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Ice cream maker scoops up advanced packaging equipment

Wells' Dairy Inc. is returning to PACK EXPO this year to purchase more business-building production machinery.



Ken Alesch, senior project integrator at Le Mars, Iowa-based Wells' Dairy Inc. (manufacturer of BLUE BUNNY and Weight Watchers ice cream and frozen desserts), is coming back to PACK EXPO this year in search of equipment to help expand the company's manufacturing operation and support its sustainability initiatives. After visiting the show in 2008, Alesch purchased several systems that improved efficiency, speed, time to market and easily integrated into the company's existing floor plan. PACK EXPO is sponsored and produced by PMMI.

Building a global brand

The roots of Wells' Dairy trace back to 1913 with the purchase of a milk distribution route in Le Mars, Iowa, by Fred H. Wells. By 1925, the Wells brothers expanded their business to include ice cream manufacturing. As the popularity of their ice cream grew, they quickly branched out and began distributing their frozen confections in nearby cities, including Sioux City, Iowa. In 1928, Fairmont Ice Cream purchased the ice cream distribution system in Sioux City from the Wells brothers along with the right to use the Wells name. After ultimately deciding to get back into the ice cream business in 1935, the Wells brothers held a contest to name their new venture and the BLUE BUNNY brand was born.

Today, Wells' Dairy, Inc. is still based in Le Mars, the "Ice Cream Capital of the World." The company's facility, in the southern part of town, is literally the largest ice cream plant on the planet, with 36 manufacturing lines that churn out one million gallon-sized containers of ice cream every day. And that doesn't

include the nine million half gallons, 20 million ice cream sandwiches and numerous other treats that also come off the lines. Wells' Dairy, Inc. also operates 13 lines out of a second, smaller Iowa facility and two in St. George, Utah.

ous innovation. Regular, rigorous assessments of its operations play a significant role in streamlining efficiency and these initiatives remain corporate priorities today.

"Wells' Dairy has continued to ex-

to explore a wide range of technology.

Besides satisfying Alesch's stringent performance requirements and meeting a Super E energy efficiency standard, it was imperative that the new equipment be compact enough to inte-



Wells' Dairy, Inc. has a long history, and it's looking to PACK EXPO for equipment that ensures a long future.

Besides a wide variety of ice cream and ice cream sandwiches, the BLUE BUNNY line includes frozen yogurts, sherbets and ice cream cones for both the retail and foodservice sectors. Wells' Dairy is also the manufacturer of low-calorie frozen treats under the Weight Watchers label. Both brands are sold in 21 countries, including the United States.

Refreshing lines to maximize results

For Wells' Dairy, becoming one of the largest ice cream manufacturers in North America resulted from continu-

pand and evolve for more than 80 years," says Alesch. "We attribute a lot of the company's success to some key principles—a belief in hard work, dedication to providing the best quality products and a genuine desire to be the preferred brand in every category we have a presence in. So when it comes to enhancing our manufacturing operation, we are very demanding."

In 2008, Wells' Dairy was looking to invest in new casepacking and banding equipment that would reduce operational costs without sacrificing speed. Alesch and a small buying team headed to PACK EXPO, where they were able

grate into the facilities for which they were destined.

"When you build lines, you don't always leave a lot of free space to accommodate future growth," explains Alesch. "So when the time comes to upgrade or replace those lines, it can be very challenging to introduce new equipment without impeding on other parts of the manufacturing process. It's simply a hurdle that you must overcome to make a successful change."

Exercising high standards

As a direct result of PACK EXPO, Wells' Dairy made several purchases,

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including two **Tripack LLC (Booth N3443)** banders—the HSA 300 to quickly handle smaller containers, and the LSA 300 to handle larger containers—and a FL-500i case packer from **Delkor Systems Inc. (Booth S2517)**.

To minimize downtime during installation and ensure each machine was a perfect fit, Alesch and his team met with each equipment supplier to align specifications before assembly began. Once systems were 80% complete, Alesch visited the supplier manufacturing sites to check on the mechanical and sanitary build requirements. When the machines were fully built, he paid another visit to the manufacturer to run a factory acceptance test at required speeds for an extended time span. The Delkor case packer was installed in the large Le Mars plant to handle four-ounce cups of ice cream. The system's increased speed has saved Wells' Dairy as much as \$500,000 since installation. The case packer is capable of handling future growth—and further boosting savings—should Wells' Dairy increase line speeds once more.

The Tripack banders were initially installed in the large Le Mars facility. Since that time, one has been moved to the smaller Le Mars plant. The company uses the machines to apply tamper-evident shrink wrap to its 48- and 56-oz. containers. Wells' Dairy recently purchased an additional Tripack bander to package pints of ice cream in its Utah facility.

"Tamper evidence is so integral to today's packaging," says Alesch. "You can't build a brand without assuring customers that your products are safe. The Tripack banders have offered an excellent way to apply the tamper-evident band quickly and reliably."

Looking to the future

The team from Wells' Dairy is back at PACK EXPO this year, in search of filling and dispensing equipment for all three manufacturing facilities, plus

technologies supporting its sustainability initiatives.

"I'm an equipment geek," confesses Alesch. "I've been attending PACK EXPO consistently for 12 years and have been known to go into an exhibitor's booth and crawl all

over, under and around the machinery to see if it meets our specifications. To be truthful, I wish the show would last a couple of weeks, because it's easy for me to spend three hours with one vendor discussing equipment."

This "equipment geek"-led team will also include processing machin-

ery on their PACK EXPO agenda.

"I'm excited to see the addition of processing solutions to the show," says Alesch. "Being able to see such a wide range of equipment in a single place helps companies like ours find what we need to meet our rigorous criteria and continue to grow." **SD**

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