



NAME: Harm Geurs

TITLE: Director of market strategy for the bag filling and palletizing division

COMPANY: BW Packaging, specifically the SYMACH Palletizing and Thiele bag-filling lines

LOCATION: Halifax, Nova Scotia, close to the Prince Edward Island potato market

NATIONAL ORIGIN: The Netherlands, speaking fluent Dutch

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: One year as director of market strategy in a palletizing/bag-filling strategist role

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: In sales since 2016 in the Canadian market for onions and east of the Mississippi River for packaging and grading lines; marketing background; and introduced into the industry through Eqraft, working for three years in potato grading and with onion processing technology

SCHOOLING: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design with an Honors Degree in Communication Studies, and a Bachelor of Design in Communication Design

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Progress Club philanthropic organization, and a founding member and a previous board member of Soul's Harbour Rescue Mission, providing 300 meals a day to the homeless, having started the mission as a collaboration with the local small-business community

AWARDS/HONORS: Has earned graphic design awards through his trade, and named Halifax Progress Club Rookie of the Year in 2008

FAMILY: Partner, Adrienne, and a 22-year-old son, two 16-year-old daughters, and a 13-year-old son

HOBBIES: Car enthusiast, sim racing, and an avid runner, currently averaging 100-120 kilometers (62-74 miles) a month and training for his first full marathon

INTERVIEW

HARM GEURS,

Director of Market Strategy, SYMACH Palletizing

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

Dating back to 1984, the company that is now known as SYMACH Palletizing, a division of BW Packaging, began building high-level palletizers for the bulk agricultural produce industry.

Early SYMACH Palletizing innovations include the push plate with a squeeze collar, and the stacking cage. The company was reorganized and rebranded as SYMACH ("system" and "machinery") in the 1990s.

BW Packaging (the Barry-Wehmiller's packaging machinery group) creates flexible packaging solutions for food and non-food products, offering innovative brands such as Hayssen vertical form-fill seal and horizontal flow-wrap machines, SYMACH palletizers and Thiele bag-filling and sealing machines.

With eight locations throughout the United States, United Kingdom, Italy and the Netherlands, BW Packaging's flexible packaging machinery group offers lifetime support to its customers globally.

SYMACH's automatic palletizing equipment is designed to achieve high-speed production rates and high-quality, perfectly stacked pallet loads.

The machines can palletize a wide range of bags in a variety of sizes, and shapes, or materials in stable, square pallet loads. SYMACH bag palletizers feature a patented layer-squaring and compression system to maximize full pallet-load stability and appearance.

Bag palletizing equipment automates the pallet building process, but not all product lines are built the same. Many different palletizing accessories and technologies can be employed by SYMACH to help producers and packers/shippers make the perfect pallet customized to their production needs.

What is your own background, Harm, and how has your career progressed? I started as an outside

Above: Harm Geurs, director of market strategy for SYMACH Palletizing, says the company is first and foremost a manufacturer of automatic palletizing equipment designed to achieve high-speed production rates and high-quality, perfectly stacked pallet loads. Shown is the SYMACH facility in the Netherlands.



sales agent and was part of the Onion Tech Alliance, a group of suppliers in the onion processing industry.

I got my start with Eqract selling complete processing and packaging lines, and SYMACH was the end-of-the-line solution for palletizing and part of our product portfolio. So, I started to explore potatoes at that time through SYMACH.

More than anything, what I love about the potato industry is the realness of the people. What amazes me, for example, is the intimate relationship that a packing shed manager has across the whole processing line. They know their processing business so well and can flex it to be able to grow.

They're always thinking about family and how to sustain the business for the next generation. I can relate because I grew up on a small family farm and was driving tractor by the time I was 11 years old. I look back at that as an incredible time in my life.

Is SYMACH a manufacturer, service provider, wholesaler, or all three? We are first and foremost a manufacturer. We have an incredible

after-sales support platform, and now it's even better with the consolidation of all business units together under one BW Packaging umbrella.

Serving U.S. customers from Europe was challenging, so we're shifting our focus to establishing more of a presence in the United States. Our production facility in Minneapolis is now set up to manufacture SYMACH

Above: The third SYMACH palletizer installed at East Point Potatoes in Prince Edward Island, Canada, was built with a focus on high-speed palletizing of 10-pound potato bags running at 40 bags per minute. Potato bags are pictured on pallets ready for shipping.

Palletizers, and we have technical staff there who can be of service to customers.

