



Packing snacks made easy

by Mark Cardwell
photos Mark Cardwell

Propack, one of North America's leading carton-loading automators, aims to make life simpler and more efficient for candy and cookie manufacturers.

> The North American confectionary packaging industry has few secrets for Chris Follows. So when he realized a few years ago that snack-food makers wanted packing machines that offered more flexibility and took up less floor space, he responded.

As president of Propack Processing & Packaging Systems, a Canadian manufacturer and distributor of standardized carton-loading machines, Follows overhauled the make and design of his company's core product line – the LJ Series. “We needed to increase the number and variety of tasks our machines could do,” he says. “We also needed to downsize our machines. Their footprint was too big.”

To solve the problem, Follows decided to change the robotics at the very heart of his machines. Gone was an old big 6-axis, side-loading system. In its place was ABB's FlexPicker IRB 340, a 4-axis, top-mounted picker system. The change, says Follows, was immediately embraced by Propack customers across Canada and the United States. “The 4-axis machines offer our customers more options and they are more durable,” he says. “We've got more than 50 of them in the field and we've had no issues with any of them.

When our customers are happy, so are we.”

That's a maxim Follows came by as honestly as did his knowledge of the packaging industry. The son of a manufacturing representative for an American packaging-machine maker, he trained and worked as a mechanical technician before joining Klockner Packaging Machinery. After five years as head of the company's sales department, he left in search of a new challenge and founded Propack in 1996.

Initially, the company was a literal one-man show, with Follows acting as the North American manufacturing representative for Dutch packaging-machine maker Tevopharm BM. Since then, Propack's product line has continued to grow. Today, in addition to selling a variety of models in its own LJ Series, which are assembled at a manufacturing facility near Quebec City, Propack is the North American distributor for Houdijk Holland's biscuit-packaging systems and Tevopharm BV's flowrapper and multipurpose modular in-line infeed systems. The company is also a distributor for Bradman-Lake, a carton machinery manufacturer based in North Carolina, and Schneider Packaging, a packaging equip-



Propack President Chris Follows, with V.P. Kevin Crosby and engineering manager Dave Young.

“I don’t buy things for the price, I buy them for quality.”

Raymond Guilbeault, Les Aliments Multibar Inc.

ment maker in Brewerton, New York.

The company’s customer list is equally impressive. Follows says that some of North America’s biggest food- and meal-supplementary drug-making conglomerates are using Propack-supplied packaging machines to wrap and pack everything from cookies and cakes to candy- and meal-supplement bars. “We completely dominant the latter sector in Canada,” he says. “We have 17 LJs there. I think that represents all of the machines being used.”

Propack has also continued to grow in terms of the number and quality of its employees. “Technically, we have one of the best teams in the industry,” says Follows of his company’s 10-member staff, most of whom work in the company’s unpretentious suite of offices in an industrial strip mall in Oakville, Ontario, a 20-minute drive south of Toronto. “That allows us to check out machines properly. And the fact that all the models in our LJ Series run the same program saves us time and trouble, too.”

The most notable addition to the company’s personnel in recent years has been Kevin Crosby. After spending a decade helping one of North America’s largest candy-bar makers build

a high-speed robotic collating system, Crosby joined Propack in 2001 as both a partner and vice president of manufacturing and engineering. “Kevin brought a huge wealth of knowledge and understanding about the confectionary industry to our company,” says Follows.

It was Crosby who first suggested replacing an old robotics system in the LJ Series with ABB’s IRB 340. A more flexible machine, together with a customized PC platform that makes both hardware and software easier to upgrade and support, has helped Propack become the dominant player in the medium- and high-speed confectionary packaging markets in North America. “Our systems are so easy to use that our customers can change the settings themselves. They don’t need a robotics technician,” says Follows. “That allows them to switch product lines with little time and trouble. That’s exactly what companies want, especially the smaller ones.”

Big ones, too, it seems. One of Propack’s biggest customers, Montreal-based Les Aliments Multibar Inc., has ten LJ500 models for its assembly process, which produces two million snack bars a day for customers like Quaker Oats and Atkins. “I don’t buy things for the price, I



ABB's Mikael Packalén likes to get people excited about robotics.

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Chris Follows, Propack

> buy them for quality,” says company owner Raymond Guilbeault. “With Propack, I get both.” In addition to small improvements Propack has made to the LJ500 in response to his company’s needs and observations, Guilbeault says he appreciates the personal and professional attentiveness he gets from Follows. “I’ve dealt with Chris for 15 years. He knows his stuff, he’s a good guy, and I can reach him anytime,” says Guilbeault.

Despite the accolades, Propack’s owners aren’t resting on their laurels. In an effort to break into the highly-competitive, low-speed packaging market, Follows and Crosby are in the midst of developing a new model in the LJ Series – a single-train system that will be able to run 500 pieces per minute and load cartons. “We’re looking to reduce end-cost dramatically,” says Follows, who hopes to unveil the new machine at the Interpack show in Düsseldorf, Germany next April. “That’s what our customers want. And by staying in tune with them, we’ll continue to be successful.”

Big plans for Propack

> Propack president Chris Follows is understandably hesitant to discuss the ongoing development of the newest addition to his company’s LJ Series of packaging machines. He will say, however, that the new model will incorporate more ABB technology than the IRB 340 FlexPicker, the robotics system at the heart of all LJ machines. The new one, he says, will also have the IRC5, ABB’s fifth generation robot controller.

A new modular concept with an ergonomically-designed portable interface, user-friendly Windows layout, and touch-screen operations, the controller offers increased life-time profitability for end users – the same qualities and benefits that Follows wants to pass on to Propack’s customers. “It will help them reduce their costs,” he says. “When our customers are happy, I’m happy – and our customers will be happy with our new machine.”

Those comments are music to the ears of Mikael Packalén. As channel partner sales manager of ABB Robotic, Automotive & Manufacturing - Canada, his job is to develop the non-automotive manufacturing industrial market for ABB by working with integrators and machine builders that supply robot-based automation to the consumer industry, particularly the food, beverage, and pharmaceutical fields. “My job is to get people excited about robotics,” explains Packalén, who hails from Sweden.

Among ABB’s many Canadian partners, Packalén considers Propack to be one of the most dynamic. “They are very focused on what they do and they’re very knowledgeable about their market,” he says. “They are also an important partner and channel for us into the North American packaging market.”

Through Propack, Packalén hopes to see a big increase in the sales of the IRB 340 FlexPicker thanks to the rapid growth in the use of robotics in the North American food industry. “The industry is now adapting to robotics, particularly for applications like palletizing, picking, and packing,” he says. “The growth potential is huge, particularly when you’re working with a dynamic partner like Propack.”