

A new chapter of innovation: Marco Esper leads AstenJohnson into the future of paper machine clothing in Eurasia

Jill Chang, Marketing Leader Asia

André Hüttner, VP PMC & Product Management Eurasia

INTRODUCTION:

In a time of dynamic transformation within the global pulp and paper industry, innovation and strategic foresight have never been more vital. At AstenJohnson, a recognized global leader in Paper Machine Clothing (PMC), that leadership comes in the form of Marco Esper — a seasoned industry executive who brings deep technical expertise, a passion for papermaking, and a clear vision for the future of Eurasia's operations.



Figure 1: For Marco Esper, joining AstenJohnson was more than a career move — it was a return to the essence of papermaking.

On January 1, 2025, Marco Esper officially stepped into his role as President of Eurasia for AstenJohnson. With a resume that spans continents and a lifelong connection to the paper industry, Esper is poised to guide AstenJohnson through its next phase of growth — one driven by innovation, safety, and sustainable performance. In an exclusive conversation, he shared insights into the company's strategic trajectory, breakthrough technologies, and his approach to leadership.

Rooted in Papermaking, Focused on Performance

For Marco Esper, joining AstenJohnson was more than a career move — it was a return to the essence of papermaking.

"I'm a passionate papermaker at heart," he says, his enthusiasm evident. "When I saw AstenJohnson's vision —

Partnering with customers to maximize performance — I felt an immediate connection. I knew I could bring this to life in ways that matter."

Esper's background supports that belief. The son of a papermaker, he earned a degree in Processing and Process Engineering (Paper Technology) from the Technical University of Dresden, later rising to executive roles in Germany, China, and beyond. Most notably, he served as a Management Board Member of the Voith Paper Group Division and CEO of the Heimbach Group. Now at AstenJohnson, Esper brings this global leadership experience to a company with a powerful legacy and clear ambition for the future.

Expanding Capabilities in Eurasia

While AstenJohnson is widely known in Europe for its **dryer fabric expertise**—thanks to standout solutions like the **MonoTier™** and newly launched **MonoLine™**—Esper is quick to point out that the company's innovation runs far deeper.

“Europe has long viewed us as Dryer specialists, and for good reason,” he explains. “But we also offer outstanding solutions in the **Forming** and **Press** sections — the heart of every paper machine. We're now bringing our full North American and Asian portfolio into the EMEA region.”

That expansion started three years ago with the introduction of **Press Felts** in Europe. According to Esper, the timing is ideal to scale up. “We see tremendous growth opportunities. The market is increasingly looking for suppliers who understand the full machine and can deliver performance across all segments. That's our strength.”

Safety and People at the Core

In today's complex manufacturing environment, performance cannot come at the expense of safety. One of the early things Esper prioritized was reinforcing **AstenJohnson's Zero Accident Culture**.

“Safety is non-negotiable,” he states firmly. “What impressed me most when I joined were the dedication of our teams and the excellence of our facilities. Everyone—from operators to engineers—is committed to delivering tailored solutions to customers while keeping each other safe.”

This commitment to safety and people is foundational to the company's values, alongside excellence, integrity, sustainability, and innovation. And it's not just internal. AstenJohnson extends this culture to its **customer relationships**, ensuring that partnerships are built on shared trust and long-term value.

Technical Excellence with Global Reach

As a technical leader, Esper is particularly energized by AstenJohnson's **world-class R&D and product development pipeline**. Central to that innovation engine is **AstenJohnson University** — the company's internal institution focused on transferring knowledge and training both employees and customers.

“In a rapidly evolving industry, continuous learning is essential,” Esper says. “AstenJohnson University is a game-changer. It helps us onboard new talent and empower the next generation of papermakers, while also equipping our customers with the expertise they need to maximize performance.”

The investment in knowledge is matched by ongoing product breakthroughs — especially in Press and Forming fabrics, where AstenJohnson continues to raise the bar.

