



BY GEORGE GUIDONI, EDITOR • PHOTOS BY PERRY ZAVITZ

# AT TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

West Coast food distribution center staying on fast-growth track with motivated workforce, progressive business practices, and top end-of-line packaging equipment

Getting to the top of the food chain of the fiercely competitive North American food distribution industry may be a life-time's worth of accomplishment for many businesses out there. But for the folks at **SYSCO Corporation**, Houston, Tex.-headquartered operator of 161 food products distribution centers across North America, it's just a prelude to the more encompassing and challenging task of continually strengthening its lofty marketplace status by day-to-day excellence throughout all parts of its far-flung distribution network.

Founded back in 1970, the story of SYSCO—an acronym for “Systems and Services Company”—is one of relentless market conquest and expansion that is right up there with similar stellar corporate successes enjoyed by the likes of industry leaders **Microsoft** and **Wal-Mart**, minus a lot of the notoriety, perhaps.

Within seven years after posting first-year sales of US\$115 million, the company grew to become the leading supplier of “meals-prepared-away-from-home” operations in North America, pulling in revenues of US\$29.3 billion during the 2004, fiscal year.

And while countless eating fads and trends have come and gone since 1970, along with a staggering array of new product launches and meal alternatives, SYSCO has managed to grow and prosper its business by unwavering commitment to customer service excellence, and arguably the broadest-ranging selection of foodservice products out there.

The company's 180,000-square-foot **Sysco Food Services-Vancouver** operation in Port Coquitlam, a 20-minute drive from the outskirts of British Columbia's largest city, is in many ways a microcosmic showcase of SYSCO's around-the-clock drive to be the best competitor out there, by just about any meaningful measure of business excellence.

Employing about 450 people today, the Port Coquitlam plant—built from ground up in 1992 to accommodate the rapidly-growing volumes handled by the formerly-named **Sysco Konings**—the three-shift, around-the-clock distribution center serves a diverse range of over 4,000 customers in British Columbia's foodservice industry, covering the full gamut from hotels, restaurants and neighborhood pubs to fast-food chains, private clubs and resorts, truck-stops, stadium vendors, catering companies, and so on.

“We only close this plant down on Christmas Day and the New Year's Day,” says vice-president of operations Richard Wilson, who estimates that the busy plant currently handles about 8,900 different SKUs (stock-keeping units) passing through its doors from a



A palletized load of boxes being prepared for shipment on the Wulftec WRT-100 rotary-arm stretchwrapper at the dry side of the Sysco-Vancouver facility, with shipper/receiver Avtar Nagra (inset) selecting the wrapping pattern from the PLC-operated control panel.



From left: Richard Wilson, operations manager, Sysco-Vancouver; Mike Johnson, equipment & film specialist, GF Packaging; Gary Grant, facility manager, Sysco-Vancouver.

supplier base of over 1,000 vendors. According to Wilson, the Sysco-Vancouver operation is a runaway leader in serving the province's foodservice industry with “frozen foods, seafood, fresh meats and poultry, groceries, fresh produce, food preparation/processing equipment, and all sorts of supplies: everything you would need to operate a commercial kitchen.”

## GOING SHOPPING

Adds facility manager Gary Grant: “Think of it as going to your local supermarket, but seeing all the products being about 10 times the size of what you will find there.

“So instead of eight-ounce cans of soup, we will have 80-ounce cans of soup; instead of two-pound bags of flour, we will stock 22-pound bags of flour.

“We also provide all kinds of supplies and equipment, including tableware, glassware, ovens, deep-fryers, you name it,” Grant told *Canadian Packaging* on a recent tour of the distribution center this past summer. “We cross-dock it all: we bring it in, you buy it, and we send it out to you and install it.”

States Grant: “If you're thinking of opening up a seafood restaurant, for example, we will send in our own seafood expert to your place, who will also help draw up a menu for you, and then show all the equipment we can provide to get you all started.

“We have two restaurant consultants on staff who

can come in and design a restaurant for you, as well as a full-time chef, to go with all the walk-in coolers, freezers, ovens, deep-fryers, and so on.

“We really aim to be a true, one-stop-shop.”

Such comprehensive, full-service capabilities has been widely embraced and praised by the plant's customers, both Wilson and Grant assert, with the Port Coquitlam plant now shipping out an estimated 2.6 million filled cases of product per month—or about 65 fully-loaded tractor-trailers daily.

## FAST TURNOVER

Such throughput keeps the facility turning over its multimillion-dollar inventory every 15 days, estimates Wilson, who gives a large part of the credit to the plant's highly-motivated, well-trained and loyal staff.