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As a former business development manager, what were your goals for SYMACH Palletizers? First and foremost, I believe our palletizers are the best in the industry, but we have some very good competitors in that space who have been in the market a long time.

So, it was my job to differentiate our palletizers from the competition and let customers know the distinct attributes and where we believe our machines excel, such as having electric lifts instead of hydraulic lifts, and the ability of our Rotax gripper head to be able to palletize at 55 units per minute.

We've also perfected Octabin and display bin palletizing and have done a great job in engineering for a high rate of speed in Octabin applications.

We can also modify our palletizers to fit in a space that's under 13 feet high. We have some great modular solutions that allow us to modify the layouts and provide robotics in tight spaces.

In the Wisconsin potato market, you have a lot of produce (especially baled product) going into polybags, which end up being lumpy as compared to the paper bags used on the East Coast. We have extensive

Left: A key innovation focused on potatoes is the SYMACH gripper head, or bag collection system. Frustrated by the slow rate of placing one potato bag on a pallet at a time, SYMACH engineered a system that can send either four bags, two bags or one into the gripper head for palletizing and create a buffer upstream to manage speed.

Right: A new SYMACH Palletizer at Coloma Farms in Coloma, Wisconsin, is designed to arrange 50-pound potato bags onto a pallet. The palletizing system includes two bagging lines that converge at the one palletizer, and an insertion point for other pallets to be directed into that space.

experience stacking the 40-50-pound polybags—we deal with that all the time.



Whether for palletizing potatoes or onions, the latter shown here, SYMACH offers complete line solutions and strong collaborations with partner companies.

Tell me a little about your project with Coloma Farms and the promotional video you are shooting. The video is a straightforward testimonial from Andy Diercks—we happened to be working with him on a new palletizer for his shed and were at the right place at the right time.

Andy wanted to go with a traditional palletizer that would stack 50-pound bags onto a pallet. He also wanted an insertion point for other pallets to be directed into that space.

He had an interesting layout, needing two bagging lines that would converge at one palletizer, and we were able to integrate product palletizing well into that system.

We put a wrapper at the end of the line with a couple of roller sets to create an extra buffer position and give him the capacity he needed. But, generally, it's not a complex palletizer.

“More than anything, what I love about the potato industry is the realness of the people. What amazes me, for example, is the intimate relationship that a packing shed manager has across the whole processing line.”

— Harm Geurs

Why do you think Coloma Farms chose to partner with you? We do this every day, right? And we were at the right time, at the right place, and he liked what we had to offer. One thing I never do in talking with a customer is overpromise them anything. It's better to under-promise and over-deliver.

It was clear to me in talking to Andy that we could meet all his palletizing needs. And the fact that it's a local

job is a key piece. We have a service team available at a moment's notice out of our Minneapolis location and parts easily available through our Duncan, South Carolina, facility.

Do you offer service before and after the sale, and if so, why is that important? Customers have access to parts and service from SYMACH 24 hours a day. We're not the cheapest source, but we believe in white glove

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service and live by that religiously for our customers.

Being an arm of BW Packaging, whether a customer needs a vertical bagging line, a palletizing line or even a big seed bag or animal feed line, we can do it all in house.

What technologies from BW Packaging/SYMACH have taken those machines to the next level for packing sheds and other customers?

A key innovation focused on potatoes is the SYMACH gripper head, or what we call a bag collection system. The challenge in palletizing, even with robots, is irregular patterns. You sometimes have 17 or 22 bags per pallet layer, and if you're only putting one bag on at a time, your rate is slow.

So, we looked at it differently and said, "What if we could send one, two or even four bags into the gripper

head?" The result was that we engineered a system that controlled the pattern so we could send either four bags, two bags or one into the gripper head and create a buffer upstream to manage speed.

It's a unique application, and we spent a lot of time working with potato guys in Prince Edward Island to refine that. We've got multiple systems in operation now.

How many SYMACH Palletizers are currently in operation within the U.S. and Canada? In total, we have nearly 300 palletizers operating in North America and \$1 million worth of SYMACH parts in inventory at our Duncan, South Carolina, facility.

We offer complete business solutions. For instance, we are also trying to eliminate as much forklift traffic as possible in packing operations between staging areas and loading

Left: Coloma Farms shed manager Dave Zeuhlike moves a pallet load of potatoes for shipping.

Right: The side-by-side comparison shows potatoes stacked by a SYMACH Palletizer (left) and those stacked by hand at right.

docks, especially for high-volume packers/shippers who are outputting 22-24 truckloads of potatoes a day.

