

Lift Trucks Keep Ben & Jerry's Churning

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Over the last 10 years, total production of ice cream and related frozen deserts has been over 1.5 billion gallons, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This high demand led ice cream manufacturer Ben & Jerry's, maker of popular, quirky flavors like Cherry Garcia and Phish Food, to reevaluate its operations.

In order to stay competitive in the industry, Ben & Jerry's recognized a need to improve uptime and reduce maintenance costs in its manufacturing and distribution site in St. Albans, Vt. Ben & Jerry's called on Pengate Handling Systems, Inc. (Syracuse, N.Y.), an authorized dealer for The Raymond Corporation, to provide material handling solutions tailored to the facility's unique needs, such as freezer storage. The result was a nearly 60 percent reduction in downtime and a more than 35 percent reduction in repair costs. Equally significant has been the calculated improvements in productivity, as more pallets of ice cream can now be stocked, stored and shipped each day.

Pengate outfitted the facility's new distribution center with three customized Raymond Deep-Reach electric lift trucks. The trucks are outfitted with cold storage

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conditioning packages to protect the truck control systems and ThermaKit systems that warm the control handle and floor pad for improved operator comfort. Over time, 22 other Raymond lift truck models, including two EASi Pacer stand-up counterbalanced trucks and two Model 8400 pallet trucks, have also been added to the fleet. In addition, Pengate worked with Ben & Jerry's to implement a Comprehensive Fixed-Price Maintenance agreement to ensure increased uptime in the challenging conditions in which the trucks operate, in both the distribution and manufacturing areas.

"We used to run a two-shift operation, but in 2003, when we started working with Pengate, we began to run 24 hours a day," said Mark Favreau, logistics manager for the Ben & Jerry's facility in St. Albans. "Then, in 2005, for nearly nine months of the year, we ran our operations six and seven days a week, and Raymond and Pengate have been instrumental in allowing us to do that."

St. Albans Facility: The Epicenter

Ben & Jerry's has more than 650 employees in three facilities, all located in Vermont — South Burlington, Waterbury, and St. Albans. The South Burlington site is strictly corporate offices, and the Waterbury facility exclusively produces Ben & Jerry's on two lines and remains the top tourist destination in Vermont, attracting over 300,000 people each year. The 143,000-square-foot St. Albans facility is the primary manufacturing site, not only for Ben & Jerry's ice cream, but also for two other brands: Breyers and Good Humor.

St. Albans produces more than 200 flavors of ice cream 24 hours a day, five days a week, starting at 9 p.m. each Sunday night and closing at 11 p.m. every Friday. Across four manufacturing lines, the company produces nearly 1,700 pallets of product per week, all of which are stored and handled several times before eventually being distributed from the facility. Raw ingredient and packaging moves add another 4,000 pallet touches per week. Such an aggressive schedule demands efficient, reliable materials handling.

"Everything we do involves a pallet truck or a Reach-Fork lift truck of some sort," Favreau said. "Because of the volume of inventory that comes in and goes out on a daily basis, it is literally impossible to be successful without dependable trucks."

The need for reliable material handling equipment intensified with the addition of a new distribution center in 2003—a 2,000-pallet freezer where all of the ice cream produced by the St. Albans and Waterbury facilities would be stored and distributed. With the addition, the previous Ben & Jerry's distribution center in Bellow Falls, Vt. closed in 2004, making the St. Albans facility the epicenter for manufacturing, storing and distributing Ben & Jerry's ice cream worldwide.

With the new distribution center came related materials handling challenges. Since the freezer was built to store all of the ice cream from both the Waterbury and St. Albans facilities, it was designed with high, double-deep racking to maximize storage space and is kept at -20°F at all times. With these challenges in mind, Ben & Jerry's had concerns about its fleet of materials handling equipment.

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"We had four lift trucks and two single pallet trucks on a five-year lease from another supplier, and those trucks were down 60 percent of the time," Favreau said.

So Ben & Jerry's called on Pengate Handling System's branch in Syracuse to not only rebuild its existing materials handling equipment, but also to lease two Raymond Deep-Reach trucks—and eventually purchase a third truck one year later—for the purpose of storing and retrieving thousands of pallets of ice cream each week.

"I didn't have the least bit of hesitation when I worked with Pengate to bring in the Raymond trucks," Favreau said. "Unlike my previous materials handling equipment, which broke down often, the Raymond trucks run day in and day out, even in a freezer application."

The challenges posed by the 2,000-pallet freezer were not the only materials handling difficulties Pengate and Ben & Jerry's would have to overcome.

A Challenging Environment

According to Favreau, there are approximately 4,500 pallet spaces in the St. Albans facility, and with the rapid pace with which inventory flows in and out, durable materials handling equipment is essential. The environment in an ice cream manufacturing plant is not especially friendly to materials handling equipment and results in considerable wear and tear on the lift trucks.

The three areas that lift trucks must pass through when transporting product each have their own materials handling challenges. The first section of the building, containing the 2,000-pallet freezer, is the storage and distribution area. Not only are the frigid temperatures harsh on the materials handling equipment, but the racking is over 33 feet high and double-deep, requiring skilled operators. A second area where the ice cream is manufactured is kept at 38 to 40°F. In this area, it is common for lift trucks to be driven through water or ice cream residue on the production floor. The final area of the facility is a dry goods warehouse, which is kept at room temperature and stores plastic tubs, cardboard, dry powdered goods, yogurt cultures, and stabilizers. Much like the freezer area, the dry goods warehouse also has high racking.

With the exception of the Deep-Reach trucks in the freezer, all of the other Raymond materials handling equipment, such as the EASi Pacer and Model 8400 pallet trucks, must be cross-functional and able to transition seamlessly between the different environments. Since the lift trucks frequently travel between areas, door foamers are necessary to properly sanitize the equipment as it passes into and out of the production area where the ice cream is made.

"The door foamers are very good at eliminating bacteria and germs on equipment and shoes; however, they can wear down wheels and bearings, too," Favreau said. "From Sunday through Friday night, the trucks are moving nonstop in and out of freezers, through water in the production room and through disinfectant foamers, so

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the environment plays a huge role in equipment wear and tear.”

But durable lift trucks alone are not enough. Beyond quality lift trucks, Favreau stresses the importance of maintenance contracts and working with a dedicated, customer-focused dealer. According to Favreau, virtually every one of the 22 Raymond lift trucks the facility owns or leases has a Comprehensive Fixed-Price Maintenance agreement (CFPM). Ben & Jerry's pay a flat fee per month for all maintenance costs (outside of operator-induced damage) for the life of a lift truck's contract. Under that flat-fee structure, virtually all damage to the lift trucks is covered, and according to Favreau, Pengate Handling Systems goes above and beyond to ensure the lift trucks are operating properly.

“I do not have enough good things to say about Pengate,” he said. “It has been fantastic. The maintenance guys are in here regularly checking on the equipment. If they have not heard from us, they even stop in. Pengate is instrumental in maintaining uptime.”

Reliability Equals Results

For Ben & Jerry's, the result of purchasing or leasing reliable materials handling equipment, complete with a CFPM from a customer-focused Raymond dealer, has been significant. Thanks to Pengate Handling and Raymond, Ben & Jerry's has experienced considerable increases in productivity due to the substantial reduction in repair costs and downtime.

“We have yet to go wrong with a Raymond truck,” Favreau said. “Raymond and Pengate have, without a doubt, helped to increase our bottom line.”

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