“We have good controls on all of our inventory in large part because of our cross-training in all of our departments, which enables staff to quickly identify mistakes and abnormalities, and then take proper corrective action,” says Wilson, himself a 20-year veteran of the company, dating back to its **Konings Wholesale** roots.

“Most of our managers have been here for 10 years, and some for 20 years. We have an outstanding staff retention rate, and that's because we are a truly progressive employer, with very competitive wages and benefits.” Wilson expands. “All our employees get between 60 and 90 days of training in equipment operation, best work methods, best business practices, forklift driver instruction ... training really is a year-round thing around here.”

Wilson also credits SYSCO's progressive procurement practices, allowing individual distribution centers to make their own capital equipment purchases by using the company's centrally-operated database in Toronto, which ranks all of its Canadian vendors and suppliers on the basis of past performance.

Wilson estimates that the Sysco-Vancouver plant ships out about 900 fully palletized loads out its doors over the course of a typical day, which has just gotten considerably easier with the recent installation of two rotary-arm stretchwrapping systems from **Wulftec**

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STRETCHWRAPPING

# AT TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

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**International Inc.**, Ayer's Cliffe, Que.-based manufacturer of stretchwrapping equipment, and the Canadian subsidiary of global packaging machinery conglomerate **M.J. Maillis Group**.

Delivered to the plant last May by local Wulftec equipment distributor **GF Packaging** of Delta, B.C., the project involved installation of a floor-mounted **WRT-150** model at the plant's "cold dock," and a **WRT-100** rotary-arm model at the "dry dock," near the plant's 11 receiving doors.

Since their installation, the performance delivered by the two Wulftec stretchwrappers has been virtually "flawless," according to Wilson, "with almost a 100-fold improvement in terms of worker safety."

Explains Wilson: "It is much more easy for the guys to

change the film, with no thread to put through the rolls. It is also a much more efficient machine than what we had before, delivering much better stretch.

"We are easily using about one-third less film to wrap out loads than we used to, and it's not because the loads are getting easier," Wilson says. "In part due to Price Club stores packaging, it is getting tougher for us all the time to cube out our loads compared to the old days, when everything came in nice square boxes.

"But for all that, we are now using less film, down to 80 rolls a month, and we also started recycling the wrap, bring it back from our customers, which they really like, and then sell it to local plastic recyclers to be made into new plastic products, such as fencing,



The installation of two WRT series stretchwrapping systems has enabled the Sysco-Vancouver distribution center to reduce its consumption of stretchwrap film by about a third, providing a very quick payback for the new equipment.

decking, bottles, etc."

Featuring heavy-duty steel construction and patented, **NO-THREAD** powered pre-stretch carriage on all its rotary-arm machines, the **WRT** series stretchwrappers

are designed to provide users with 50- to 300-percent prestretch capabilities for increased holding power and optimal film performance, complemented by a broad choice of flexible wrapping patterns to handle all sorts of different products sizes and irregular shapes—at rotary-arm speeds of up to 15 revolutions per minute.

Controlled via an **Allen-Bradley** PLC (programmable logic controller), the **WRT** machines are outfitted with state-of-the-art, **Allen-Bradley** AC variable frequency drives from **Rockwell Automation** for easy monitoring and on-the-fly adjustments; low-maintenance motors and completely enclosed circuits with built-in alarm diagnostics; and dual-chain carriage lifting systems, to ensure even support of the carriage throughout operation.

## PERFECT FIT

"The rollers on these machines are made from very resilient materials, so we will never really have to change the rollers," notes Wilson, adding that the machines' washdown-friendly construction and design also make them a perfect choice to operate in a food industry environment.

"GF Packaging provided an excellent service for us with this installation," states Wilson "It took one day to do the cold side, and one day for the dry side: no problems, no headaches, just do the job.

"I really believe that this installation will pay for itself within a year's time," he says.

"Service-wise, GF Packaging was just awesome with this installation," Wilson adds, "but service really is everything in our industry: service to us from our vendors, and our service to our customers.

"We have about 1,000 vendors, and they all have to be approved by Sysco to have met our standards through yearly inspections, audits and documentation," he states. "And that's because we ourselves are audited all the time by third-party agencies and through internal Sysco audits: everything to do with the product coming in to the product going out.

"Every single asset of our business is heavily policed internally: HACCP, inventory control, security procedures, you name it," Wilson states. "And that is just how it works throughout the Sysco organization from one facility to another: we deliver the product the same way, we put it away and store it the same way ... each Sysco plant is like a mirror image of another Sysco operation.

"Which doesn't make it easy to become an approved Sysco vendor," Wilson sums up, "but for those suppliers who make it, there can be a lot of new opportunities for them, because they can start doing business with all the other Sysco operations in Canada." □

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