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Servo placer replaces robotic feeder

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Machine increases reliability and uptime for shelf-stable, flexible pouch packaging operations.

AmeriQual Group, LLC (www.ameriqua.com), Evansville, IN, specializes in the contract production and packaging of shelf-stable, retort-processed foods in flexible pouches, microwaveable plastic bowls and trays, and glass jars. Major customers include the U.S. Department of Defense and some large commercial branded food manufacturers.

The company had been using a robotic feeder for its pouch filling operations. The robotic feeder picked and presented pre-formed, unfilled pouches in a vertical orientation to the parent machine for filling. But AmeriQual was not completely satisfied with the speed and efficiency of the system.



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In August 2006, AmeriQual replaced the robotic feeder with a servo-driven rotary placer supplied by Graphic Packaging International, Inc.'s Minnesota Automation Products (www.minnesotaautomation.com) group.

Wes Blankenberger, AmeriQual's director of engineering, says, "AmeriQual worked closely with Minnesota Automation on the design of the placer. With our experience with flexible pouches and Minnesota Automation's experience with pick-and-place applications, we developed a high-speed, flexible, and efficient system."

Installation & start-up

Blankenberger notes that Minnesota Automation technicians were at the AmeriQual plant for about a week to install the rotary placer, test it, assist in start-up operations, and train AmeriQual's operators and maintenance personnel.

The placer is mounted to the existing Bossar (www.bossar.com) pouch fill/seal machine. No new auxiliary equipment was required to accommodate coupling of the rotary placer to the Bossar system. Using vacuum cups, the placer picks up two pouches at a time from the magazine and places them vertically with the open-side up between feed belts on the pouch-filling machine. The feed belts grab the pouches and hold them in place for filling, sealing, and releasing. The system then resets for the next fill/seal cycle.

Positive results

AmeriQual is packaging into three pouch sizes, measuring from 50 to 150 mm wide x 90 to 300 mm long, to hold product weights from 5 to 14 oz. The pouches are made of foil/plastic (further structural specifics not disclosed) and are supplied by multiple vendors.

Blankenberger reports, "With this rotary placer, we have been able to increase our pouch line speed by 15% and our efficiency by 20%, while we've reduced packaging material scrap by 5%. It's much easier to operate and very reliable."

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