

Certifiably Clean

A high-speed Mamata pouchmaker gives Fisher Container an edge in the very demanding clean room market environment it serves.

By Edward Boyle, Contributing Editor, and Yolanda Simonsis, Editor/Assoc. Publisher

Whatever you do, don't send a fruit basket. That's exactly what one ill-fated bag converter did 25 years ago to apologize when it failed to deliver the quality garment bags required by ARAMARK, an international supplier to the food, hospital-ity, facility management, and work apparel industries. It didn't go over well.

So when Michael Fisher, then a salesman for Fisher Container Corp., walked into that company's reception area a few days later looking to win the business, the ARAMARK executive waved at the now infamous parting gift. He pointedly demanded, "Don't send me fruit baskets. Send me good bags."

Fisher, now president of the company, fondly recalls that meeting in a story he never tires of telling, not only because he landed the account, but because it marked the converter's entry into the clean room bag market. Within weeks, the company had the equipment and procedures in place that ultimately would deliver mil-

lions of clean room bags annually to ARAMARK and hundreds of other customers in more than 50 countries.

"It was a wonderful example of a supplier and a customer working really closely to develop a high quality product that fit their needs," recalls Fisher. "I said to them, 'You teach me clean room protocol, and I'll develop a product that is lower in particulate, that you can sterilize, and I'll also develop a process in which we can be held accountable. We'll set levels.'"

Meeting Stringent Requirements

The timing of Fisher Container's entry into the clean room bag market couldn't have been better. Demand was on the rise. The industry was so young at the time that it was difficult to find reliable sources of product that could come through 100% of the time.

Even today, the purity requirements for clean room bags remain so stringent that only a handful of companies produce them, says Fisher. "If I make a bad bag or a couple of bad bags [for a typical customer], I get those boxes back," explains Fisher. "If I make three bags that are contaminated, and they're sent to Singapore, I'd get everything back—all 150,000 of them. So quality is of the utmost concern."

Fisher Packaging's Precision Clean Div. manufactures bags and pouches in an ISO



Class 10 clean room. Fisher says that only two or three other converters have Fisher Container's clean room capabilities, but no one has their printing capabilities.

The Mamata, which can produce side weld Tyvek pouches, peelable structures, and other specialty bags, operates at 250 strokes/min and can convert polypropylene/low-density (LD) and linear LD polyethylene (PE)/high density PE materials from 10–100 microns. Fisher says production speed was a priority when choosing the Mamata because "it had to run faster than what my competitors have, because cost is a factor. It fit all our needs and requirements and seemed like a sound piece of equipment. It gave us peace of mind and comfort, so we decided to pull the trigger and buy it, and it's worked out well for us."

Because it operates in the company's clean room, Fisher says his employees reviewed every component of the Mamata—from belts and gears to the way the machine was lubricated—to guarantee it would operate contaminant-free. Notes Fisher, "It's an extremely lengthy list that can either make or break a deal. And we found that we were able to modify the machine to meet our needs."

Take, for example, its ability to handle such hard-to-convert materials as Cryovac, polyvinyl chloride, and shrink films. "Not everybody can do that," notes

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Fisher. “We developed a reputation for doing things that not everybody else can do or would want to be bothered with.”

Rather than pigeonholing Fisher Container as a niche supplier, Fisher says the company’s forte as a manufacturer of clean room bags has enhanced its overall reputation for quality among Fortune 500 companies and regional packaging buyers as well. The company, which has been ranked among the largest US plastic printer/converters, operates two manufacturing divisions: the Precision Clean Div. and the Fisher Container Div. The latter uses a range of wide web flexographic presses and a new laminator to manufacture and print films and packaging for overwrap, shrink sleeves, shrink bands, pouches, food packaging, and a host of other packaging materials.

