

Ocean Spray Automates Tagging

The fruit cooperative has automated the process of applying RFID labels to cases and plans to integrate the tagging of cases with its packaging processes.

By Claire Swedberg

May 16, 2006—Last November, fruit products producer Ocean Spray installed an RFID tagging system at its facility in Sulphur Springs, Texas. The operation was up and running in three days, allowing the company to fully comply with mandates from Wal-Mart and other RFID-utilizing retailers. The system was deployed by RedPrairie and uses Gen 2 UHF tags.

According to Chad Kramlich, RedPrairie's director of supply chain executive (CSE) application services, the system was able to complete its implementation faster than most RFID installations because of the participation of Ocean Spray's staff. Kramlich says the fruit products producer's staff members fully understood the system and why they were using it, making a point to educate themselves on how it worked with their own internal homegrown IT system and the SAP warehouse management system (WMS) they use.

Thanks to its RFID system, Ocean Spray is able to automate the process of applying RFID labels to cases and testing those labels before the cases are shipped to retailers that have mandated tagging. When Ocean Spray ships its Cranberry Juice Cocktail to Wal-Mart, for example, employees take the cases off pallets packaged for shipping and place them on a U-shaped conveyer belt, where they are sent past a Weber Marking Systems' RFID label printer-appliator. The device encodes and attaches a Weber SmartTrak label with an Alien Technology Gen2 Squiggle tag to each case. The case then continues on to an Alien interrogator (reader), which verifies that the tag is functioning correctly.

The interrogator is integrated with Ocean Spray's programmable logic controller (PLC) to send an alert in the event of a bad read. If a tag has a bad read, it sets off an audible notification, Kramlich says, and causes the light stack above the conveyor to illuminate. The RedPrairie Ignitor software generates a list of all incidents in which a case does not have a good read after a batch goes through the system.

If two consecutive tags have bad reads, the PLC stops the conveyor. Cases with bad reads can then be taken off the conveyor and run past the interrogator again to determine whether the tags are inoperable, and if the company needs to generate a new tag for those cases. "This way, Ocean Spray is able to guarantee a 100 percent read rate," Kramlich says. When the cases have passed through the applicator and reader, workers restack them manually on a pallet, which they then send to the warehouse for shipment.

Currently, Ocean Spray is tagging only cases of product destined for Wal-Mart or other customers using RFID. According to Kramlich, however, the fruit cooperative has plans to include the tagging and verifying of case tags with the rest of the manufacturing process. This could result in cases being tagged and tags being read during the packaging of product into the cases.

For Kramlich, the biggest surprise was how fast the system went live. "One of the key components to pulling this off was the strong business partnership we had with Ocean Spray. Everyone there understood what we

were doing and why we were doing it." Typically, Kramlich explains, the implementation of a simpler "slap and ship system," which does not involve integration with the company's internal warehouse management system, requires three to four days.

The strong partnership included Ocean Spray's SAP representative, a member of Ocean Spray's WMS team, a RedPrairie and Ocean Spray customer-service representative and an individual from Wal-Mart. "They were able to bring in a cross-functional team that was able to answer questions as they came up," Kramlich says.

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