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### Common Ground

By Jim Parsons

PMMI's processing equipment members may bring different backgrounds and technical priorities to PACK EXPO or other industry events than their counterparts on the packaging "side" of the manufacturing equation. Yet finding common ground for conversation is rarely difficult, as many of the trends affecting how products are packaged are also influencing how they are prepared.

"A top issue for food and pharmaceutical processors is identifying equipment that is flexible enough to keep up with changing market needs, product marketing ideas and finished product designs," says Bruce Teeling, general manager for Key International, Inc., Cranbury, N.J., which supplies both processing and packaging equipment to the pharmaceutical, food, cosmetic and chemical industries. "Another big concern is with scheduling suppliers and maintaining 'just in time' deliveries in order to keep inventory costs as low as possible."

Line speeds, efficiency and cost-control in the use of utilities, raw materials and other resources are also shared priorities.

"This is a labor-intensive industry," adds Bob Rochelle, food and packaging industry specialist for Staubli Robotics, Duncan, S.C. "Along with retaining employees and providing safe, productive environments, processors are also looking at ways to automate these processes."

True, there are some differences. Though food/pharmaceutical packagers are intently attuned to safety and other product quality issues, the fact that processing equipment typically has more direct contact with the product than packaging systems makes the margin for error in hygiene and sanitation virtually invisible, particularly with stronger food safety regulations on the way.

"No one's really sure where FSMA [Food Safety Modernization Act] will lead, but it's indicative of what food processors and suppliers are emphasizing today," says Tim O'Brien of Urschel Laboratories, Valparaiso, Ind., which makes slicers, dicers, milling and shredding equipment.

Greg Jacob, general manager for Allpax, powered by Pro Mach, Covington, La., which manufactures retorts and material handling equipment, agrees. "Plants being more conscientious to get in sync with the latest and greatest platforms," he says.

So it should hardly be surprising that these trends—both shared and distinct—are showing up in the processing equipment processors specify and purchase today. Take hygienic equipment, for example. Tim Talberg, product manager-sanitary equipment for Triple/S Dynamics, Inc., Dallas, Texas, notes that more food companies are going to all-stainless steel conveyors, even those for dry clean areas, to eliminate painted components that can chip and eventually rust. Triple/S Dynamics manufactures conveyors, screeners and gravity separation equipment.

"More conveyors are being equipped with covers to prevent foreign material from falling into the food stream, and potential cross contamination from other processes in the area," Talberg says. He adds that conveyors for dry clean packaging applications can contribute to cost reduction "because they can be equipped with painted carbon steel drives and support frames and only the product contact components are stainless steel."

Similarly, Allpax has introduced products to boost line speed, conserve and reuse water and steam and cut food cooking cycles. Examples include the 1300 and 1600 Shaka production-size retorts that can deliver chilled or aseptic quality at shelf-stable costs.

"This trend has forced us to look at ways to improve the energy design side," Jacob says, noting that the focus on energy consumption has helped some clients achieve LEED Certification for their facilities. "We want to stay on top of technology and adjust our product offerings as necessary."

Similarly, says Rochelle, more companies are looking at robotics on the processing side or where we handle raw products. "The industry is gradually seeing the benefits of this sort of automation, which have been enjoyed by industries such as automotive for many years now," he adds.

### Aligning interests

Given that there is no shortage of similarities among processing and packaging equipment suppliers, strategic alliances between the two and their respective component suppliers would seem to make perfect sense. And in a lot of cases, they do.

"Putting the front and back ends together is important, because whatever the front end does, the back end has to manage it," says Roger Toll of Marchesini Group USA, West Caldwell, N.J. "That's why many companies like ours are doing complete lines. You bring one solution to manage the product end-to-end, which is very important to a customer."

Alliances can also address the growing interest among food, pharmaceutical and other manufacturers in seamless solutions.

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Erik Brainard, president of Anritsu Industrial Solutions USA, Elk Grove Village, Ill., explains that one of his company's core applications is to detect bones in meat and chick products prior to and during packaging. "Therefore, we work with packaging companies to inspect during or after the finished product to ensure fill levels are accurate or confirm the product is clean from bones or metal," he says.

For example, an Anritsu detection system can confirm meat chub clips are present while inspecting the package for bones or metal contaminants.

