

Brenton Engineering

Although many people might drive by Brenton Engineering near Carlos every day without giving it much thought, the company is actually known around the world for what it does. Not only does it design and build packaging machines and robotics that increase the productivity of some of the world's largest companies, but it also has the distinction of building the world's largest case packer – a machine that packages bumpers and grills for General Motors.

Packaging machines and robotics built by Brenton Engineering can be found throughout the United States, as well as around the world in countries such as Canada, Mexico, France, England, South Africa, South America, Thailand and New Zealand.

History

Brenton Engineering was founded in downtown Carlos by Brenton Smith in 1987. Initially, Smith had an idea for a new product: a cable-car lift that could be used on steep lakeshore banks. However, he was soon asked to manufacture a custom packaging machine. Soon orders for specialty machines began to come in, thus setting the course for the company's future.



Penny Brundell
HUMAN
RESOURCES
COORDINATOR

Brenton Engineering soon outgrew its downtown location, and in 1991 moved to a 20,000-square-foot building at its present location on County Road 13, just east of Carlos Corners. Over the years, the business was sold a couple of times and the building was also added on to several times. In 1998, Pro Mach, the company's current owner, purchased Brenton. Pro Mach, a leading provider of integrated packaging products and solutions, is made up of 10 different divisions throughout the United States.

Specialty



Mike Grinager
VICE PRESIDENT
OF TECHNOLOGY

Brenton Engineering specializes in what is known as "end-of-line" packaging – or in other words, the final packaging before a product is shipped. Using the example of a product such as bottled water, Brenton could design and build a machine that wraps the already-filled bottles in plastic shrink-wrap and then packs those 12-packs into cases. The company could also then build a machine that would stack those cases on a pallet and wrap them with stretch wrap so they would be ready for shipping.

In addition to end-of-line packaging machines, Brenton also builds robots that can be used for case packing, palletizing, material handling and painting.

Penny Brundell, human resources coordinator, explained that although Brenton does have a few standard product lines, the majority of its business is custom work. In other words, a company will have a problem that needs to be solved – such as how to get a certain product packed quickly and efficiently – and Brenton will come up with a solution.

The company is also well known as being able to find solutions to tough problems that other companies may have failed at, such as integrating several existing machines.

"They really come to us for a custom solution," Brundell said. "We'll set up a whole line."

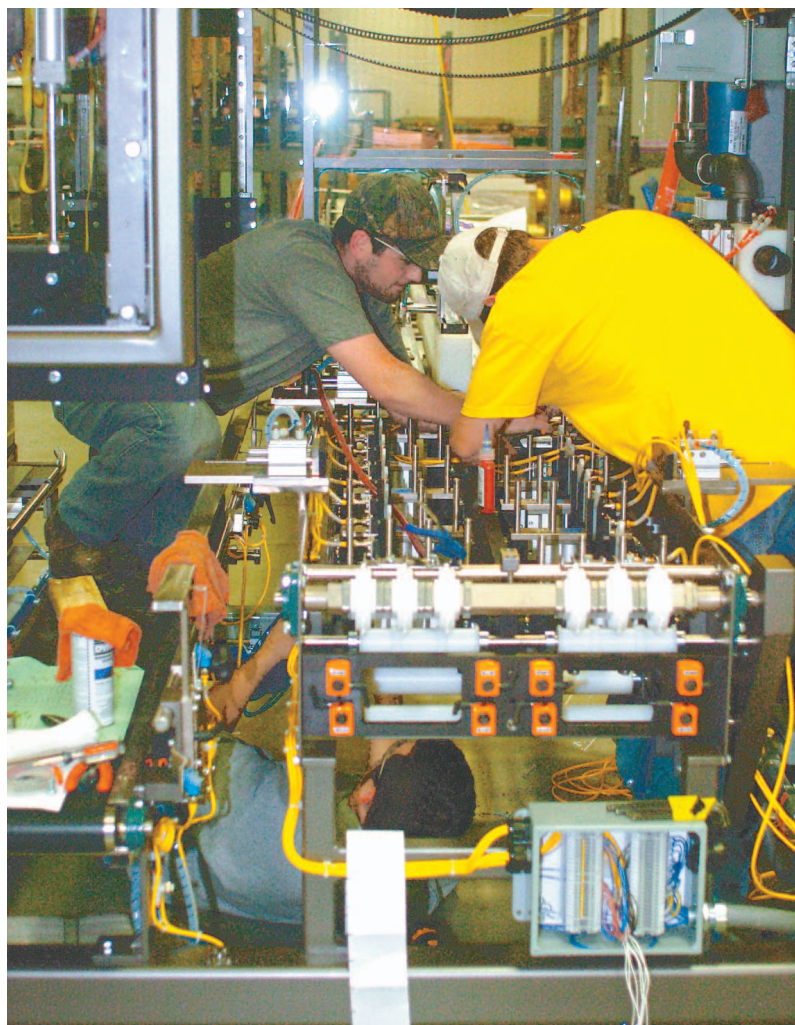
The ability to take several existing machines (even if they aren't made by Brenton) and integrate them to work as a unit, is one of the things that makes Brenton unique, said Michael Grinager, vice president of technology.

"That differentiates us from a lot of our competitors," he noted.

