



DARLINGTON

CASE STUDY

Brad Schweiss,
Vice President of Manufacturing
Darlington Snacks, a Family-
Owned Commercial Bakery

Darlington Snacks faced significant challenges in staffing, packing accuracy, and meeting customer product handling requests. Being in the food service business for schools and healthcare, there was increased demand from those organizations to purchase snacks in single-serve containers that weren't getting handled by multiple end users, particularly during the COVID pandemic.

With Darlington Snack's facility located in an area dense with food manufacturing plants, they faced tough competition to find talented workers, especially in a time of workforce and economic instability. With many open manufacturing jobs, they were scrambling to fill roles, overstressing their current employees when trying to keep up with demand.

Darlington Snacks is a thriving family-owned snack manufacturing and packaging facility located in the vibrant city of Joplin, Missouri. Established in 1982, the company has grown from a small local operation to a respected national player in the snack industry. Darlington Snacks prides itself on producing high-quality, innovative, and delicious snack products that cater to a diverse range of consumer tastes.

Serving daycares, schools, and the healthcare industry, Darlington Snacks is committed to sourcing the finest ingredients for their products. They partner with local farmers and suppliers whenever possible, supporting the local economy while ensuring the freshest and highest-quality ingredients go into their snacks. This dedication to quality has earned the company a reputation for producing some of the tastiest and healthiest snacks in the nation.

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Automation Solution

Darlington Snacks saw the impressive speed of the VFFS Velocity packaging machine at Pack Expo in Las Vegas, and the single-serving pouches it produces fit right into their wheelhouse. Brad Schweiss, Vice President of Manufacturing at Darlington Snacks, was already familiar with Viking Masek's packaging equipment.

"I'd been with Darlington for six years but in the industry for more than 30," explains Schweiss. "so I was familiar with Viking Masek and what their services and capabilities were."

After collaborating with Viking Masek's team of snack packaging experts, Darlington Snacks purchased an entire snack packaging system consisting of two bagging lines that merge into a single case packing line.

Snack products first make their entrance into the automated packaging system through a hopper and then are fed to a bucket elevator which conveys the snacks vertically. Then the product is conveyed to a multi-head scale where it is quickly and precisely weighed. Next the snacks are gently dropped into bags that have been formed on the VFFS Velocity packaging machine at a rate of 150 bags per minute per machine (300 bags per minute for both bagging lines). The bags are sealed shut and then conveyed on a takeaway conveyor. The finished bags pass over a checkweigher to ensure quality and accuracy before being conveyed once more to the case packing area. Here, sturdy cardboard cases are formed by a case erector. Those cases are conveyed below a batch gate, where the bags of snacks are precisely counted and gently dropped in. When a case is full, it is transported further down the packaging line by a powered conveyor. The case then enters an automatic case sealer where it is taped shut.

As finished cases reach the end of the line, they are stacked by dedicated workers onto pallets, and the pallets are then moved to a storage area where they await their journey to schools, daycares, and health care facilities across the country.

This entire snack packaging line was set up, tested, and perfected at Viking Masek's US headquarters in Oostburg, Wisconsin before it was even loaded on a delivery truck.



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"Before delivery of our automation, I took my plant engineer to Viking Masek to see the system's capabilities, slow-motion videos for assessment, and a trial run of the line before it shipped with everything labeled the way we needed it to be," explains Schweiss of Viking Masek's comprehensive testing and checkout process.

Results

Viking Masek assembled the entire system onsite at Darlington Snack's plant. The new snack packaging lines fit seamlessly into their packaging configuration, resulting in precisely the solution their customers were asking for.

"We didn't have to worry about integration because Viking already took care of that for us," comments Schweiss. "We bought it as a complete system and it's functioned perfectly since."

Darlington Snack's biggest victory with the automated packaging system is the accuracy of the batch gate – they report it's consistently spot on.

"The real trick for me was the downstream stuff to be able to make the counters work right," explains Schweiss of the accuracy of their packaging line. "We're going to be able to get the cases erected and into the stations in the right sequences at the right time, and then on out to the palletizing operation. It has worked seamlessly."

Today, their packing operation, case conveyance, and case closing are all automated, and they've relocated that staff to other areas of the facility. Since embracing automation, Darlington Snacks has seen substantial improvements with the throughput and labor-related challenges they were facing.

"Automation has cut down on our waste, overpacking, and amount of giveaway," reports Schweiss. "It has made our customers' experience better because we're not coming up short on products. And I'm pleased to report we've doubled production with about 40 percent less labor on the line."

As a single-source provider, Viking Masek takes care of everything, from sourcing the packaging line components, to assembly and testing, to delivery and setup, and finally technical support of the entire system.

"Viking Masek helped us tremendously as a single source provider for the entire line. Our post-sale support has been beneficial and responsive. When we have an issue, Viking Masek takes care of it," comments Schweiss. "I'd definitely recommend Viking Masek to anyone looking at automating their packaging operation. The fact that I've worked with Viking Masek in the past and wanted to work with them again demonstrates how much I value their expertise."



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