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CHRISTMAS LEASE BOON FOR PACKAGING AUTOMATION

The Christmas trade can be both a boon and a boom for many businesses, particularly those involved in food production and its packaging. Sales achieved in the run up to the holiday period, including the New Year, can make the difference between an average year and an excellent one.

But seasonal trade can also have its down side in terms of the capital cost of equipment and, unless care is taken, the outlay can go a long way towards out-stripping the proceeds.

Which is where the growing practice of hiring and leasing equipment to assist companies through the peak periods of seasonal demand without breaking the bank – or upsetting the finance director – comes into its own.

Packaging Automation, the UK's leading manufacturer of heat sealing machines has not been slow to recognise the hire-not-buy needs of today's food packaging companies and react to them. The Knutsford-based business has even gone so far as to come up with special hire and lease deals for its range of heat sealing machines, including the semi-automatic PA182 and Vision machines.

Typical of Packaging Automation's customers with a booming seasonal market is Derbyshire-based Matthew Walker, a division of Northern Foods plc. The company is one of the country's leading suppliers of Christmas puddings – and you can't get much more seasonal than that – to the majority of the big supermarket chains.

So seasonal is its business that it's January staffing level of 120 more than doubles by the time November is reached. So the company called in Packaging Automation to help remove a bottleneck in the production process and improve throughput. Packaging Automation was the natural choice, as it had been a supplier to Northern Foods for more than a quarter of a century.

Chief engineer Nick Garnett says he finds Packaging Automation's approach ultra professional. "They have a good understanding of our business, provide a great back-up service and follow-up on all their promises."

Hiring suits another of Packaging Automation's top customers, Premier Fresh Foods, which uses the company's equipment in the supply of fresh chickens and chicken portions, which find their way on to the shelves of most of the country's leading supermarket chains.

Not unnaturally, sales rise in the lead-up to Christmas just as they do for the company's other chicken dishes like tomato casserole and drumsticks in

onion gravy – ideal for those unfortunate people who have to spend Christmas alone.

A hire deal was recently concluded after Scunthorpe-based Premier's development manager Sharon Thomas chose Packaging Automation, in preference to a number of other would-be suppliers she had contacted.

Mrs Thomas said: "Packaging Automation has a good reputation in the industry and was able to provide a straight-forward solution to our needs."

Another company prepared to sing the praises of Packaging Automation also knows a thing or two about seasonal demands. Lloyd Maunder produce meat based meals of all kinds from their Devon headquarters and chose to rent the PA182, because it was a relatively inexpensive option. "So I don't worry if it is not in use every day because I know it will be working 23 hours a day once the orders come in," says sales director Andy Maunder.

Sales manager Neil Ashton says: "We regard the new PA182 as the workhorse of our heat sealing range. The recent changes we have made incorporate a number of customer suggestions to bring the machine into line with our latest state-of-the-art Vision range. And the option to hire it is proving particularly popular with those who are keen to keep their costs to a minimum."

These recent changes include a new film feed and rewind to speed up the changing of film reels and an improved film path. Guarding has also been significantly enhanced to improve hygiene and reduce food traps while providing easier access to the machine's interior for maintenance and routine servicing.

The PA182's guarding now incorporates horizontal front and back guard openings and the facility to remove the rear guard for even easier access.

There is also a new rotary table latch mechanism which avoids the need for operatives to disengage the table prior to rotation. The mechanism has two big advantages – it addresses potential repetitive strain injury issues and provides much greater ease of use.

Packaging Automation's managing director Carol Royle says: "The PA182 is part of a family of semi-automatic hand-turned rotary table machines which has proved particularly popular with the short-term hire market, which includes a good number of companies looking for equipment to help them cope with the Christmas rush. Rental options are excellent for allowing companies to meet increased production demands or to introduce seasonal product lines for Christmas.

"Short-term rental offers the flexibility of adding to production capacity specifically to meet peak demands but we also offer the alternative of leasing. This allows the customer to acquire a machine by making monthly payments

over anything up to a 3 year period and provides the added benefit of having Packaging Automation's equipment on their premises all the year round - so it can be used at other times in addition to those of seasonal pressure."

Packaging Automation has many food producing customers amongst its growing portfolio who have good reason to be thankful for its heat-sealing equipment and the flexibility it shows towards them.

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