Continuous Improvement

Fisher says he learned about the importance of customer service from his father, Don, who established the company in 1969 and today serves as CEO. When Mike joined the company as a salesman five years later, the importance of both quality and dedication were deeply engrained in the company—and consequently became engrained in Don’s son. Explains Mike, “He once told me that the mark of a truly successful company or salesperson is how they handle their complaints. If you do that well, you will always

be a hero, even if you started out as the root cause of the problem.”

Overall, says Fisher, “We probably have one of the most diverse product lines in the country—especially for a company of our size—in side-weld bags with foil and paper laminated structures. There’s a lot of knowledge here.”

Among Fisher’s proudest accomplishments was becoming the first clean room bag converter to become ISO 9001:1000 certified in 1996 as well as the first clean room bag manufacturer internationally to receive ISO certification. Fisher says that certification actually became a selling tool for his company to attract customers like INTEL and NASA that demand accountability from their suppliers. He notes that many US competitors are not certified, which further bolsters Fisher Container’s reputation and business success.

“Customer audits,” says Fisher, “are not only welcomed by the company but are beneficial to our ongoing program of continuous improvement. Every audit is a great educational tool. We embrace them. It’s a great process for educating our employees. Our experiences in ISO Certification and Clean Room Certification have permeated the entire flexible packaging effort of Fisher Container and have been a catalyst toward making us most professional in the work we do here.”

Peace of Mind

Meeting stringent requirements across all company product lines is something Fisher Container does successfully, innovatively, and with pride day in and day out. Using anything but quality equipment and materials to produce quality product is not negotiable.

But to Fisher Container, it’s even more than this. To further underscore and assure the experience of commitment to quality when a customer establishes a relationship with Fisher Container, Mike Fisher explains, it’s not just about ordering bags. “We have a tagline that appears beneath our header in our plant that reads: ‘People may not remember exactly what you did or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.’”

“Our responsiveness to customers’ needs sets us apart from other packaging companies and gives our customers peace of mind. We don’t want anyone waking up at two o’clock in the morning realizing that they didn’t get a call back concerning delivery, quotations, or samples. We want them to make the request without having to write themselves a note to watch for whatever they requested from us. Peace of mind is putting down the phone and having the full confidence of knowing that whatever it is, it will be taken care of, and they can go about their busy day. Peace of mind is providing customer service the way it should be—without question, without worry, without concern.”

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POUCH MAKING



(Top) One of the two Bielloni slitters at Fisher Container's plant. (Bottom) Printing is accomplished on one of three eight-color gearless flexographic Bielloni presses.

Customer and Employee Satisfaction

Fisher says that bringing employees into the equipment purchasing process not only allows the company to benefit from their expertise but also makes them feel like valued members of a highly successful, family-run business. The result: Not only have customers such as ARAMARK been with Fisher Container for more than a quarter of a century, many of its 85 employees have been with the company for at least 20 years.

And, says Fisher, while a fruit basket may not be enough to retain a customer, doing the little things goes a long way to keeping employees happy: calling people by their first names, blue jean Fridays, Christmas parties, and summer picnics. "Imagine a company that allows people to bring their children and even their dogs into work," says Fisher. "That's us." Of course, annual bonuses, profit sharing, and 401(k) plans don't hurt either. Quite simply, Fisher says he considers his

employees "partners" in the company's success and treats them accordingly.

"We're a small family business, with family morals and values," explains Fisher. "As corny as that sounds, boy, is that different from a lot of what the industry offers. We've watched our employees get married, buy their houses, have their children. We're intimately involved with them enough so that everybody cares."

Ultimately, though, it all leads to customer satisfaction. When Fisher visited ARAMARK late last year to introduce himself to the company's new purchasing manager, they shared a laugh about the fruit basket incident that ultimately led to their 25-year relationship. And, the next day, Michael Fisher even sent her one! **PFFC**

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Michael Fisher, president of Fisher Container Corp., has some advice for people just starting out in our industry. See "Experience Speaks" on p96 of our May 2007 issue or visit our website at www.pffc-online.com.