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Getting the Mix Right at EW Packaging

Contract manufacturer's new Rotary Batch Mixer from Munson Machinery slashes cycle times, overages for dry product operation.

By — Joseph Derr

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When Rob Lonas founded EW Packaging in 2001, he started it as EW Trading, a business that outsourced packaging and printing. Over time, Lonas decided to bring these services in-house, rebranding as EW Packaging.

Today, the company has grown into a versatile operation, manufacturing and packaging powder, tablet, and capsule products for customers ranging from national warehouse clubs to dietary supplement retailers

and government contracts.

EW Packaging produces sports nutrition products, energy drink mixes, food powders, dietary supplements in tablet, capsules, and powders.

Source: Munson Machinery

From its 30,000-square-foot facility in Los Angeles, EW Packaging handles everything from protein powders to energy drink mixes and sports nutrition products, including the EarthNutri.com nutraceutical line.

With more than 50 employees, EW Packaging runs six blister-filling lines, four bottle-filling lines, and in-house flexographic printing for custom pouches and blister foils. Carving out a niche in the contract manufacturing sector for dry products, EW Packaging prides itself on machining its tooling, enabling faster turnaround times and cost savings for its clients.

Evolving equipment for growing demands

By 2016, EW Packaging had expanded to include blending dietary supplements and food powders, as well as manufacturing tablets and capsules. However, its V-cone blender needed attention.

“The V-cone blender we used was a lot of work and there was a lot of downtime,” Lonas explains. “It took at least 30 minutes to get a load in and out, plus another 15 to 20 minutes of actual mixing.”

Next, he tried a ribbon blender, which reduced loading and unloading times but compromised blend quality. “The ribbon blender has corners, dead zones, where the powder isn’t mixed,” he says.

Sometimes EW added as much as 10 percent more active ingredient to the products than required for HPLC testing to confirm that the product met the label claim. In addition, the ribbon blender's impeller put product quality at risk, Lonas says. "It chops up the ingredients and damages the product at the same time."

Gentle blending

In search of a solution to improve its blending operation, EW found **Munson Machinery** online. That led to Lonas purchasing a 15-cu ft (425 L) Munson Rotary Batch Mixer machine that loads, blends, and discharges in about 15 minutes—half the time of the previous blenders.

The unit's horizontal vessel rotates on external trunnion rings located at each end, handling ingredients gently because it has no agitators. Instead, the vessel has internal flights that create a four-way tumble-turn-cut-fold mixing action, producing homogenous blends without generating heat, shear, or stratification. Lacking internal shafts, the mixer has no seals that are in contact with the product.

To initiate a blending cycle, operators hand weigh ingredients into a drum. A plant-based protein product may contain up to eight ingredients, while a flavored creatine product may contain up to four. The drum containing the weighed batch is then lifted onto a mezzanine and dumped through a security screen into a hopper that discharges into the mixer's stationary inlet. A collection hood contains fugitive dust during the loading process, while a single external seal prevents the escape of dust during vessel rotation.

Lonas highlights the Rotary Batch Mixer's gentle mixing action in his business conversations. "It's part of my sales pitch for whatever the job is — encapsulation, tableting or just blending a powder," he says. "This mixer just folds in the ingredients. It's not smashing them or pounding them together."

EW Packaging says its mixer’s gentle four-way action leaves almost no residue, simplifying cleaning between batches.

Source: Munson Machinery

Blends are discharged from the mixer through a stationary outlet. Batches destined for encapsulation or tableting flow into mobile hoppers that are rolled into the adjacent room for those processes. Powder products are discharged into a screw conveyor that transports the batch to the feed hopper of an auger filling machine, which dispenses it by weight into bottles, canisters, tubs, or most any container.

The vessel leaves almost no residue following discharge. “There aren’t any corners or pockets that can collect powder,” Lonas says. Between blending campaigns and when switching products, operators wash, rinse, and swab-test the vessel interior in accordance with GMP.

Lonas says that the blends are always on-spec, and overages range between 2 percent and 3 percent instead of 10 percent previously. “I sold my V-blender and my ribbon blender. The Rotary Batch Mixer gives us a perfect HPLC test every time.”

Small size, big output

The Rotary Batch Mixer discharges to a screw conveyer, which transfers mixed powder products to an auger filling machine.

Source: Munson Machinery

Despite its modest volumetric capacity, the mixer outputs high volumes because it loads and discharges quickly and blend times are short, as little as 3 to 6 minutes, Lonas says. “When we started getting bigger orders, we got nervous at first thinking our mixer wasn’t big enough, but we ran some big orders with no problems.” In one case, EW Packaging blended some 80 batches of a protein powder over four days, filling all of it into 5 lb (2.3 kg) tubs.

“The future for us is growing the powder business because we have our powder lines so dialed in. It’s a profitable and a fast way to fill bottles,” says Lonas.

EW fills as many as 50,000 bottles a day, which includes capping, induction sealing, metal detecting, check-weighing, labelling, lot coding, and neck banding.

Lonas says that EW Packaging seldom tells customers ‘no’ unless they come to them with a liquid.

“If we don’t have the right machinery, we buy it. Our niche is getting new products going for people and cranking it out, getting them into the market fast. We get a lot of business because of our blister and short-run capabilities. There aren’t many other places on the West Coast that can do that.”

Lonas calls the mixer his workhorse. “I think we changed a seal once.

There’s not much maintenance to do on it. It’s one of our most reliable machines.”

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