

AirPouch® void-fill system packs a big payback

A mail-order nutraceutical company packs up the loose-fill peanuts and switches to air pouches for greater productivity, less mess, and reduced costs.

HHealth Resources™ LLC of Hueytown, AL, was established in 1995 as a manufacturer of natural health supplements available by mail order. Today, the company offers more than 400 different SKUs, with products that promote a range of health solutions, including joint relief, heart health, reduced inflammation, and better digestion, among many others. In March, the company began running six AirPouch® Express 3™ void-fill systems from **Automated Packaging Systems** (www.autobag.com) to protect its bottles of product during shipment.

Replacing the use of expanded polystyrene peanuts, the new system has increased operator productivity, has eliminated on-site and in customers' homes the mess associated with the clingy foam peanuts, and has reduced labor and energy costs.

"The decision to move from packing peanuts to air pouches was an easy one," says Health Resources production and facility manager Mike Ceravolo. "The most important factor for us was the presentation of our package and product to our customer. The air pillows improve the customer experience while ensuring better protection of our product. Less damaged product means fewer returns and claims."

Choosing an alternative

Last year, when Health Resources outgrew its EPS peanut-packing system, which fed the company's 12 packing lines from overhead bins, Ceravolo set out to design a better, faster, and more efficient packing system. The time spent each day loading the bins, moving stored peanuts, and cleaning up the



CUSTOM FEED. Automated packing stations move the air pillows from the machine via an air tower into an overhead hopper.

mess at each packaging station was increasing at a time when Ceravolo says he was looking for productivity improvements to help manage the company's rapid growth. At the same time, some customers were complaining about the mess associated with the peanut packing material when the packages arrived at their homes.

Andy Bauer of Strickland Packaging Co. (www.stricklandpaper.com), an authorized AirPouch distributor, offered to help

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Ceravolo evaluate Health Resources' growing needs. Bauer says he immediately recognized the value the AirPouch system could bring to the packing operation. The clear, air pillow material would eliminate the mess and storage problem of EPS peanuts, and customer satisfaction would improve because the air pillows create no mess after a shipment is opened.

Additionally, the efficiency and protection offered by the air pillows would surpass those associated with peanuts and paper, Bauer explains. Finally, the overall cost of the Express 3 system would be less than what Health Resources was spending at the time.

Health Resources' 12 packing stations are now served by six AirPouch Express 3 void-fill systems. For the company's require-



DOUBLE DUTY. Each hopper features two openings to serve two packing stations. Operators can pull lengths of air pillows directly into the packing area, easily tearing off as many pillows as they need.

ments, the benchtop machines produce air pillows measuring 8" x 8" in continuous strips that can be torn away quickly and easily via EZ-Tear™ perforations. The clear, air pillow material is constructed of a 2.0-mil linear low-density polyethylene called DuraClear™ 2000.

The void-fill system measures 20.5" x 8.5" x 14", making it one of the most lightweight and compact packing systems on the market, according to Automated Packaging Systems. The unit is quiet, and its all-electric design requires no compressed air. The AirPouch sealing process prevents air leaks, and the amount of air per pillow is adjustable for optimum packing

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conditions. The system can run in automatic or semi-automatic modes, and at Health Resources, it uses an optional sensor to start and stop production automatically.

To ergonomically and conveniently supply filled pouches to the shipping operators, Automated Packaging Systems developed custom feeding systems comprising an air tower and an overhead hopper for each machine. Each hopper features two openings where packers from two stations can pull lengths of air pillows out and directly into the packing area, tearing off as many air pillows as needed. There is no mess and no wasted product.

The air pillow material is supplied fan-folded in compact boxes that include 3,000' of pillows. "The amount of space this saves in our facility is amazing," states Ceravolo. When using the EPS peanuts, Health Resources had to store 50 20-cu' bags of peanuts every two and a half weeks. "That is now reduced to one pallet, easily accessible," he adds, "and the supply lasts about six weeks."

Benefits abound

The new packing process has resulted in roughly a 2-percent to 3-percent increase in productivity per operator, Ceravolo estimates, allowing each operator to pack an average of 55 to 60 shipments/hour, for a total of 1,500 packages/day prepared at Health Resources. "There are significant cost savings just in the time we save handling the AirPouch material versus EPS," he continues. "Then, when we add the increased productivity of an additional three shipments per hour, per employee, we really

begin to realize the benefits of the Express 3 system. We don't even have to put a value on the increased customer satisfaction levels to see our return on investment for this system. In fact, we added custom printing to the air pillows so customers have another opportunity to see our logo and Web address, while we benefit from increased brand awareness. The package has a higher-quality image, which helps our business.

"How many other ideas are out there that are as cheap to implement with a benefit that makes it all the way into the hands of the customer?"

—Anne Marie Mohan