

## How is food processing like truck maintenance?

By Joel Levitt

I had a fun opportunity to visit with the folks who make our fast foods. Located near the West Coast, each of their many plants process millions of pounds of food every day.

All the time I was there trucks (about 30 loads a day in and the same out) dumped their loads on to the conveyors and finished food products came out the other end.

In literally hours the food was cooked. After the fryers and dryers was the freezer tunnel and finally packaging. The technology to sort, grade and cut out the bad bits was amazing. What was left made the cattle in that part of the world very happy. Nothing was wasted.

One thing that impressed me was the attention to specification. Every fast food company had detailed product specifications. Each one seemed completely different. Who would have thought? Every hour or so the lab would cook up a batch and check them against the specifications. When they were done people in the plant could stop in to sample what was left. I'd be 500# if I worked there.

A few years back there was a breakthrough in high velocity slicing that sped up the whole process. Too bad it's still a secret so I can't share about the room full of swords people (not really). You should be wondering by about now what on earth this has to do with maintenance. Well I was just getting to that.

I asked how they knew if they were doing a good job. Another question was which plant was doing the best (so perhaps all the plants could adopt their 'best practices'). The secret answer I was looking for was KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Immediately and without discussion they all said \$.03 per pound (not the real number- which is secret). I asked \$.03 per pound what? They said that the maintenance cost to run a factory like theirs was \$.03 a pound of packaged and shippable product.

How clean. A million and a half pounds of product generates \$45,000 a day for maintenance activity. I wonder how many fleets have the maintenance cost per mile (or even more accurately the maintenance cost per ton-mile that well thought through).

They told me that over the years they determined that, with experimentation \$.03/pound was the 'right' number. A lower number would allow accelerated deterioration and a higher number would be over spending and would result in lower profit. The battle is that the metric make sense and can be supported by experience and



strategy (in other words not just pulled out of a hat by someone in an ivory tower with a spread sheet).

Improvements in productivity on the operations side allowed them a little more money for maintenance each year. That increase in production tonnage accommodated increases in labor and parts costs. Also they pointed out the new high tech systems needed to process the increased tonnage also usually need more maintenance support.

Given that operating environment they could align on a number, have meetings about achieving that number, and suggest courses of action to produce that number. Clean metrics make the manager's job easier.

And you know, I'll never look at a fast food restaurant the same way again!

Joel Levitt, Director International Projects [JLEVITT@LCE.COM](mailto:JLEVITT@LCE.COM)  
Life Cycle Engineering | 4360 Corporate Road Office | Charleston, SC 29405  
843.744.7110  
Mobile +1-267-254-0061  
[www.LCE.com](http://www.LCE.com)