



Mike Pomerleau,
Vice-President,
Snack Brands Inc.

Jodd Muise,
Vice-President,
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KERNEL KNOWLEDGE

Upstart popcorn manufacturer aims to take a bite out of the competition with newly-acquired packaging prowess

The aromatic scent unleashed by a handful of freshly-cooked popcorn may be well one of the most tried-and-true ways to set off a trip down the memory lane to the days of care-free youth and childhood, and thanks to folks like **Snack Brands Inc.**, that rush of subliminal nostalgia can be found in every bag of gourmet popcorn produced and packaged at the company's lively, 5,800-square-foot manufacturing facility in Ottawa.

Started up just over a year ago by three long-time friends and stakeholders in the fledgling venture—president Chris Garofalo and vice-presidents Todd Muise and Mike Pomerleau—the 12-employee operation has wasted little time in pursuing a promising niche opportunity in the private-label gourmet popcorn segment, quickly revving up the plant's annual production capacity to an estimated 100,000 kilograms.

Also operating a Toronto-based headquarter location, housing all the administrative and sales functions, the company has already gobbled up the exclusive retail rights as manufacturers of *Kernels Extraordinary Popcorn*—a flagship brand of the 25-year-old popcorn franchise stalwart **Kernels Popcorn Limited**, which today operates 65 retail outlets across Canada, in addition to global locations in the U.S., Australia and South Korea.

“Prior to starting up the business, my partners and I looked at the snack landscape out there and noticed that there weren't many popcorn players offering high-end popcorn for retail sale,” explains Garofalo, who juggles his duties as Snack Brands president with overseeing all the sales and marketing activities of the firm's exclusive retail sales partner **Brand Fusion**.



Snack Brands purchased an XPdiius 1200 vertical form/fill/seal bagger with a CS-10 SB CombiScale from WeighPack Systems Inc. with the optional date-coder and a gas-flushing system, helping the gourmet popcorn manufacturer obtain dramatic reductions in its labor costs.

Getting the *Kernels Extraordinary Popcorn* brand business has certainly provided Snack Brands with a solid growth platform, Garofalo told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview, adding he is looking forward to building on that expertise by extending the product's marketing reach beyond specialty stores into the mainstream grocery retail channels across Canada.

“Because we didn't see a lot of competition in the gourmet popcorn market, we realized that by aligning with the Kernels brand that is known for its flavor, we would have a tasty—and fun—natural fit on the grocery shelves,” Garofalo explains, adding that Snack Brands is already producing private-label brands for a number of well-known Canadian and American retailers, while also turning out popcorn for various charity fundraisers and other similar one-off events.

Company vice-president Muise—in charge of general day-to-day operations, staffing, product development, food safety and plant administration—cites **Wal-Mart**, **Costco**, **Loblaws** and **Sam's Club USA** as some of the company's key high-profile customers whose extensive reach has enabled Snack Brands-made popcorn to become available throughout North America, with initial success prompting thoughts of pursuing international expansion into the European and Asian markets.

Muise says the company's optimism is underpinned by the broad variety of tantalizing flavors and high-quality ingredients at its disposal, including real butter and Belgian Chocolate.

Some of the company's bestselling recipes include the

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A large Omron PLC (programmable logic controller) controls the WeighPack XPdius 1200 machine's forming, filling and sealing operations.

Swizzle, a creamy caramel popcorn with a chocolatey swizzle; *Spring Fling*, flavored with a mixture of banana, orange and strawberry; and *Chicago Style*, a zesty blend of creamy caramel and orange-cheese popcorn.

"For fundraising we offer a more laid-back, but still fairly exotic, set of flavors like salt-and-vinegar, dill pickle, white cheddar, buttersalt and our 'air caramel' flavor," adds Muise, who credits a lot of the company's early success to finding the right balance between producing a high-end, gourmet-quality product and value pricing—enabling it to forge successful relationships with customers and suppliers alike.



A Vertex Phantom Series metal detector from Fortress Technologies is used to catch any unwanted particles in the free-flowing product.

The company's relationship with Kernels Popcorn is a case-in-point, according to Garofalo.

"Producing the Kernels gourmet popcorn is the major part of our business," Garofalo states. "We believe that this brand is the most recognizable premium popcorn in Canada, and that is what we are really focused on."

It is a very intense focus indeed, as evidenced by the more than two million bags of popcorn—running the full gamut of sizes from seven-gram pouches to two-pound bags—churned out by the Ottawa facility in its first year of operating.

