



In 2005, Scott Lutocka took on the role of Facilities and Sustainability Manager at Piazza Produce, Inc., a produce distribution company based in Indianapolis that delivers fresh produce and specialty foods to more than 150 cities across four states. As a part of his new role, Lutocka wanted to find smarter ways to run the company's warehouse, which operates on a 24/7 schedule.

The Problem

After a few months of trying to work within the company's current systems, Scott was able to evaluate a host of equipment challenges and breakdowns including multiple battery failures on many of the company's fleet of forklifts. It was clear that Piazza Produce would need some guidance on how to remedy the systematic problems that were evident to both Lutocka and corporate management.

Piazza Produce sought the help of Associated Integrated Solutions, a local material handling company that also provided significant recommendations on how to properly plan for and upgrade its current systems without compromising down time, which is operationally critical in such a time-sensitive industry like perishable goods. As a part of the overall management survey, the "Holy Grail" of solutions was introduced to Piazza Produce in the form of Waddell Power, DEKA batteries and AMETEK Prestolite Power. It was recommended that the company replace not only the batteries in each working fork lift, but the chargers as well. A key element to an efficient operation in a warehouse that often gets overlooked is the battery chargers, their location in the warehouse and how critical they are to ensure complete and sustainable charging of the batteries. This seemingly small factor can make a large impact on efficiency and reducing down time.

"These changes instantly made our nightmares go away, and we were able to focus on additional efficiency opportunities. These changes later played a foundational basis as well as my main driving force – making the company sustainable with a goal of achieving 'Zero Waste' status in short order," said Lutocka. "In the process of installing new equipment, the company has found that these chargers are reliable work horses that have helped improve warehouse conditions significantly. There's also inherent value in purchasing quality equipment that lasts for years without having to make unnecessary early replacements."

The Solution

Knowing that short cycling is dangerous and costly, Piazza Produce purchased ten, four circuit chargers for their existing riding pallet jacks along with 45 new pallet jacks, bringing its fleet to 60. The distribution center's original charging area was grossly undersized and they knew replacing chargers would require new space in the warehouse. Since they couldn't afford downtime to switch out existing equipment, they worked with electricians to design a new area that would keep the fleet working in its 24/7 environment while not sacrificing its exemplary standards of customer service. Once the entire new fleet of batteries and chargers were up and running, the team at Piazza Produce conducted training with all shifts of employees, ensuring the proper methods of charging and maintenance of the equipment were taught.

"Once the system was functional, Piazza Produce immediately saw benefits in efficiency with more than two hours of time savings for night shifts going out for delivery the next day. Everyone worked as a team from the consultants to each warehouse employee to provide correct specs, installation, training and application," continued Lutocka.

The Success

Now in its 12th year with the new batteries and chargers, things are still running well – so well in fact, Lutocka feels bad that he doesn't need to have them serviced more often. With the fleet's daily use factor so high, short charges have been stopped and the life cycle of each battery is still on track to continue for years to come.

Because of the success of this installation, Lutocka was able to focus on the sustainability objectives, which has been a resounding success. In 2010, Piazza Produce was able to break even on waste costs to become waste neutral, and in 2012, the company successfully became a Zero Waste company, diverting more than 90 percent of its company waste from landfills. This was accomplished through comprehensive recycling, utilizing food banks for qualified foods and commercial composting. Since then, the company has saved \$1.75 million in waste hauling expenditures to landfills. In 2014, it received its Gold Level certification by the U.S. Zero Waste Business Council as Zero Waste.

Lutocka expanded in his passion for the reduction of waste by becoming a founding member of the U.S. Zero Waste Business Council, where he utilized his experiences at Piazza Produce to help establish criteria and the certification process, becoming a nationally recognized speaker and instructor. He credits these successes to a lot of hard work, focus and the company's initial move to make warehouse efficiency a priority.

“In spite of the size of the project, everything went smoothly – reinforcing the notion that we made the right business decision from the start.”