



Stretching things out

Drugstore giant boosts distribution throughput and productivity with robust, Canadian-made stretchwrapping machinery

Breaking into any well-entrenched and established marketplace takes a special blend of steely nerves, sharp foresight and acumen, firm commitment to the cause, and a clear vision of the ultimate goal.

By any measure, Jean Coutu seemed to have all these pre-requisites down pat back in 1969, when he and business partner Louis Michaud opened up a discount pharmacy in Montreal that, unlike most discounters, combined professional customer service with broad product selection and extended operating hours—becoming an instant hit with the locals.

Thirty-five years on, Jean Coutu chairs the board of directors of **The Jean Coutu Group Inc. (PJC)**, today widely regarded as one of the brightest-shining lights of Quebec's corporate elite—now ranking as Canada's second-largest drugstore chain—with the promise of even bigger and better things to come.

Just last spring, PJC engineered a spectacular, \$2.4-billion takeover of some 1,539 **Eckerd** drugstores in the eastern U.S., making it North America's fourth-largest pharmacy chain, with annual revenues in the \$15-billion range.

Today, the company's eastern Canada network is comprised of some 276 drugstore outlets under the **PJC** banner—as well as 41 **PJC Clinics** and two **PJC**

Santé Beauté franchises throughout Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick—retailing about 20,000 different pharmaceutical products and a broad range of popular consumer goods.

Through it all, the company managed to maintain a high measure of respect and goodwill among its customer base by remaining an exemplary corporate citizen—donating, for example, \$12.5 million toward the building of a biomedical complex at the **University of Montreal**, regularly providing substantial financial support to the **Ste-Justine Hospital** in Montreal, and periodically making other well-meaning displays of corporate largesse.

As a nerve center of the far-flung, burgeoning PJC empire, the company's main distribution center (DC) in Montreal's south-shore suburb of Longueuil is understandably a beehive of constant activity.

Housing about 18,000 SKUs (stock-keeping units) at all times, the 487,000-square-foot, 309-employee operation ships out close to 300,000 cases of product per week—a staggering throughput that has more than its share of logistical and production challenges to overcome on a daily basis.

One of these never-ending challenges is making sure that all the palletized loads of product leaving the facility arrive to their destinations in pristine, damage-free condition.

To this end, the Longueuil DC has successfully employed two robust stretchwrapping machines—models **WRTA-200** and the **WRTA-125**—manufactured by end-of-line packaging machinery builder **Wulftec International Inc.** of Ayer's Cliff, Que., and distributed by the Montreal-based **Emballages Jean Cartier Inc.**

“Both of these models are quite suitable to our operations and our needs,” says Jean Coutu transport director Michel Lariviere.



PJC transport director Michel Lariviere (foreground) and distribution center foreman Claude Belanger stand in front of the WRTA-200 stretchwrapping machine just finishing off one of thousands of palletized loads shipped weekly from the company's massive Longueuil DC facility (inset).



Handling maximum load sizes measuring up to 52-inch-wide by 52-inch-long by 80-inch-high, the **WRTA-200** is a heavy-duty, fully-automatic, free-standing rotary-arm stretchwrapper that can handle produc-

tion rates of up to 50 loads per hour, with virtually unlimited load weight capabilities.

The rotary-arm drive, featuring variable speeds up to 12 rpm (revolutions per minute), is powered by a 3/4-horsepower AC motor with an **Allen-Bradley** model variable frequency drive from **Rockwell Automation**. Constructed of heavy-duty structural steel, the wrapper features a NEMA 4/12 control cabinet with quick-disconnect, and a splash-proof top cover over the pause switch.

In operation, WRTA-200 machine's innovative cut-clamp-wipe film-tail treatment system effectively eliminates any loose bits of film dangling from the stretchwrapped load, which can cause safety hazards and make the finished loads look sloppy and unprofessional.

While it is designed as a stationary machine, the WRTA-200 provides a welcome degree of mobility in so far as where it can be placed within the plant. Because it comes with its own on-board air compressor—requiring no external air source—there are relatively few restrictions as to where it can be installed inside the facility, according to Marcel Boutin, equipment representative for Emballages Jean Cartier.

“There is also no need to cut a hole in the concrete floor,” points out Boutin, “like with the older Wulftec designs and other current competing models.”

“Wulftec's new modular clamp design allows for the clamp to be mounted on the floor, and it does not reduce how low it can wrap on a pallet.”

Boutin says the stretchwrapper's fence guard assembly was custom-modified for the Jean Coutu application with the mounting of two safety photoeye sensors at different heights at the opening of the wrapper—to prevent any accidental obstructions within the wrap zone.

While Boutin says there is no universal, cut-and-

“You have to consider a customer's immediate requirements and their potential for the future,” he explains.

“Current production speed, meaning pallets per hour, is one of the most obvious points to look at.

“Then it becomes a question of load handling. Are the loads coming off a palletizer, or are they being order picked for shipment, like in distribution warehousing? Are they using a forklift or a pallet jack? What are labor costs versus automation? The key is to review the customers requirements and propose the machine that meets the application.”

As far as Lariviere is concerned, the plant's investment in the WRTA-200 installation, which phased out the old manual pallet-wrapping process, has been more than worthwhile.

“We saved nearly \$500,000 on film last year, the first year of the switch,” Lariviere told **Canadian Packaging** on a recent visit to the Longueuil plant.

“In addition, we have decreased the wait time and the loss of time that comes with doing it manually,” he notes, estimating the saving in lost time and productivity at about \$10,000 a year.

For its part, the automatic WRTA-125 stretchwrapper—operated with an **Allen-Bradley Micro Logix** PLC (programmable logic controller)—is a rotary belt-driven machine that is better suited for lighter-duty applications.

The machine features manually-operated carriage up/down and rotation controls—with separate up and down carriage speeds and separate top and bottom wrap selectors—and a full suite of safety devices such as an “alarm mode” light, photoeyes at each end of the safety fencing, and an indicator light for all operations.

“These two Wulftec machines are able to handle the volume we deal with presently,” Lariviere says, “but should our needs grow in the future, we will consult to acquire the best machines possible for our operations.” □

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