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PACKAGING AUTOMATION SETS THE PACE

Presentation has come a long way since meat was carried from shop to home in brown paper bags. Alongside increasingly stringent control of food hygiene, manufacturers and retailers have realised that consumers are becoming far more demanding, in essence they also want their products to look good before they purchase. In the meat and poultry industry it isn't always easy to pre-pack product, the variety of cuts that customers demand often makes this impossible. Couple this with the needs of retailers across the country to maximise revenues and there is a real need for high-quality packaging that is flexible in its exploitation, creates an aesthetically-pleasing product, while reducing waste through ever-longer shelf lives.

This combination of factors is behind the creation of the new range of packaging machines from Packaging Automation, the UK's only manufacturer of such machines. The company has gained this enviable position through the variety, adaptability and reliability of its 15 different models - with specific variants available for specialist markets.

Typical of the Knutsford-based company's dedication to leading technologies is its development of Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP) systems, which significantly increase the shelf life of a wide range of products. MAP has played a major role in the food and especially the raw meat industry since its introduction over 10 years ago.

During the sealing cycle, the air is removed from the pack and replaced by a single gas or mixture of gases. The usual gases involved are carbon dioxide, nitrogen and oxygen. These cocktails can be ordered in pre-mixed cylinders or mixed at the point of use via a gas-mixing panel.

When considering MAP as a shelf life extension technique it is important to strike a balance between eye appeal and the slowdown in growth of aerobic bacteria, which cause spoiling effects. For ultimate shelf life, higher carbon dioxide levels often combined with nitrogen are preferable. For presentation purposes a gas mix involving high oxygen concentrations for bloom may be more appropriate, along with carbon dioxide to retard the growth of spoilage bacteria. It is important to understand that it is essential to conduct trials to determine the best gas or cocktail of gases for a given product. Packaging Automation's food industry gas specialist Martin Cooper, works with customers to conduct these trials in the company's fully equipped test facility.

Packaging Automation's recently launched Vision 182 and Vision 4000 machines incorporate the latest MAP technology. Another special feature of these new systems is their ability to handle trays up to 100mm in depth.

A removable conveyor combined with a sealed machine bed means both systems are very easy to clean, thereby reducing downtime and helping to maintain high standards of hygiene.

It is obvious therefore, that the Vision 4000 which also offers an exceptionally large seal area, when used with the MAP system is a major advance in food

packaging technology. And a breakthrough that is likely to have a massive impact on the packaged meat and poultry market.

Grampian Country Food Group has recently begun using the Vision 4000 at its Sandycroft, Deeside, site.

The Vision 4000 is initially being used to seal three different polypropylene tray sizes, for the packing of its "mega pack" of eight chicken legs for the barbecue, as well as its six leg and four leg sizes.

Drawing on 37 years of experience of manufacturing heat-sealing machinery for the food industry, Packaging Automation is highly focused in meeting food producer's needs. This ensures a high level of product reliability, which has been attained through constant development and improvement of its product range.

Another example of this constant development is the addition of the Vision 182 to Packaging Automation's range. Developed following the success of its "brother" the semi-automatic PA182, the Vision 182 has many of the best design features of the PA182 but is aimed at those looking for a low cost in-line machine.

The key benefit of the Vision 182 is simple: for a relatively low-cost, producers can achieve an increase in output by replacing expensive labour with this automatic machine. This allows overheads to be reduced and profits to be maximised, creating a more level playing field between smaller companies and their larger competitors.

Exclusively built in the UK by Packaging Automation, the Vision 182 is capable of sealing up to 15 cycles per minute and, as an additional cost-saving, tools from the existing PA182 can be used with the Vision 182 machine. As an added extra, the Vision 182 can be fitted with a MAP system, which will appeal to processors and retailers as it extends shelf life, creating a more attractive product and greatly reducing the risk of food contamination.

Operating from state-of-the-art premises in Knutsford, Cheshire, Packaging Automation employs 120 people and produces simple manual units and semi-automatics through to in-line fully automated systems, volumetric fillers through to conveyors - as well as various other ancillary equipment.

And, for those occasions when machines do go down, Packaging Automation operates a 24-hour a day, 365-day a year help line and response team.

Allied with the quality and reliability of its equipment, this commitment to after-sales service has made Packaging Automation one of the market leaders in the supply of heat-sealing solutions. Covering industries as diverse as food, medical and DIY with suppliers to Marks & Spencer, J Sainsbury, Asda and Tesco increasingly calling on Packaging Automation as their provider of choice.

Packaging Automation's chairman Anthony Penn is understandably proud of the company's success, saying: "One of our greatest strengths is that we listen

to our customer's requirements, often customising equipment to meet their specific needs.

Our long history in this industry enables us to adapt quickly to manufacturing's changing requirements, anticipating needs and producing equipment to meet these, it is what has kept us at the fore of heat-sealing technology."

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