



Kroger Foods celebrates 3 Years of Machine Excellence

Three years ago,

the nation's largest grocer took a calculated risk with a relatively new case packer company. But officials at The Kroger Co.'s manufacturing facility in Rochester, Minnesota, did their homework and were convinced that SOMIC Packaging's technology provided them with a better packaging solution.

Today, a variation of SOMIC's custom 424 W3 wraparound case packer machines have replaced Kroger's previous equipment line. The retail ready units support the packaging lines for chunk and shredded cheese, running three shifts per day on a seven-day a week schedule.



The installation and early results of the five machines installed in 2019 were so successful that Kroger has since added a sixth machine in Rochester. Six others were installed and run at Kroger's sister plant in Crawfordsville, Indiana, an operation that packages chunk, shreds and cheese slice products.

Steve Tramp, general manager of the Rochester facility, said conversations within the industry started the ball rolling with SOMIC. At that point, Kroger was in need of automated retail ready packaging machinery for their packaged cheese products.



"We had no knowledge of the SOMIC case packers until we contacted Peter Fox and he visited us," **Tramp said**. "We toured our packaging operation and he saw the lack of space that we were dealing with. Peter thought it was a tight space but with some slight adjustments, he said they would be able to fit all of the case packers."

The next step for Tramp was seeing the machine in production. Fox spoke with some customers to see who would grant access and share knowledge and opinions of their 424 machines. Once Growers Express approved the request to visit their frozen vegetable processing facility in Yuma, Arizona, Tramp assembled a large group. This included engineering teams led by Rick Eppen and Tim Nichols who are based at their Rochester and Crawfordsville operations, in addition to engineers from Kroger's general office.

An Overview of The Kroger Co.

140 Years of Providing to Communities

Founded in 1883 The Kroger Co. is the nation's largest grocer. It serves more than nine million customers daily with nearly 2,800 retail food stores in 35 states. Supermarkets such as Ralph's, Dillons, Pick 'n Save and Mariano's, the multi-department store Fred Meyer, and price-impact warehouse stores Food 4 Less and Foods Co., are all Kroger brands. It also ranks as one of the world's largest retailers with annual sales of \$132.5 billion.



"Up to this point we liked what we heard and saw. But this was such a huge project, we needed to see it running in production," **he said**. "The machine in Yuma ran frozen vegetables in a stand-up pouch and it was impressive. The machine motion was incredibly smooth and effortless, and it had a small footprint. The case packer conditioned the pouches, stood them upright and packed 30 cases per minute."



"What impressed us most," **continued Tramp**, "were the rave reviews we got from the operators and maintenance team. They told us how the machine was installed in about two days and how they were running at speed by the end of the week. That was the final thing that sold us on the machine."

When the machines arrived, Tramp's team and SOMIC technicians were ready to tackle the installation phase.



"What was most challenging about this process is that we had to pull out the old machines and install the SOMIC units, and have them up and running in one week," **Tramp recalled**. "Peter promised they could meet this timeline and they did. It was a remarkable effort that was very well executed."

Tramp said the SOMIC 424 W3 machines in Rochester and Crawfordsville have delivered the speed and efficiency he expected, and more.



"We love the small footprint, which made all of this possible. Maintenance is very minimal and simple. You have to lubricate a few things and clear corrugated dust from the vacuum filter cannisters. But overall, the machines are easy to navigate on the HMI and we can adjust the parameters in 1mm increments. The program set up is unique but once you understand it, it is very simple to run."