We try to automate it completely through on-demand ordering so, while trucks are being loaded, the next order is already in position and ready to be taken directly off the conveyors.

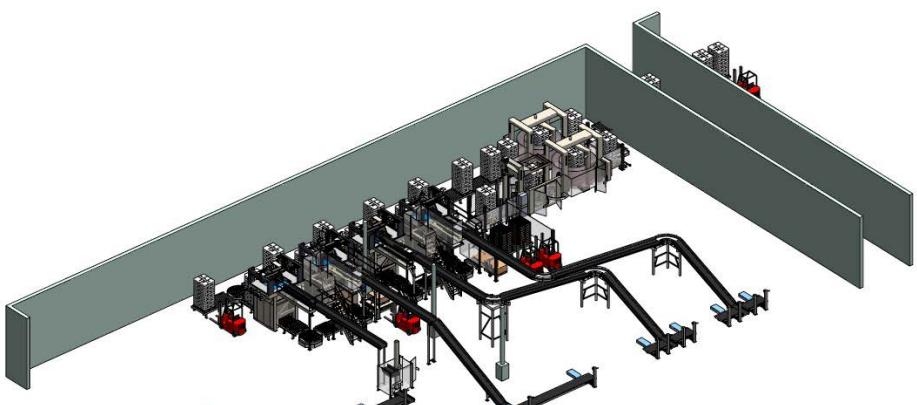
Between the palletizers and staging areas are little shuttle cars that pick up the orders on pallets. You've got all these pallets lined up for different orders. If done correctly, each truck pulls up close to its load. That way, operations can eliminate five or six forklift drivers.

Instead, you have two forklift operators and each truck is literally loaded in 10 minutes.

This is unique to us and where we're completely different. We think in terms of efficiency and logistics, as well as reducing people, injuries and cost in the plant.

Does BW Packaging also offer potato grading and sorting equipment?

No, but we have a strong history



A detailed rendering illustrates a complete SYMACH onion-palletizing system.

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and working relationship with Eqraft to provide grading lines. You need a good integration partner, and we believe Eqraft does an incredible job.

We are so well integrated into their planning that it's seamless across the whole planning and production of potato and vegetable lines. We're sort of the end-of-line partner with them on almost every project.

How many facilities does BW Packaging have, in what countries, and how many employees? We're a unique blend of 130 companies and have 100 locations worldwide.

We have 25 manufacturing locations in eight countries and 2,400 team members. BW Packaging has completed 11,000-plus machinery installations.

SYMACH will be exhibiting at the Industry Show in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Why is that important to be present at the Wisconsin potato Industry Show? We believe we have a good product to offer the market, and through our success with Coloma Farms, want to keep growing a customer base.

We have an incredible service and

Above: BW Packaging has 25 manufacturing locations in eight countries and 2,400 team members.

parts team and take care of the customer, not just at the time of the sale, but also through the life cycle of each machine for a complete, satisfactory experience.

Did you debut any machinery or products at Potato Expo? No, we just went through a reconsolidation of the whole company, and a lot of our resources have been tied up in that, so this is a bit of a streamlined year for us as we reset our focus.

We're looking forward to bringing out some cool and innovative products, probably in time for Pack Expo, and will launch new items for the agriculture market as we get towards the middle and end of 2026.

I want to ask about the philanthropic activities you mentioned in your bio sidebar at the beginning of this article. Why is it important for you to give back to the community? It's part of what makes me "me." As a privileged person, I believe I have a responsibility to take care of my fellow humans. What gives me the right to hold back from supporting a fellow human if I have the ability to help them?



Harm Geurs (left) is pictured with Steve Shellenbaum, who works out of SYMACH's Brooklyn Park office in Minneapolis, at a past Prince Edward Island potato show.



Customers have access to parts and service from SYMACH 24 hours a day.

So many people are hurting in the world, and I've been put in a beautiful position where I can help. We all do well in this business. What gives me the right not to help?

I believe we have a responsibility to take care of our fellow humans. Many people have a hard time understanding that, quite often, people's circumstances define their future, right? But I believe all ships rise together.

What are your goals for the coming year? I would like to see the industry settle down and keep growing. The volatility of the market's been up and down, making it difficult to conduct business with producers. It would be nice to see a bit of normalcy return to the market.

Customers are excited about next year because commodity prices are rebounding, so all these things play into how we view the market. It was a bit of a "hold off and wait" for us this year because the market wasn't investing.

I have fun in this industry, and I'm looking forward to seeing everyone in Wisconsin for the Industry Show this February. **BCT**

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