Sweet Success

Krystal Gabert, Editor, Food Manufacturing

Wolfgang Candy officially opened for business in York, PA in 1921, but the Wolfgang family's candy-making began decades earlier when the Wolfgang brothers opened the first Wolfgang Candy Factory in the late 1890s. After only a few years, the factory was burned down in the North York Fire, and the candy-making business came to a halt.

That is until a few years later, when a second-generation Wolfgang—Paul—took what he had learned of the candy-making business from his father and uncles and

started the business anew.

The Next Generation

The Wolfgang Candy Co. has expanded since then, from the basement of the family home to occupying an office building and two production facilities, the newest of which was built in 1987. Until recently, Wolfgang's bread and butter has been the fundraising market. But due to pressure from parents and school districts to cut sweets from schools, fundraising through candy sales is not as in vogue as it once was. Seeing the writing on the wall, Wolfgang decided that it was time to diversify its product line and distribution and began to consider other ways to get its chocolates into the hands of consumers.

That's where the fourth generation of Wolfgangs comes in. Since the fourth generation took over management of the chocolate business several years ago, there have been numerous changes afoot, from production to distribution and beyond. While fundraising is still an important part of Wolfgang's business, the company's cookies and candies can now be found on the shelves of grocery, drug and specialty stores throughout the country.

Deciding on new product offerings is truly a family affair. "We're our own focus group," says Mike Schmid, one of Wolfgang's managing partners.

In addition to new product offerings, like Eve's chocolate-topped truffle cookies and Jungle Jack's chocolate covered animal crackers, manufactured under the Wolfgang brand, the company has begun production of private label products for customers like CVS and Walgreens.

"Candy is one of those areas where private label is very much in its infancy," Schmid says. "Retailers are finding there is real value in cementing their brand."

Candyman Meets Candybot

In order to keep up with the demand imposed by these new ventures, Wolfgang sought out ways to incorporate new technology into their existing operation. The company teamed up with local JLS Automation, an automation integrator, to help research automation options for its growing production line. After both companies evaluated the production line, available space, and automation options, Wolfgang eventually implemented ABB Robotics' FlexPicker pick-and-place system.

The system picks up finished truffle cookies and other chocolates, and places them in packaging trays. The system is able to recognize and skip over defective products, helping Wolfgang maintain product uniformity without intensive manual oversight. The robots can pick and place 200 cookies per minute, increasing production speed by about 12 percent.

Schmid says that the pick-and-place robots have been a great addition to the production line. He says that though robotics technology is often considered as a means of cutting labor costs, Wolfgang kept its labor force in tact after the

acquisition of the new technology. The employees of Wolfgang even participated in a contest to name their new robotic coworkers, and the winning names were “Lucy and Ethel,” after the infamous “I Love Lucy” episode in which Lucy and Ethel take jobs working the line at a candy factory.

“The robots have allowed us to get more work,” emphasizes Schmid. “Our employees know that Lucy and Ethel aren’t competing for their jobs. The robots allow us to work faster and better and offer the employees job security as we continue to grow.”

The most challenging part of implementing the robotics system, Schmid says, was learning the equipment and how it functioned, but JLS was able to help streamline the integration process and train employees.

The newly-christened robots have helped to speed up production at Wolfgang's York facility. A contest among employees resulted in the names "Lucy" and "Ethel."

Traditionally Delicious

But despite all these changes, much of the Wolfgang operation is committed to continuing its traditional production methods and producing quality confectionary products. Wolfgang’s chocolate recipe has remained the same for decades, is prepared offsite, and is delivered in liquid form to the production facility where it is stored in 50,000-gallon tanks until it can be used.

The assorted chocolate gift boxes are still packed by hand, too, each chocolate carefully selected by a Wolfgang employee, many of whom have worked for the company for decades, and placed in its designated spot in the chocolate box. Employees are able to pack between 120 and 200 boxes of chocolates per hour this way.

A Tasty Tour

Because of Wolfgang's public outreach, about 16,000 visitors each year are able to see pick-and-place robots alongside Wolfgang's employees. York, PA has designated itself the "Factory Tour Capitol of the World," and many of the businesses in the area, Wolfgang included, have embraced this title, opening their doors to the public. York's big draw is the Harley Davidson facility, which draws motorcycle enthusiasts from all over the world to its doors. While in town, many stop by Wolfgang to get an up-close look at chocolate-making.

"Being as open as we are poses its own set of unique challenges," admits Schmid. The public is briefed before entering the facility: No eating, no touching the chocolate, and stay with your tour guide. And though most visitors abide by the rules without issue, Schmid says that another part of the facility workers' jobs has become keeping an eye on the visitors to make sure they follow the rules.

In addition to the challenges of having a factory full of onlookers, though, there are real benefits to an open facility. Opening its doors generates goodwill among those who see its operation and in the local community at large. In 2004, Wolfgang was selected as one of Food Network's top five "Tasty Tours," spreading the word about its chocolates and its tours. Not only has the company seen great publicity from its tours, but it has also seen some unexpected food safety benefits.

"When your doors are open all the time, it's hard to do the wrong thing," says Schmid of the company's production transparency. Hundreds of visitors each week mean hundreds of sets of eyes overseeing the company's production methods. This increased visibility has kept the Wolfgang facility at the top of its game.

A Sweet Future

Lucy and Ethel have been in place since July of last year, just as production was ramping up for Wolfgang's busy season, from August through Easter. The robots will continue to prove vital for the candymaker, as Wolfgang persists in growing its new private label and branded businesses and hopes to expand its grocery items into stores in its backyard and beyond. No doubt, the company's commitment to quality candy-making, its employees, and the public at large will carry it through the changes ahead.

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