"Our checkweighing technology can also provide process control to packaging equipment allowing it to automatically adjust and ultimately provide more accurate filling," Brainard adds. "The benefit to an end user is a single source and proven solution."

Jacob notes that larger companies, especially big box manufacturers, are likewise asking for more of a one-stop, turnkey solution, enhancing the advantages of processor-packaging equipment alliances.

"They don't like the idea of sourcing from different companies and having them meet up at the factory to get things to work together," he says. Being part of the Pro Mach group, Allpax can work directly with other companies on either the upstream or downstream side.

"A more unified or turnkey approach reduces commissioning time by several weeks," Jacobs adds. "At the factory acceptance test, for example, we can run things at line speeds, rather than having to rig up a conveyor. This shortens the start-up curve and reduces debugging."

A well-synchronized alliance can also help with ongoing operations. By utilizing the same type of motor or other components, a processor-packager team can help streamline designs and reduce a customer's spare parts inventory.

And if a technology such as robotics has proven itself in packaging, Rochelle adds, chances are it has applications in processing. "These two seem like a perfect marriage," he says.

But no marriage is perfect. The downside to being a turnkey provider, cautions Toll, "is if you don't win the job, you don't get anything."

Nevertheless, alliances can provide dividends beyond helping equipment suppliers provide efficient, flexible and reliable processing and packaging solutions that meet customers' wide-ranging, ever-changing needs. For example, they can help facilitate mutual information sharing and a generation of coveted referrals among packaging and processing suppliers.

"Some customers might not know where to find the equipment that they need and will ask us for our advice and a referral," explains Teeling, whose firm partners with top European and Asian manufacturers of high quality packaging equipment such as Hoong-A, Sarong, TGM Tecnosistemi,

OMAS Tecnosistemi, Countec Corp., SolPac and Enflex—often serving as the sole U.S. sales representative and distributor.

"If the customer's equipment

request is out of the scope of what we or our strategic partners can provide, we will refer them to a quality vendor that we trust," Teeling says. "This is a win/win/win situation for us, the referred vendor and our customer."

Though alliances have their merits, not everyone pursues them. Many manufacturers prefer to limit access to proprietary technical data. After all, today's ally might well become tomorrow's competitor.

Others feel that good communication among equipment manufacturers on applications should be a standard operating practice of all good businesses.

"I can see where [alliances would] be an advantage, but we really don't do it because there's no big benefit to us," O'Brien says. "All manufacturers should and do work with each other on whatever is needed to meet the customer's needs."

A processing supplier may have no choice but to work with a specific packaging vendor if the customer requests it, either to maintain commonality with existing equipment or simply because they've had good luck with a particular firm.

"Unless they are unhappy, or we can provide a better solution, it is difficult to get them to change to one of our preferred suppliers," notes Teeling.

The result may not always be a "shotgun marriage," but the relationship can still have its challenges.

"It can be difficult to accommodate this request, especially if the packaging equipment supplier is a competitor on other equipment lines, such as conveying equipment," says Talberg, whose firm has also worked with packaging equipment suppliers and system integrators to provide conveyors as part of turnkey systems. "But we do try our best to make it work."

### Pick your partners wisely

Establishing an alliance with one or more packaging equipment manufacturers may well prove to be an ideal strategic move for a processing equipment supplier, or one that will help ensure survival as customers look more toward "one-stop" providers for their evolving needs.

To ensure that the relationship achieves the kind of "win/win/win" outcome Teeling describes above, there are certain qualities processors should look for when evaluating prospective packaging partners.

Rochelle says that being in similar industries—meat, dairy, bakery, etc.—"creates a better, smoother opportunity for a technology transfer to take place."

Teeling agrees. "If we do not have the capabilities that our customer is looking for, we can help steer them in the right direction," he says. "Additional items to look for when choosing a packaging partner are capacity, referrals and pricing."

Jacob also advises making sure the alliance partners speak the same language, literally and figuratively.

"There are some subtleties in the way we and packaging companies view things and use certain terms, such as sanitation and regulation," he explains. "You need to have a clear understanding at the outset so there's no confusion later on."

Above all, the most critical element of a processing-packaging alliance may well be the partners' respective reputations.

“It is important to align with reputable and proven suppliers who will stand behind their equipment because we are placing our reputation on the line when we recommend or work with another equipment supplier,” Brainard says. “It truly needs to be a partnership.”

Jim Parsons has written about business and technology issues for more than 14 years.



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