

Conveyors boost efficiency

Expansion drives need for conveyors.

Using small-batch production techniques, Valley Popcorn, Neenah, Wisconsin, pops high-quality hybrid white or yellow kernels in coconut oil and salt to yield a theatre-style, ready-to-eat (RTE) product with maximum flavor and minimum calories (35 calories/cup). The RTE popcorn is sold in resealable, 20-oz. Big Bags and 6.5-oz. bags at the company's retail location, through resellers and distributors and online. Flavored RTE popcorn is packaged in bags holding between 3 and 7 oz. For on-site popping, the company supplies kernels in 2-lb. bags or dual-chamber Perfect Pack - Popcorn Kit pouches, which provide the exact ratio of corn, salt and oil needed for easy, mess-free popping.

As the popularity of its RTE product grew, existing equipment had difficulty keeping up, and expansion became imperative. So poppers were installed to increase production. The expansion also necessitated more sophisticated conveyors to maximize throughput while improving cleaning and maintenance.

"We needed stainless steel, sanitary, easy-to-clean conveyors with removable belting," says Mike Freundl, operations analyst at Valley Popcorn.

With the expansion driving the need for additional conveyors, the popcorn maker looked for an

original equipment manufacturer that would collaborate in the design of a custom-fabricated system. The solution proved to be equipment from **Multi-Conveyor (Booth 1203)** Winneconne, Wisconsin. "Multi-Conveyor came on-site, listened to our needs, designed and engineered problem-solving systems even beyond our original specifications," Freundl reports.

Valley Popcorn started doing business with Multi-Conveyor in 2013 when it replaced a system that did not have a removable belt. Freundl recalls, "It was hard to clean, and the oils built-up underneath, causing breakdowns. That system needed cleaning daily, which was taking up valuable production time. Multi-Conveyor alleviated those problems by designing a one-pin belt-removal system. All we do now is pull a pin and soak the belts for easy, quick cleanup. We've increased production and decreased our cleaning man hours, a financial win/win."

The Multi-Conveyor equipment for the expansion replaced an existing horizontal belt and added two additional conveyors, an incline and a wide diverting conveyor. It was installed at the end of 2015.

Freundl says, "The conveyors tie our entire manufacturing process together, moving our product though each stage of production. We could not possibly achieve our output goals without



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When Valley Popcorn needed to expand production of RTE popcorn, Mike Freundl, Operations Analyst, worked with Multi-Conveyor to address product-handling requirements.

these conveyors. They are a key component to our production process and, probably, the most taken-for-granted pieces of equipment we own.

The expanded operation also is much more flexible. "The diverting conveyor enables us to divert to specific pack-off lines with the push of a button," explains Freundl.

"The new conveyors not only handle the increased production, but also make the plant more versatile for future additions and supports Valley Popcorn's goal of being an industry leader in popcorn," notes Clint Koelbl, sales account manager at Multi-Conveyor. "Results couldn't have been better from our perspective," continues Koelbl. "In a post-installation survey of the equipment and the buying process, Valley Popcorn rated Quality, Speed, Performance, Reliability, Safety, Sales/Project Management, Engineering and Shipping/Delivery with a five on a scale of one (least favorable) to five (most favorable). They also plan on using Multi-Conveyor for their future expansion."

Freundl concludes, "The Multi-Conveyor lines have significantly reduced our downtime and solved our ergonomic issues. The quality-built systems have increased our efficiency, and we have not had any need for service. These conveyors are the heartbeat of our packaging system."

For more information, visit www.multi-conveyor.com. **SD**

