

Q-Sage, Inc.

SPECIALIZING IN QUALITY CUSTOM SEED AND GRAIN CONDITIONING EQUIPMENT.

The ability to customize a product of virtually any kind has become an increasingly important product strategy for manufacturers over the past several years – and recent research confirms it. A 2013 Bain & Company study of 1,000 online consumers found that between 25% and 30% of respondents were interested in customized products.

While the grain industry doesn't follow consumer trends, customizing grain equipment is an option more companies are offering to position themselves uniquely to provide "best fit" equipment solutions and corresponding value for customers. That's the approach Mt. Pleasant, MI-based Q-Sage, Inc. has taken, and its one that has served the grain and seed conditioning equipment supplier well since its founding in 2007.



Q-Sage Inc.'s 20,000-sq.-ft. manufacturing plant in Mt. Pleasant, MI.

"We can basically design and concept the machine during the unit planning and quote process, per what the customer wants," explains Tim Throop, president of Q-Sage. "So whether it's related to sunflowers or rice, or if they have a different idea that they want to do – a different flow configuration, for example – we can accomplish that. We can do it rather efficiently and quickly," he adds.

Q-Sage offers true customization options for customers upgrading their conditioning equipment and facilities, and it welcomes customer requests for installing modern machines into existing facility floor plans. "In our designs, we can also accommodate legacy customer screen inventories into the function and construction of replacement or retrofit Q-Sage cleaners to offer flexibility and overall purchase economy," Throop notes.

Developing a Niche

Although most manufacturers add customization as an option to enhance existing product lines, Q-Sage is somewhat unique in that it got its start building custom seed cleaner machines from the get-go. Having worked for a competitor prior to founding the company, Throop admits he thought there was only a small need for custom cleaners. However, upon cofounding Q-Sage

with his father-in-law Tom Wright, he realized the opportunity was bigger than he initially thought.

With an engineering background, Throop says he was thrust into the business and sales side all at once, but with the help of his semi-retired father-in-law/business partner, they quickly established a name for themselves as a supplier of quality seed and grain equipment (hence the acronym, Q-Sage).

Since opening its doors, Q-Sage has



President Tim Throop (left) with Business Development Mgr. Jim McIntosh.



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Tim Throop, President

Jim McIntosh, Business Development

Products

Precision air screen cleaner
Medium air screen cleaner
High-capacity pre-cleaner
Debearder
Soybean belt sorter
Edible Bean Polisher
Vibratory conveyor
Real Scalper Aspirator



High-capacity pre-cleaner.

seen consistent growth in sales, market share, and facility expansion, which Throop credits to providing prompt and comprehensive customer service before and after the sale. Additionally, the company's 13 full-time employees produce robustly engineered and constructed equipment from a centrally-located, modernized facility with 19,900 square feet of shop floor manufacturing space all in the state of Michigan.

"Our machines are typically more robust in terms of construction with a lot more steel to them," he says. "Consequently, our machines will weigh sometimes as much as 50% more than offerings from other manufacturers."

Air screen cleaners. Among the company's most successful product lines is its Air Screen cleaners, which Throop says have been upgraded and modernized from the traditional design and functionality for the industry. Features such as increased bearing sizes and longer "shake" dimension on eccentrics that provide for better flow and sort/sift effectiveness across the screen matrix provide the ultimate in smooth operation which are Q-Sage hallmarks. Throop says the company also employs a simple service adage in its interaction with customers and clients: "First, we build it right, and then we make it right to ensure customer satisfaction."

Debearders. Throop says another key product offer is a complete line of debearders. "This product line has done well for us. Debearders are not screen cleaners but a different type of machine altogether," says Throop. "We service the market that needs an alternative-sized debearder compared to other models that are out there. That's helped provide customers with more choice and flexibility," he adds.

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-Tim Throop, president, Q-Sage.

Market Trends and Growth

Although Q-Sage has an installed customer base around the globe, the majority of its customers are in North America in the seed, grain, and food processing markets, where effective and reliable seed conditioning is required. The company works closely with customers in both the conceptual and final equipment design process right through product construction and delivery, in addition to post-installation commissioning when appropriate.

In terms of the grain market, Throop says the vitality of the seed conditioning equipment business in the western United States has been impacted by an ongoing drought. Additionally, he says the company produces a line of cleaners for the rice industry, and activity in that segment has been muted as of late.

"However, as we continue to grow in sales and market share, we're still on the receiving end of a steady flow of quote requests from our customer prospects, facility construction partners and industry reseller affiliates," Throop explains.

In spite of fluctuations in the market, Q-Sage is optimistic about the future. "We anticipate increases in our international business opportunities going forward, as we integrate with off-shore seed and grain plant design and construction partners," Throop notes. "Although the strength of the U.S. dollar is impacting some of our export momentum, our product quality, customer service and representative good equipment



Precision air-screen cleaner.



Vibratory conveyor.

value structure will position us well for international growth.”

Further, Throop observes that the legacy seed and grain conditioning equipment installed base is aging, providing additional opportunities for growth and customer acquisition.

“Although lifetime duty cycles for this type of equipment is impressive, we know that machine upgrade and replacement schedules are destined to call for new and retrofit units to provide the capacity and precision need for our discriminating customers,” Throop says. “For near-future innovation, we are integrating the addition of capital equipment to improve our manufacturing efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally we anticipate the design of product improvements in the realtime digital monitoring and control of our machines providing plant-wide IT exchange and Cloud-based functionality,” he adds.

People Key to Success

While Q-Sage stands for quality products in name, it wouldn't be possible without the hard work and dedication of the people producing them. “We have a loyal and proficient work force at Q-Sage based in mid-Michigan, where the labor climate is very balanced, and the retention rate of our skilled work force is excellent – one of the key reasons that we've been successful,” says Throop.

Rob Nieminen, contributing writer