

Picking right sort — Italians naturally

by Georgina Bond

Auckland company Compac is taking its high-tech fruit-sorting machines to the European market in a joint venture with Italian packaging manufacturer Sorma Group.

In the new venture — Compac Sorma Europe — the specialty produce weighing-and-sorting machines will be made outside Compac's Onehunga factory for the first time.

For Compac, it marks the next phase in its growth. It has expanded from providing sorting and packing solutions for local kiwifruit packhouses 20 years ago to being a leader in the fruit and vegetable world.

International sales director Dave Buys said the company could now supply to packhouses throughout Europe with improved manufacturing times and services.

"By manufacturing locally, we expect to make significant inroads on the present delivery times that have been a barrier to Compac being a competitive operator in Europe," he said.

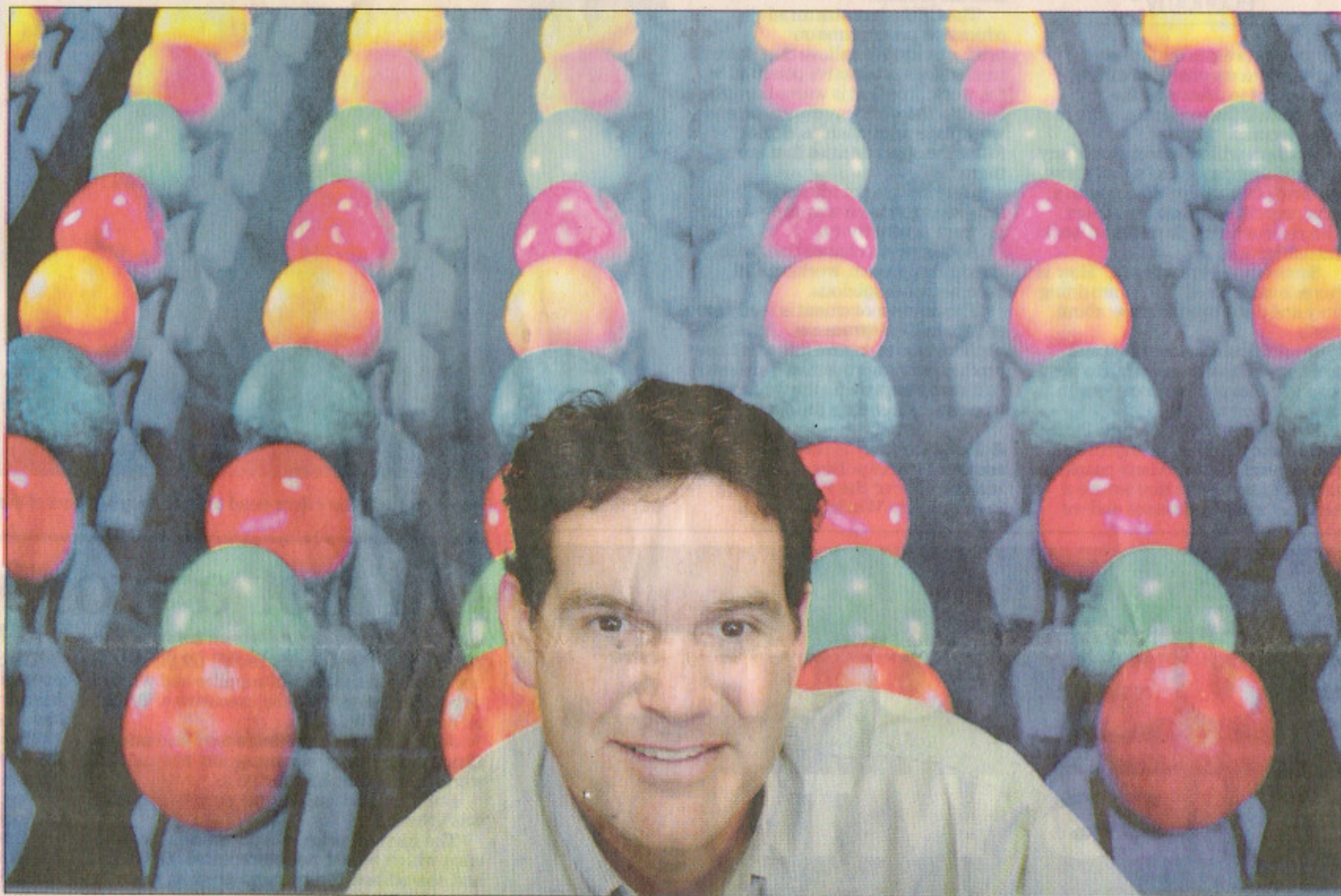
"Italy is an efficient place for us to do business and we are confident it will provide a platform for expansion into other key areas, such as Spain."

General manager Bob Shaw said Europe was a market the company had been unsuccessfully trying to tap into for a number of years.

Compac had a natural synergy with Sorma, which makes produce-bagging and -packaging machines and supplies the packaging used with Compac machinery.

Compac has a 30 per cent stake in the new company, which will build the machines under licence. Shaw expected the initial Italian customers to be kiwifruit and potato packhouses, and this would expand into stone fruit and apples.

The company was founded as Horticultural Automation in 1984 when managing director Hamish Kennedy identified a gap in the market for accurate, high-speed sorting machines. After studying electrical engineering, he went on to work on his family's kiwifruit orchard in



EXPORT THRUST: James Flocchini says Compac's commitment to research and development is one of the key reasons for its success.

PICTURE / KENNY RODGER

Northland and decided he could devise a better way to sort the fruit.

He built his first machine in a garage in Kerikeri. Neighbours saw it and wanted one and so the business began.

The privately owned company employs 130 full-time staff and 85 per cent of its machines are exported.

The US is the biggest market, followed by New Zealand, Australia and South America.

Kennedy is the majority shareholder in the company, which has an annual turnover of \$28 million to \$30 million. More than 40 per cent of the Washington State apple crop — twice this country's apple crop — is sorted

by Compac technology.

All the machines are custom made, and range from 6 metres long to the size of a rugby field.

Video cameras and computer software are used to detect the colour, weight, blemishes, size and shape of the produce. Compac says the machines are the fastest produce-

sorting devices on the market, handling as many as 100 pieces of fruit or vegetables a second.

The company ploughs 20 per cent of its revenue back into research and development. International account manager James Flocchini said this commitment to R&D had been one of the keys to its success.