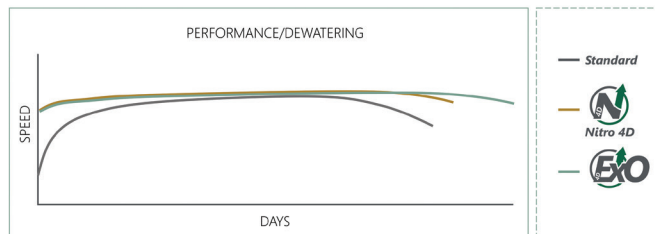
The Launch of ExO 4D: A Breakthrough in Press Fabric Innovation

Among the most exciting developments is **ExO 4D**, a new press felt enhancement launching in 2025. Designed to address key performance criteria — break-in time, dewatering efficiency, and felt life — ExO 4D introduces a **self-cleaning capability** previously unseen in conventional fabrics.

“The challenge with traditional felts is that over time, the base fabric compacts,” Esper explains. “Compressibility and capillarity can only do so much. So, we asked ourselves: What if we could add a controlled, self-cleaning effect to the felt structure?”

Nitro 4D and ExO 4D Fast Start-up

Go Nitro!



ExO 4D offers similar break in time performance Nitro 4D, but exceeds life performance.

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Working with supplier partners, AstenJohnson's product management team developed a novel material that combines **high compressibility, openness, and a self-cleaning effect**. The results exceeded expectations:

- 10–25% longer felt lifespan
- Break-in times reduced from 3–4 days to just 12 hours
- Higher machine speeds and fewer sheet breaks
- Dramatic reduction in contamination

Perhaps most importantly for customers, ExO 4D can be integrated across all AstenJohnson's press felts, including the iconic **FlexFlow family** — in both endless and seamed formats — ensuring flexibility and value across multiple machine types.

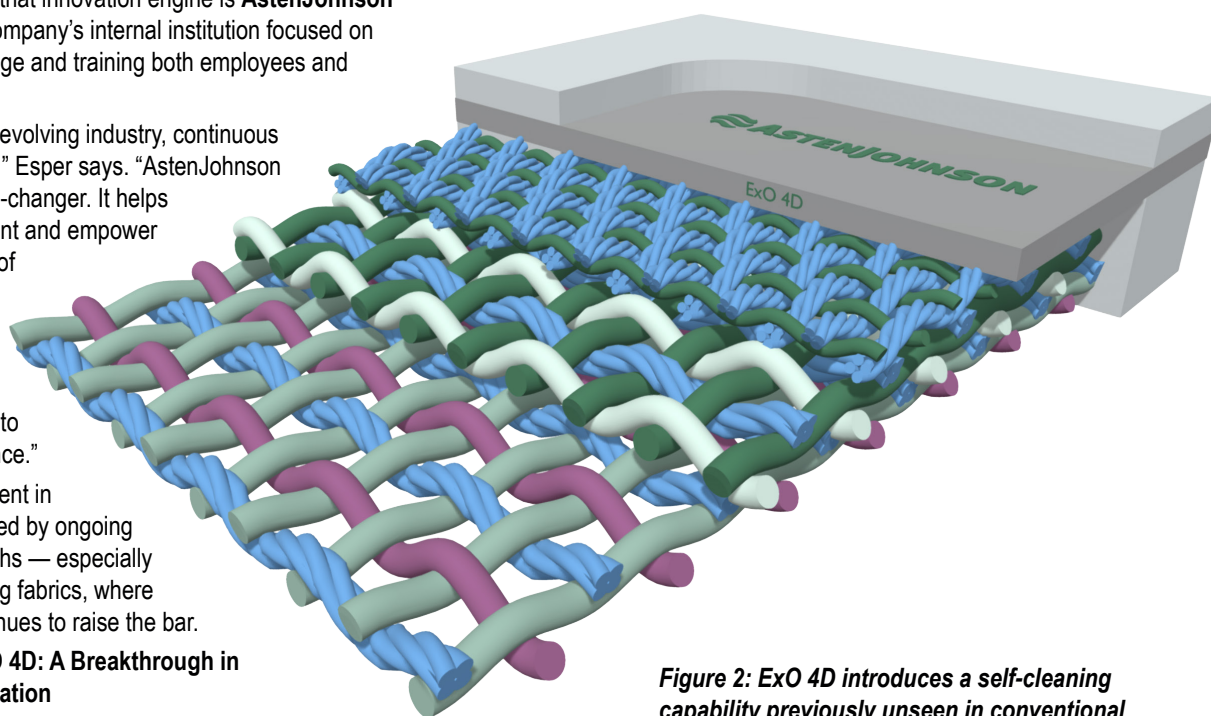


Figure 2: ExO 4D introduces a self-cleaning capability previously unseen in conventional fabrics.