"We're pretty much the only division that can take on that scope," said Naomi Holdvogt, end-of-line marketing coordinator.

Brenton can also retrofit older machines to help them meet the current needs of the companies that own them.

Employees at Brenton Engineering (below) assemble a packaging machine. In addition to designing and building custom packaging machines for some of the world's largest companies, Brenton also specializes in building robotics that can be used for many types of packaging and manufacturing applications. On Page 18, John Hodge (left) is part of the service department, and Jerry Baker (right) works on assembling an Orion stretch-wrapper.



BRENTON ENGINEERING

4750 County Road 13 NE • Alexandria, MN 56308

Phone: 1-800-535-2730

Website: www.brentonengineering.com



Grinager also explained that Brenton sets itself apart in being able to complete most machines fairly quickly – usually within about six months of getting the order. During that time, employees design the entire machine (which can be as large as a truck trailer), build most of the parts in the company's machine shop, assemble the parts and test the final machine.

In addition, employees also write instruction manuals (often in several languages), and help the buyer with start-up and training.

Growth and economy

One of the ways Brenton has stayed healthy over the years is by becoming more diversified in the products it offers. Although Brenton

began with all custom products, in the past 10 years it has added a few standard products. These have included the Robocaser (a small, low-cost, case packer), Currie by Brenton palletizers, and the Orion stretch wrapper. However, about 60 to 70 percent of its business is still custom machines.

Another way in which Brenton has remained competitive is by using robotic systems. According to Grinager, these systems can be programmed to do almost anything, but are most often used for palletizing. The advantage of robotic systems, he stressed, is that when they are no longer needed for their original purpose, they can be reprogrammed and re-deployed for another application. They can also be used for case packing, hazardous material handling and painting.

One of Brenton's most significant expansions occurred in 2007 when it doubled its size by adding an additional 72,000 square feet of manufacturing space and 20,000 square feet of new office space.

"We did that knowing we were going to start manufacturing Orion stretch wrappers," Brundell said.

With its additional office space, Brenton has also taken on the role of being the business center for all the Pro Mach end-of-line companies.

Plans for the company's future include looking at new ways to approach green initiatives and making machines more economical to run, Grinager said. Additionally, Brenton has recently developed new products, such as the small, slower speed BantamPro ELS case packer, to help smaller companies economically upgrade their hand-pack operations.

He added that to weather the current economic storms, Brenton has relied on diversification, the stability of its parent company and sales of high-end equipment – the type of machines that can double a manufacturer's productivity and help it keep up with demand.

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Left to Right: (Back Row) Julie Lenarz, Cami Schwantz, Mickey Larson, Judy Fosberg, Chuck Bokinskie, Amy Kerhberg, Missy Kranz, Tracey Krueger.

(Front Row) Cheryle Larson, Jamie Larson, Myron Larson, Jillian Loveland.

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Employees

Locally, Brenton also has a big influence, as it employs 179 people who live within a 50-60 mile radius of the Alexandria/Carlos area. Most new employees come from local tech schools or a robotics college in Staples. Brenton has a low job turnover, with the average employee having been with the company for about 12 years.

Employees have a wide range of specialties, including sales, marketing, support, designing, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, fabrication and assembly. However, Brundell explained that most are trained in several areas to enable the company to move them to whatever job is most needed at the time.

By Lowell Anderson
Staff Reporter

History timeline

- 1987 - Brenton Smith founds Brenton in Carlos.
- 1988 - Case packer product line.
- 1994 - Automatic magazine loader.
- 1997 - Industry- First All Servo Case Packer.
- 2000 - Shrink wrapper product line.
- 2000 - Robotics line developed and experienced robotics team hired for robotic packaging applications, including palletizing systems.
- 2002 - Custom robotic automation line for assembling doors and windows.
- 2005 - Acquired Robocaser case packer.
- 2006 - Currie by Brenton conventional palletizing and material handling machinery acquired from Currie Machinery Company.
- 2007 - Building expansion to provide 72,000 additional square feet of manufacturing space and 20,000 square feet of new office space.
- 2008 - Began manufacturing Orion stretch wrapper in Alexandria facility.
- 2009 - Added powder-coat facility.



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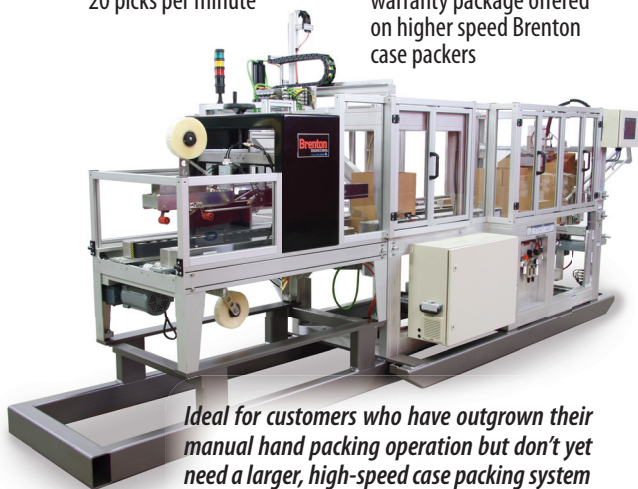
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