottles. We have found changeovers to be very impressive. Within 21 minutes I can go from running one bottle to another," John said.

With Flexblow technology, not only regular bottles but also 1-gallon containers with a wider neck can be produced.

### Saving costs and increased sustainability

"We've significantly optimised our logistics process, reducing the number of trucks required for packaging transportation from 60 to just eight. This efficiency not only slashes costs but also minimises CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, reinforcing our commitment to sustainability," John said.

"We were finding leaks in bought-in bottles, sometimes running through entire consignments. We would get credit from our suppliers but we were losing an awful lot of product and it impacted our reputation. We have eliminated that completely, as well as unformed bottles and cloudiness," he said.

"We're saving around 60% over what we were paying for bottles alone, plus freight charges. We've eliminated management costs of returning faulty product. We're saving on credit notes we had to give our customers, as well, and on warehousing."

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## The complete solution

### Total packaging cost audit and business case:

Flexblow made a free total packaging source analysis and a business case in which it was shown how much English Mountain will save with self manufacturing.

### Turn-key equipment solution:

Flexblow provided a comprehensive turn-key solution by delivering a blower, bottle accumulation system, and all necessary peripheral equipment. This complete package was designed to seamlessly integrate into existing production line, ensuring efficient and reliable operation from start to finish.

### Preform sourcing platform:

Flexblow recommended preforms most suitable for English Mountain Spring products.

### 10-point project implementation and aftersales:

Flexblow ensured the successful completion of the project and continued to support English Mountain Spring Water, ensuring their satisfaction with the product and service after the initial sale.

**Relationship:** Flexblow continues to provide periodic consulting services to assist with packaging solutions.

**Custom shape value:** English Mountain Spring Water Company stands out with its unique custom bottle designs, leveraging this distinctiveness to differentiate their brand in a competitive market.

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