LIFELINE FOODS
MOVES FROM MANUAL TO AUTOMATION

COMPANY PROFILE

LifeLine Foods is a producer-owned cooperative that processes corn into human food ingredients. The 600+ farmer/owners span the states of Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska, and participate in globally recognized, sustainable agriculture practices. They run their operation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with the help of 120 full-time employees. LifeLine Foods ships over a million pounds of food ingredients daily.
A PROGRESSIVE COMPANY WITH AN AGING BUSINESS MODEL

Increased sales are always a good thing, right? In LifeLine Foods’ situation, though, a stark increase in sales made the age of their manual packaging system painfully clear. Michelle Clark, Director, Strategic Planning and Analysis, says, “One year it increased 97%. We were running three different lines with different bag types, sizes, product types. We knew it wasn’t a sustainable business model.”

Casey Housman, Operations Manager, also saw the side effects of growth: not only was their equipment outdated, but he was very concerned with ergonomic and quality issues that could develop if the company continued using their old equipment.

For example, workers were manually taking bags and running them through the sealer. “If you’re doing 4,000 bags a day, it’s going to be hard on your wrists,” says machine operator Keith Williams.

At the same time, the old system was costing LifeLine Foods orders. Because some of the company’s customers lacked floor space in their own facilities, they required pallets that could be stacked. The lack of automation meant LifeLine Foods couldn’t meet these customers’ requirements. In other words, the company had an option to increase their sales even more, but the old equipment and processes couldn’t play along.

In the end, the inefficiency and inaccuracy in their old equipment led LifeLine Foods to update their line, says Mike Sobetski, an executive with the company.

THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE, THE RIGHT TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP

LifeLine Foods needed a company with expert knowledge of their industry; knowing how to build packaging equipment wasn’t enough. Housman was searching for a partner who understood not only the products LifeLine Foods processed but also the concerns with dust, sanitation, and food safety and quality that were special to their industry.

Premier Tech Chronos’ expertise in the food industry met those requirements and then some, allowing it to fully support LifeLine Foods throughout the entire process, and even afterwards. Sobetski says, “The relationship with Premier Tech so far has been very good. They’ve been very up front, they’ve been very communicative, we’ve had good response from them.”

The support started at the first phone call and continued the entire way, past the final installation. Tim Hale, Maintenance Reliability Projects Manager, says he felt very much at ease with Premier Tech Chronos’ teams: He could get drawings, pictures, and help whenever he needed.

Establishing a Higher Standard of Employee Safety

Housman looked forward to the new system so LifeLine Foods could improve ergonomics for its employees.

“So now we don’t have to worry about the ergonomic issues: the backs, the shoulders, the wrists, the hands, pinch points. All that in the new line has been very well thought out. All the safety aspects that are with the new line are just amazing,” he says.

Housman also says that the new line has both increased their employees’ skill set and also “eliminated all that potential of them getting hurt.”

However, an ergonomic system is only useful if its operators know how to work with it. To that end, LifeLine Foods’ employees received training, which further ensured employee safety, and both Housman and Sobetski thought highly of the training Premier Tech Chronos conducted.

WE WERE LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION THAT WOULD MEET ALL OF OUR WISH LIST. PREMIER TECH MET NOT ONLY OUR WISH LIST BUT INSTEAD OF AN ROI OF 3 YEARS IT WAS JUST OVER 2 YEARS.”

– MICHELLE CLARK, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ANALYSIS
“The training that they received from the technicians that were on site was very helpful, very beneficial, and it’s been relatively uneventful since then,” says Sobetski. Housman agrees. “The training that Premier provided was great. We had a nominal amount of guys that were here to train all our employees throughout.”

Premier Tech Chronos was not the lowest-priced solution LifeLine Foods was considering. What helped convince the LifeLine Foods project team, though, was the quality behind Premier Tech Chronos’ products and the reputation of its name. Those two factors circled back to Housman’s initial concerns: employee and public safety.

“One terrible shoulder injury, one terrible back injury, and say you’ve got a product recall because your steps now are not very controlled, those two things alone right there could cost more than what a brand-new line would,” he says.

A SAFER AND MORE PRODUCTIVE LINE

LifeLine Foods had a BHS and DSR (scale feeding systems), one scale with the PTK-1700 underneath it, a pinch-top bag sealer, an AR 225 robot, and a state-of-the-art stretch hooder installed.

The new line allowed the company to increase their own floor space by three times just because they could stack their pallets, which were now perfectly uniformed squares. In addition, the new pallets helped the company increase its sales with several of its customers, as Housman explains: “That’s one of their requirements. Some of the time […] they wouldn’t use our products because our pallets look so terrible and we were unable to stack them. […] So now we’re a competitor.”

LifeLine Foods’ old line averaged seven bags per minute. With their new equipment, they now average 14 bags per minute, doubling their capacity. Williams is also very satisfied with the new systems. “If we had to go back to the old system, that would really hurt my feelings,” he says.

Housman calls this project “the fastest project I’ve turned around ever, from the sales, to the visit to the plant, to the visit to the customer, to install. They’ve been more than helpful. And they will bend over backwards and help you in any way they possibly can.”