



PICKING UP THE PACE

Continuous automation enables West Coast bakery to accelerate its throughput capacity

BY BOB OWENS

Rapid growth presents both a unique opportunity and a substantial challenge for food manufacturers.

This often requires that companies make significant changes to their production lines without missing a beat, as stalled output can represent significant lost earnings.

By investing in the right equipment and streamlining throughput, companies can radically improve efficiency; reduce the amount of time spent fixing problems, and meet new demand as soon as it arises.

Located in Surrey, B.C., **Pace Processing** is a textbook example of such a company.

Established 18 years ago, this versatile commercial bakery has enjoyed consistent growth from the outset.

Since 2014, that growth had accelerated to double-digit levels, as the company grew into a prominent producer of frozen foods for the North American retail and foodservice industries, including cakes, baked goods, desserts, pizzas, pizza toppings, gluten-free toppings, and many other such products.

To maintain and expand its diverse product portfolio, the company employs about 360 people at six manufacturing plants, with nearly 97,000 square feet of production space in total.

“We have grown substantially in the last several years,” says Pace Processing vice-president of operations Jason Darrah.



The Bel 505 semi-automatic case former and pack station supplied by Wexar Bel provides a compact and ergonomic packaging solution for manual hand packing lines, allowing one operator to form, pack and seal corrugated cases in single operation, while handling a wide range of case types and sizes.



“We have done a good job offering a variety of products, from focaccia bread to pepperoni cheese sticks to a cake line, along with starting up gluten-free facilities,” Darrah relates.

“With this increased growth, we recognized the need to automate.”

Automation comes with its own set of challenges, however. Inadequate machinery tends to require more maintenance and troubleshooting, leading to a significant amount of human labor and downtime that can often offset profit margins.

Conversely, systems that properly designed for the application at result in quicker production output, fewer malfunctions and more uptime, yielding improved profits.

“Our primary need was for case erecting, case sealing and tray forming machines that would allow our process lines to operate efficiently,” Darrah recalls.

“In 2014, we were already running several older-model case-packers, but because of our growth they were no longer able to handle the output on our lines, and there was also considerable machine servicing required to keep them operational.

“It was then that we began looking for better automation options,” Darrah states.

One of those options was a semi-automatic case taper from **Wexxar Bel**—a leading manufacturer of machines for automated corrugated container packaging applications located just north of Vancouver in Richmond, B.C.

Founded in 1977 and now operating as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Cincinnati-headquartered packaging machinery group **ProMach**, Wexxar Bel enjoys a stellar track record in the global packaging industry, having installed its case formers and case sealers in nearly 40 different countries to date.

In addition to its own flagship Wexxar equipment brand, the company also offers the **Bel** line of corrugated box sealers, tapers, and packing systems, as well as the **IPAK** line of tray and bliss formers, stackers, and sealer systems.

“A team from Wexxar Bel came over and looked at what we were doing for our packaging lines,” recalls Darrah.

“They measured our rooms, evaluated our output, and gave us several different options.

“Our first step was to implement the case sealer, which would provide an economical and effective way to minimize manual labor requirements.”



The semi-automatic Bel 150 case taper from Wexxar Bel can seal a wide range of case sizes at speeds up to 30 cases per minute, while facilitating quick case size changes.

Specifically, Pace acquired a semi-automatic **BEL 150** pressure-sensitive case taper for use on one of its end-of-line packing operations, making good use of the machine’s highly flexible operation that enables it to seal a wide range of case sizes at speeds up to 30 cases per minute, with quick size changeovers.

As Pace continued to expand, it added the **BEL 150** machines to all of its processing lines at each of its six manufacturing facilities, Darrah adds.

Soon afterwards, the company began looking at replacing some of its older case formers and packers with more reliable and modern equipment.

After turning to Wexxar Bel for options once again, Pace settled on the **Bel 505** semi-automatic case former and pack station for two of its facilities.

The Bel case former and pack station can handle and form a wide range of case sizes and various case types, with a versatile design that allows a high degree of customization.

More importantly, this setup makes product changeovers easy, quick and flexible, thanks to the tool-less, quick and simple case size changes and easy access to the change points from both operational sides of the machine.



“The case former and pack station allows us to produce and pack about eight full cases per minute,” says Darrah, adding the two systems were installed in 2018.

“We put these machine in place at our high-throughput pizza topping plants,” Darrah continues.

“In one of these plants we have line changes four or five times a day,” Darrah relates, “so the machine has to be very fast on changeovers, which can be accomplished in under five minutes.”

At these plants, Pace pairs up both the case-sealer, and case former and pack station—allowing one operator to form, pack and seal corrugated cases in a single operation.

On one of its lines, Pace has also paired a *Bel 505* with a **Bel 252** fully-automatic case sealer for extra automation.

In addition to the end-of-line case packing and sealing processes, Pace also desired to upgrade its automation for tray forming to support its sheet cake production line. In operation, the paper-based 12x16x2.5-inch trays are put onto baking sheets, cake batter is deposited into the trays, and the trays are then moved into the ovens for baking.

Once baked, the sheet cake may be cut into different shapes and sizes depending on the customers’ requirements, or it may be shipped ‘as is’ in bulk form, in which case the tray acts as the support for the cake when it is moved downstream through the packaging line.

“To automate this tray forming process, we selected the IPAK TF200 fully-automatic tray former, again from Wexxar Bel,” says Darrah.

“We looked at other systems, but the TF200 was definitely more robust for our needs and has a high level of flexibility.

“We can interchange the mandrel on the machine to achieve different depths or tray sizes should we desire in the future,” Darrah explains.

“We were also attracted to the fact that size changes can be performed in less than 10 minutes.”

The **IPAK TF200** is capable of forming a wide range of tray sizes, including regular slotted trays in various configurations.

This includes a full range of four-corner glued trays, one- and two-piece telescoping



The fully-automatic IPAK TF200 tray former can form regular slotted trays in various configurations including four-corner glued trays, one- and two-piece telescoping trays, at speeds of up to 35 trays per minute, handling a wide range of tray sizes used in food processing applications..

trays, and variations of triangulated-corner and self-locking trays.

The tray former permits diagnostics and advanced programming capabilities to be set up in multiple configurations to suit the needs of the user.

“The machine will continuously operate at speeds of up to 40 trays per minute,” adds Darrah, “but currently we are running it at 50 to 55 percent of the machine’s capability at 22 trays per minute.”

With business growth continuing to gather pace, Darrah says the company is constantly evaluating new possibilities for further automation investment and process improvements.

“Having the automated machinery is just part of the solution,” states Darrah. “We wanted our machines to be user-friendly, so that they are easy to operate.

“And that is exactly what we have achieved with Wexxar machinery,” Darrah sums up.

“Ensuring that the machine operators are trained sufficiently to run the equipment with precision and safety, and with proper maintenance is an integral part of ensuring the company’s production lines run optimally.” 🍁

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