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## Manufacturing Success Stories

### Maine MEP Shows Look's Gourmet They "Can" Boost Business

*Gourmet Canning Company Expands Facility and Increases Sales Using Lean Principles*

Look's Gourmet Food Company offers some of the best gourmet foods from Downeast Maine: whole Maine lobster, steamer clams, haddock chowder, baked beans, all packaged in the safest form of food packaging – the can. Back in 1917, the founder of the company, Willard Look, developed the first successful process for handling and canning crabmeat and lobster, a process that the company still uses. When Look's new owner, Mike Cote, purchased the business in 2003, the mission was to keep the small-batch processing methods in place, but meeting the growing demands of the marketplace required the company to identify and correct inefficiencies in other areas of the operation.

"We have basically converted an old canning company into a gourmet food company in less than four years. We made label modifications, revitalized and converted old recipes to "all-natural," all in an effort to insure the authenticity of Maine products continued to resonate with people," said Cynthia Fisher, VP of Marketing & Quality Assurance at Look's. "We knew we had a thriving business on our hands, but since we were doing things much the same as they had been done back in 1917, we weren't really outputting as much volume as we could."

Jon Kirsch, project manager for Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP), visited Look's to see how he could help them become a more efficient plant.

"Mike and Cynthia knew there were areas where waste in their processes could be eliminated, efficiencies gained, and those efficiencies put to use making more product. As the employees began their Time Wise® principles of lean manufacturing training, they did find that there could be a place for more efficiency in their processes," said Kirsch. "Since lean is a lot about the layout of a plant, we showed them ways to cut down on search time for tools and equipment and how some small and simple changes in all areas of the process could bring them big efficiency gains."

"We saw an immediate change in our employees during these three days of lean training. It really bonded them, made them realize they were working as one cohesive unit and that each task was integral to the big picture," added Fisher. "We went from making seven batches a day of one product to 27 batches a day all because of lean."

As their business grew, Fisher and Cote realized the need for more warehouse space. Through the Community Development Block Grant program, Look's was able to move into a 12,000-square foot warehouse, in the recently revitalized Cutler Navy base. Again, they brought in Jon Kirsch and Jayne Riley from Maine MEP to help them create a new layout.

"Jon helped us organize the new Cutler warehouse where labeling, order fulfillment, and shipping would eventually be centralized. We also created seven new jobs in Washington County, one of Maine's most economically depressed areas," said Fisher.

As part of their production process, the meat from lobsters, mussels, and clams are removed by hand and the shells are then discarded as waste. Fortunately, another Maine business saw these discarded shells as valuable resources.

"Jayne and I had met with Tamra Philbrook of Artful Wares, who makes silverware handles and other textiles from crushed Maine shells. Tamra mentioned she was concerned she did not have a steady supplier for mussel shells, and we put her in touch with Look's," said Kirsch. "She had worked with them before, but didn't realize just how many shells they could provide her, now that their business has expanded. Now both Artful Wares and Look's are developing a side business where these shells will be cleaned and crushed, packaged, and sent back to Artful Wares. It's definitely a renewable business."

"Together, we're able to set up a great system that is beneficial to both our businesses. I'm impressed that all this came from just one conversation with Jon," said Philbrook.

"We have learned so much from Jon and the Maine MEP," added Fisher. "The business has tripled in three years, growing over 80% last year and we will see an even larger increase in 2007. Because of lean, our bottom line has increased, and more importantly, our employees now feel ownership of our brand. We will continue to utilize and implement the lean techniques we have learned for years to come."

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the NIST under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business "coaches" whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634.

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