Says Garofalo: "Within the past year, we were able to assure ourselves that not only was Snack Brands able to adequately handle current production demands, but thanks to some recently installed semi-automatic packaging equip-



A bird's-eye view of a Snack Brands employee hand-packing freshly-sealed pillow-packs of gourmet popcorn.

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ment, we have made ourselves well-positioned to work with our proposed future growth plans as well."

With the benefit of over 18 years of experience working within the Kernels Popcorn franchise network, vice-president Pomerleau brings with him a vast array of knowledge regarding industry-specific machinery and production techniques—naturally putting him in charge of the company's capital machinery investment, production and scheduling functions.

Pomerleau put that experience to use last September, after weeks of extensive research and tire-kicking in the marketplace, with the purchase and installation of a high-speed *XPdius 1200* model vertical F/F/S (form/fill/seal) bagging machine manufactured by the Montreal-based food-packaging equipment specialists **WeighPack Systems Inc.**

Boasting high-throughput capacity to process up to 90 bags per minute using laminated or polyethylene film—and capable of packaging virtually any type of free-flowing product in bags ranging from three-by-three inches to 16-inches-long—the stainless-steel machine has recently been upgraded with an additional servo motor to control the pneumatic sealing jaws, allowing the operator to adjust the opening of the jaws electronically in one swift adjustment that has enabled up to 30-percent speed increase compared to previous models.

IN THE BAG

Pomerleau says he is very impressed with the operational versatility of the *XPdius 1200* machine, which can handle different types of plastic and a variety of bag types, including gusseted, stand-up pouches, and the pillow-bags used for the Kernels Popcorn brand.

"I really like the *XPdius 1200* machine," Pomerleau readily admits. "Although we are only running ours at 50 bags per minute at the moment, it is nice to know that should we need to increase our production line speed, it can handle it easily.

"It has a very smooth operation, and it can accurately control and position the film on the bag former, enabling us to have exact cut-off lengths every time," says Pomerleau, noting that the high-speed machine makes optimal use of laminated film supplied by the Toronto-based company **Creative Rock**.

"Because of the machine's exactness, there's no wasted film," he stresses, "which means we can saving quite a few dollars on our film expenditures."

Pomerleau says he is also impressed with the user-friendliness of the machine—facilitated via its touchscreen control panel—saying that learning how to use it was far easier than anyone at the plant expected.

To make sure the machine covered all of the plant's application requirements, Pomerleau requested WeighPack to enhance the systems with a couple of handy optional features.

Namely, this comprises the code-dating equipment for inline printing of lot numbers and best-before information on the bags, and a gas-flushing system for flushing the bagged product with food-grade nitrogen to obtain extended shelf-life—anywhere between six and 12 months from the production date.

After the popcorn is popped while being cooked, the product is gravity-fed from a giant storage tote to an automated vibratory feed-hopper designed to hold up to 12 cubic feet

of the bulk product.

From there, a model *Z Bucket Conveyor* is used to transfer the popcorn 14 feet up into a *CS-10 SB CombiScale*—both pieces of equipment supplied by WeighPack—with the 10-head weigher then using its 1.3-liter buckets to execute over 80 scale measurements per minute, and to perform high-precision dispensing of extremely accurate measurements to within 1/20th of a gram.

After weighing, the weigher's chutes gently open up and the product flows down toward the *XPdius 1200* for final forming, gas-flushing, filling, sealing and date-coding, with a strategically-positioned *Vertex Phantom Series* metal detector—manufactured by the Toronto-based **Fortress Technologies Inc.**—putting its high-performance detection capabilities to work to pinpoint any metal components that may have made their way into the free-falling product.

"Whether it's value versus cost, or its small footprint, or simply because it's a Canadian company with an outstanding service and repair facility in nearby Montreal, purchasing the WeighPack machine has been a real boon for us," extols Garofalo, saying that automating and combining weighing, date-coding and bag-filling into a seamless process has enabled Snack Brands to cut its manual labor costs dramatically.



The high-speed, 10-head CombiScale weigher owned by Snack Brands can perform up to 80 high-precision measurements per minute.

And such cost control and discipline is absolutely critical for small-sized companies like Snack Brands, Garofalo maintains, who simply do not have the economies of scale to make up for any production inefficiencies.

"Although we have been able to position ourselves nicely in this niche market, there is still a lot of competition in Canada," Garofalo reflects. "The grocery business is always tough and we're up against some pretty big players.

"However, our strength has never been to be like them," he sums up, "but instead do what we do best, which is producing unique, fun, colorful, tasty popcorn that parents and kids are quickly becoming accustomed to when walking through their local shopping mall." ♦

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