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## Kings of takeout

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Published: 07/07/2010 - 12:54

Employees work on multiple lines at a Kilgore factory to fill client orders for custom takeout bags. On North Longview Street, in the heart of Kilgore's industrial base, a new model has been molded for making the most of a shifting manufacturing landscape, and it's as flexible and sturdy as the line of plastic carry-out bags it's based on.

Pak-Sher is the real king of carry-out. Just about all the company's products go to the food industry, producing restaurant carry-out bags and serving as the top producer of food prep and wrapper-type sheets in the country for a Who's Who customer list that includes famous chicken and burger chains.

"We are the number 1 supplier of those sheets in the U.S.," said vice president Larry Rada.

When market forces drove projects, companies and their accompanying jobs overseas a decade ago, Pak-Sher put American ingenuity to work to reimagine a product line with strong roots – and jobs – remaining on American soil.

"The term we like is 'nimbleness,'" said company president Don James. "When a lot of stuff started moving to China, we took a hard look at the business."

That hard look included some cold reality. Unavoidable facts stared them in the face, James said.

"We decided there were certain things it made sense to get from China," he recalled.

Understanding that took the company into China's industrial heartland to develop "affiliated operations" – longstanding vendor relationships, interdependent ones that encompass shared technology and shared processes for producing huge volumes of plastic carry out bags and wrappers for the restaurant industry.

"We have very tight relationships and they're long- term relationships," James said.

Nimbleness translates throughout the operation, with employees on the line empowered to stop the presses in the interests of quality and safety.

"Any time they think they need to, the people on the floor can shut it down," Rada said. "We'd rather scrap a whole role of film than send them something that's not right."

And with its Texas base close to the customers, the Kilgore operation specializes in quick changeovers.

"We are a job shop, so we're able to go from one spec and one customer to another quickly, with minimal waste," James said.

With 130,000 square feet under roof, a staff of 160 employees stateside (and 200 more affiliated workers in China), the process starts with high-density polyethylene pellets – and Pak-Sher has silos full of them – millions of pounds

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of them.

They melt them down and add color, mixing them like paint before spinning the liquid plastic out in a continuous film and inflating it to turn it into bags or sheets – whatever the job calls for.

It's a state-of-the-art printing operation that's been upgraded with \$2 million in new equipment over the past five years, said Larry Rada, vice president of operations.

In any given year, they typically ship between 150,000 to 175,000 cases of product a year, with each case holding between 25 and 2,000 units.

In its 60,000 square foot warehouse, Pak-Sher can stock up to four weeks inventory for customers who prefer a just-in-time approach.

"Five to seven years ago, we embraced the toolbox of lean manufacturing – a number of techniques and tools to reduce waste and increase effectiveness," James said, citing the examples of reducing scrap by 400 percent and streamlining the product spec review process from two weeks and eight people to one day and five people.

The privately-held company has led the way on conservation.

"We're one of the first ones out there with that. We have recycled content in most of our products, but the FDA doesn't allow recycled content in some products," James said, noting that Pak-Sher's partnering with the City of Seattle - HQ of green thinking - to create compostable trash bags.

Pak-Sher is FDA approved and fully audited both in America and overseas, where they follow ethics guidelines that include everything from testing the water employees wash hands with to verifying that everyone who works is an adult eligible to do so.

Kilgore Economic Development Corporation executive director Amanda Nobles applauded Pak-Sher for their swift-footed response to economic stressors.

"They've been a great example of being flexible," she said. For their part, Pak-Sher appreciates KEDC's ongoing support.

"They provided start-up support. My hat's off to Amanda Nobles - they've really been a partner with us, and Amanda's great," Don James said.

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