

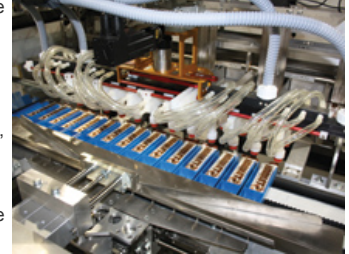
AFA Systems Inc.

Article by Jamie Morgan

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There are two major modes of thinking when it comes to manufacturing equipment. Manufacturers can either design and produce machines as they see fit and expect customers to fall in line, or they can take a careful look at their customers' processes and create exacting solutions. AFA Systems Inc., based in Brampton, Ontario, has chosen the latter. The company, run by a second-generation of Langen brothers, specializes in engineered automated product-handling and packaging solutions. AFA's equipment can be used for a number of packaging functions and applications such as product handling, case packing, cartoning, product orienting, alignment systems, lane combiners, palletizing and case erecting.



As one can imagine, because packaging is used in almost every industry, AFA's client list runs the gamut from food and beverage manufacturers to pharmaceutical and personal hygiene companies. The company has developed best practices for working with each industry, but also creates customized solutions for specific needs.

"We do all of the design in-house and all of the designs are proprietary," Vice President Eric Langen explains. "I think traditional packaging companies were more focused on building a machine and selling it to customers and having them modify their product and process to match the machine, whereas we've enjoyed tremendous growth over the last 10 years through creating engineered solutions."

ROBOT HELPERS

AFA Systems monitors trends in the packaging world to stay ahead of customers' needs. One of those trends is the move away from pneumatic compressed air solutions to electronic motion-controlled machinery, which uses robotics to control movement through the packaging process. Langen says a good example of the process is AFA's MK-DLT Integrated Delta 3 Robotic Cartoner, which uses a Delta 3 robot that is designed and manufactured by AFA Systems. The robot is mounted above the cartoner to provide accurate collation of product off either an indexing or continuous moving conveyor. An integrated AFA platform for motion and machine control offers one programming environment for operators. Other benefits to the end-user include reduced training costs, easier troubleshooting and reduced maintenance costs.

The key innovation behind the MK-DLT is that the Delta 3 robot and the cartoner are controlled by an Allen Bradley platform. Traditional integrated Delta 3 Robotic Cartoners will typically employ two control systems: one for the cartoner and one for the Delta 3 Robot. This means that operators will have to be familiar with two control systems, which increases training and maintenance cost. With the MK-DLT, one integrated platform is used to control both the cartoner and the Delta 3 Robot. An integrated vision system ensures accurate pick and placements of a wide variety of carton and product sizes. The machine can handle up to 300 pick and placements per minute.

"We have really spent a lot of effort in increasing our capabilities in terms of machine control and robotic integration," Langen says. "We've partnered with companies and we've also developed our own robots for different applications, such as the Delta 3 to give customers programmable control to operate the robots."

TOTAL INTEGRATION

Another recent trend the company has noticed is customers requesting more one-stop-shop services. Rather than working with 20 different companies to form one complete packaging solution, product manufacturers are looking for partners who can handle that process for them. AFA Systems is responding to the need and offers customers equipment integration and automated product assembly systems.

"Packaging is typically at the end of the line so usually the whole process is already in place," Langen says. "We can come in and integrate the entire process, whether it's granola bars or bottling and labels, we can integrate with other equipment that is part of the packaging operations, such as metal detection and labelers. There's a whole variety of components that make up the whole end-of-line operations."

Between its two facilities – one in Brampton and another in Shanghai that opened three years ago – AFA makes sure that each customer is taken care of well after the sale has closed. It ships product globally, including to North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The company provides installation, training and maintenance. It will also handle packaging machine rebuilding and retrofits depending on the customers' needs. To determine those needs, however, Langen emphasizes that a great deal of listening has to happen first.

"We just listen to our customers and respond to what their requirements are," Langen says. "We listen to the customer and we found out that what they needed were complete solutions to specific problems. They don't want something that they end up having to re-engineer to their process. Our focus in the industry is designing solutions that perfectly fit the customer."