

CHOOSING PLASTIC



After having its product refused, Gatorade switched to a plastic pallet and realized immediate improvement.

By Allison Manning, Associate Editor

Gatorade's Oakland facility ships nearly 300,000 pallets of sports drink each year. So when the wooden pallets they were using began breaking down, it was a major problem.

The wooden pallets needed constant repair, says Gatorade process improvement engineer Brian Finegan, adding that more than 3,800 pallets worth of product were lost due to poor pallet quality in 2007.

The final push to switch to a more reliable pallet began when customer Costco refused to accept the product on the wooden pallets because of missing boards and exposed nails.

Finegan turned to a plastic pallet (iGPS, 800-884-0225, www.iGPS.net), which rented for the same amount as the wooden pallets. After a six-month feasibility trial on the plant's 32-ounce line of beverages in July 2007, an immediate improvement was seen in the way the pallets reacted to the plant's almost 25-year-old palletizers.

"Every pallet was the same dimension," Finegan says. "They ran through perfectly and smoothly. We weren't losing product like we were on the other line."

The completely recyclable plastic pallets are 37% lighter, weighing about 50 pounds, which saves money on fuel. Plastic pallets don't require inspection before being loaded, reducing labor costs. The plant floor is also safer, with less wood debris on the ground and less potential for injury. The results were so good that the Arizona Gatorade plant has started using the plastic pallets on four of six of their production lines.

Eight months after the 32 and 20-ounce lines switched, the plant is still reaping the benefits of the plastic pallets, with no customers refusing the product.

Since switching, Finegan has worked with the Reusable Packaging Association (www.choosereusables.org) and Oakland-based StopWaste.org, speaking at workshops and educating other distributors about wood alternatives.

"If people really understood all the benefits of plastic and how it has tremendous impact across the board, they'd be much more willing to give it a shot," he adds. 