

NEW CHALLENGES BREW AS BULK HANDLERS ADAPT TO EVOLVING MARKET

With sales of the standard cuppa' falling, major brands are turning to new, exciting blends of tea to engage an increasingly adventurous consumer base. While there has never been more choice for consumers, the plethora of new flavours has brought with it a shift in the challenges bulk handlers and manufacturers face to deliver quality products.

FPE Global's CEO David Cooper discusses one of the most significant of these challenges – cross contamination – and how the bulk handling and pneumatic conveying specialists guard against this to ensure the 165m cups of tea consumed daily in the UK are exactly as advertised.

The tea market is evolving. While the cup of tea has become deep rooted in British culture and firmly entwined in the economy, the everyday brew is no longer enough for many consumers.

Retail tea sales, while remaining a significant £654m last year, fell over six per cent in the five years prior to 2015. Tata Global Beverages GB, the owner of sector giant Tetley Tea, recently posted similar returns. A headline loss of £863k in the year to 31st March 2016 comes as consumers increasingly looked to diversify their palette, opting instead for alternatives such as coffee.

The industry is reacting. Major tea manufacturers have taken steps to diversify their range of products to include new, adventurous blends. Recognising the need to evolve, well-known brands such as Tetley, PG Tips and Twinings have explored blends in green, fruit and herbal teas in recent years, prompting the beginning of a major shift in the industry to recapture the nation's consumers.

Between 2012 and 2014, sales of fruit and herbal teabags rose by 31 per cent, from £58m to £76m. Sales of specialty teabags rose by 15 per cent to £63m, while sales of green teabags increased by around 50 per cent to £36m.

While these new, exotic options have revitalised an industry at risk of becoming stale, this renaissance has brought with it fresh challenges for manufacturers and bulk handling firms tasked with delivering pure, high-quality products.

Companies are now dealing with potentially hundreds of flavours and blends, from regular black tea to exotic infusions such as mango and strawberry herbal tea. With each flavour invariably passing through the same manufacturing process, bulk handlers and manufacturers must enforce measures to avoid cross-contamination of products.

The correct equipment selection is vital. One piece of incorrectly calibrated machinery has the potential to cause a recall on a product, irreversibly damaging relations with a brand. Flushing machinery prior to processing new materials, especially where mechanical conveying is concerned, is essential.

At FPE, the company incorporates dense phase pneumatic conveying into its processes. This empty to empty system allows the gentle handling of materials such as tea in a way that eliminates the possibility of residual material being left in the system after the conveying process is completed. A vibratory tray feeder can also be introduced, which reduces maintenance and improves sanitation.

Maintaining careful handling of the material from arrival through to the processing and delivery stage is equally important. Stringent de-packing and storage measures ensure each product is kept in separate storage compartments. From there, a calculated recipe and volume is discharged into the processing system, ensuring the correct level of fines content is adhered to. Increasing or decreasing the fines content from the correct position can cause problems with both the taste and, if packing the tea into teabags, the packaging process.

As the world's biggest brands evolve in the food and beverage sector, it has never been more important for bulk handling firms to be at the forefront of new technologies, research, and methods of working efficiently. Companies must strive to continue to add value to the quality of processes. To do that, they must adapt.

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