Daisy Brand Deems RFID a Success

The sour cream maker says it has operated more efficiently since deploying its RFID system last year, and that expansion plans are underway.

By Claire Swedberg

Jan. 10, 2007—After implementing an RFID system to track pallets at its manufacturing site in Texas and throughout the supply chain, Daisy Brand is working to expand the system to a new facility. The system, deployed last spring (see RFID Increases Sour Cream Maker's Visibility), has required some training and maintenance, according to Kevin Brown, Daisy Brand director of information systems, but it has been a success.

Daisy Brand is preparing to deploy a simulated version of the system at a temporary distribution center near the site of a future manufacturing facility in Casa Grande, Ariz. The simulation is intended to be in operation by the end of first quarter 2007, and Daisy Brand says it will be prepared to launch an RFID system immediately when the new manufacturing plant opens in 2008.

Since last year, the company' factory and warehouse in Garland, Texas, have been applying Alien Technology ALL-9460 Omni-Squiggle EPC Class 1 Gen 2 RFID labels to loaded and shrink-wrapped pallets. It has also been using Alien 9800 RFID readers and tablet computers on forklifts, in conjunction with an iMotion Edgeware RFID middleware platform provided by GlobeRanger. In addition, 10 dock doors at the facility each contain an Alien fixed RFID interrogator.

The Garland system went live May 1, Brown says, and the seven forklift drivers were given training on a GlobeRanger Flash multimedia simulator program that mimicked the tablet PCs they would be using. For about a month, trainers on the floor helped with RFID-related problems, Brown says. "I'd say we were fully functional by the third week, and by the fourth week, we no longer needed the help on the floor."

The existing system allows Daisy Brand drivers to press prompts on their tablet PCs to update the company's ERP system with RFID data detailing which pallet is being moved, where it is going and why. According to Brown, this system has decreased the average time the company requires to load a truck from 50 minutes to 20 minutes. That includes time spent locating a loaded pallet, taking it off the rack and loading it onto the truck, while automatically recording which items were loaded on which truck, and even where on the truck they were loaded.

The system offers several features. Forklifts fitted with RFID readers capture the EPC numbers of tags applied to loaded pallets. That data is then linked with a five-digit pallet number used in-house, Brown says, because it is shorter and easier to track. Data about the product on that pallet, including its type (no-fat versus regular sour cream, for example) and sell-by dates, is stored in the company's ERP system. The driver can see the pallet number on the screen of his tablet PC, which prompts him to press responses to such questions as where the load will be located in the warehouse.

When a truck arrives to pick up a load, the driver can remove pallets to be loaded on his vehicle. The system

will let that driver know if he is picking up the right pallet. For example, a pallet containing cases of product with an imminent sell-by date would not be shipped to a far-away retail destination, such as Seattle or New York. The reader at the portal would also alert a driver on his tablet PC if he were loading the wrong pallet for a specific truck.

Since May, Daisy Brand has gone through two "maintenance releases," in which it has adjusted the existing system to improve performance. "There have been challenges," Brown says. "We had to work through things—programmers can't think of everything." For example, there is now an option for forklift drivers in the event a pallet breaks while being loaded (in such a situation, the adjusted system allows Daisy Brand to print a new RFID label).

With the construction of its new manufacturing facility in Arizona, Daisy Brand will be adding an RFID system there for the tagging of pallets. Data from forklift readers and fixed readers at that facility would also be routed into the company's ERP system, allowing staff to access it from the company's Garland headquarters.

Daisy Brand uses Wal-Mart's Retail Link Web site to track the RFID tagged cases it sends to that retailer throughout the supply chain. To date, however, it has done little tracking of its pallets at the retailer's distribution centers. For instance, the company is not tagging cases for any shipments other than those destined for Wal-Mart. "We have great visibility at the retail point," Brown says in regard to Wal-Mart, noting that there is less guarantee of RFID tracking at the distribution center. "The store is where you really need it," he adds, since that is where a company can check if its product has reached a site on time, whether it is still on the shelf and how long it takes to sell.

RELATED_ARTICLES Daisy Brand is looking at the front end of its operation as well, and is undertaking business case studies about the benefits of capturing RFID data from milk and cream trucks arriving at the manufacturing facility for unloading. Some trucks are already tagged with container RFID tags. If Daisy Brand were to use that data, says Larry Chandler, GlobeRanger's vice president of business development, it could then capture details regarding the kind of milk or cream being delivered, allowing it to prepare itself to receive that product more quickly.

According to Chandler, GlobeRanger has been working on business case studies with Daisy Brand that could be implemented at both the Garland plant and the new Casa Grande facility. Daisy Brand is now purchasing software for the Casa Grande facility, he adds, and will begin testing it with simulated hardware at its temporary warehouse in Arizona for three dock doors and two forklifts. "This gives them a nice way to start staging," Chandler says.