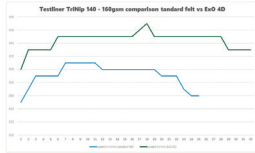
Lighter Corrugated Medium Case Study

VALUE:

- Press Layout: Tri-Nip
- Nip load: 80/110/980kN/m
- Standard life 25 days

RESULTS:

- ExO 4D Results
- BIT even shorter compare our standard design, 2 shifts
 - Consistent dewatering for whole life, very stable performance
 - Average speed 30 ~ 50m/min higher
 - No edge issue through whole life
 - Lifetime increase to 32 days



CASE STUDY

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GRADES	Corrugated Medium / Testliner
BASIS WEIGHTS	90gsm-180gsm
SPEEDS	800 - 950m/min

FlexFlow 3C ExO 4D



"I'm honored to be part of AstenJohnson," he reflects. "We offer a world-class product portfolio for the most advanced paper machines."

Sustainability in Action

ExO 4D is not just about performance. Like other recent innovations — including the **MonoLine™** family and **T-Star™** forming fabrics — it reflects AstenJohnson's commitment to sustainability.

"With increasing focus on recyclability and environmental performance, we're designing products that align with our customers' sustainability goals," says Esper. "Innovation must go hand-in-hand with environmental responsibility."

This thinking is also reflected in the upcoming **KraftStar Max III** for packaging applications, where strength, energy efficiency, and resource optimization are paramount.

A Global Company with a Local Mindset

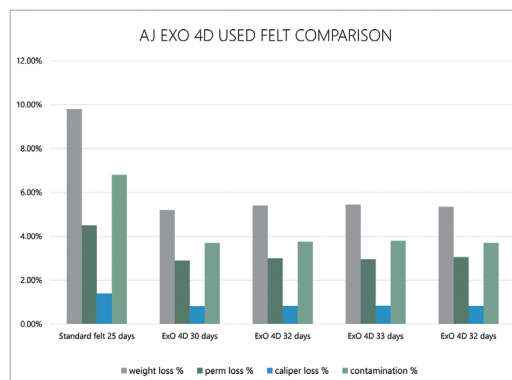
With operations across North America, Asia, and Europe, AstenJohnson blends global scale with regional focus. Under Esper's leadership, the Eurasia division is aligning closely with market needs — not just by delivering product, but by providing **strategic solutions** tailored to specific production challenges.

Whether it's supporting containerboard producers like PCM in improving strength at lower basis weights, or helping customers optimize stock preparation systems with technology from partners like AFT, AstenJohnson is positioned as a **value-added partner**, not just a vendor.

"Customers are looking for more than products," Esper notes. "They want insights, support, and measurable outcomes. That's where we differentiate."



ExO 4D Lab Comparison



ExO 4D felts:

- Less wear potential for longer life
- Less contamination = self cleaning effect
- Less caliper loss = keeping active volume
- Higher perm after life = self cleaning effect

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Looking Ahead: Driving Sustainable Innovation

As Esper settles into his new role, his focus is clear: continue to **build trust, innovate with purpose, and drive measurable impact** for customers across Eurasia.

"I'm honored to be part of AstenJohnson," he reflects. "We offer a world-class product portfolio for the most advanced paper machines. But what makes the difference is our people — they're talented, committed, and constantly pushing forward. Together, we're ready for the next chapter."

About Marco Esper

Marco Esper is a paper industry veteran with over two decades of leadership in engineering, project management, and executive roles across Europe and Asia. With a degree in Paper Technology from TU Dresden, he combines technical depth with commercial acumen. Prior to joining AstenJohnson, he was CEO of the Heimbach Group and a board member of Voith Paper Group.

About AstenJohnson

Headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina, AstenJohnson is a global manufacturer of pulp and paper machine clothing, advanced filtration fabrics, filaments, and nonwoven materials. The company operates manufacturing facilities across Europe, Asia, and North America, and is built on five enduring values: **Safety, Excellence, Integrity, People, and Sustainability**. These principles drive a culture of innovation and long-term customer partnerships across the globe.