

APT Celebrates 20 Years, Continues To Adapt To Customers, Industry Needs

Cokato, MN—It was 20 years ago when Advanced Process Technologies (APT) opened and announced that it would be a provider of integrated sanitary processing systems and engineering services for the dairy industry.

Founded in 2000 and headquartered here, APT has grown its portfolio of equipment, systems and services to provide start-to-finish support for projects in the dairy, egg, and other food industries.

APT has grown to facilities in Minnesota, Idaho, and California providing engineering, system design, project management, sales, installation, training, spare parts, and service to its customer base.

“Since we founded APT two decades ago, we’ve made our mark with customers in the processing industry and we are excited to write the next chapter of our story as we add on new staff, new production capabilities and services” said Craig Campbell, president and one of the original owners of APT.

APT now occupies five major buildings totaling over 100,000 square feet of state-of-the-art manufacturing and production space.

“We look forward to bringing even more value to our customers with best-in-class engineering services, stand-alone products, integrated systems, and after manufacture support that create efficiencies,” Campbell added.

Those capabilities include upstream services on the packaging side, and on the processing technology side of the business, giving the company the ability to help customers increase their efficiencies, streamline their operations, and continue bringing essential products to the marketplace.

“This is a very exciting time in the history of APT,” Campbell said. “As we continue to expand, not only our capabilities but also our people, we will be able to accelerate our business even further and bring substantial benefits to our customers.”

Campbell said from day one, he knew the new company would have to be innovative in its approach to serving the dairy industry.

When APT first got started, there were a few more equipment suppliers than there are now, Campbell said.

“Then all of a sudden several of those companies like Damrow and Stork were purchased by other bigger companies,” Campbell said. “The industry got a little nervous when that started happening. We were fortunate to have the industry asking themselves, how can we

find competitive pricing with so few suppliers. That kind of opened the door for us.”

Management Team In 2000 vs 2020

We all had a tremendous amount of experience in the industry prior to starting here, Campbell said.

Kevin Rolfes headed up the road crew, Dave Kupka was in charge of automation, Mel Briggs and Campbell spearheaded the process design group, while Russ Scherping ran the shop.

“It was a lot of fun,” Campbell said. “I learned a lot from each one of those guys, particularly Mel. He was one of a kind and still the best engineer I ever saw.”

The current management team consists of Phil Cunningham, vice president of sales; Jared Brandt is vice president of operations; Tom Russell is head of the automation team; Dan Lechelt, CFO;

Jackie Peterson, human resource director; Jamie Ries, marketing and Gary Starkson

manages the food group.

“We have always been fortunate to have worked with a good customer base that appreciated and trusted our set of skills throughout the years,” Campbell said. “We’ve always had great people here but you still had to gain the industry’s trust, and we have always been able to prove that out.”

Experiences Turn APT Into ESOP

A major influence on Campbell was his former boss, Virgil Scherping. Many of the former management team worked for and learned the industry from Scherping in the 1980s and 1990s.

“Virgil had a good business philosophy and he treated his employees well,” Campbell said. “Much like we have now, he had good customers, that grew with him.”

Scherping also formed a great team of people and nurtured their knowledge and relationships, Campbell said.

“You can look throughout the industry still, the Virgil Scherping tree branches to many of the companies that supply processing and engineering services,” he said. “Many of the really good engineers we have and Tetra Pak has and others, come from Virgil Scherping.”

When Scherping sold his business to Carlisle Process Systems, Campbell and the team saw a way not to go through a transition.

“That transition always stuck with me. I learned a lot. I wished there was a way to sell a company that would cause less disruption,” Campbell said. “I always thought, when it was our time to get out, we’d do it differently.”



The current management team at APT, a company celebrating 20 years of business this year, includes (back row left to right) Gary Starkson, Jared Brandt, Dan Lechelt, Phil Cunningham; (center) Jackie Peterson; and (front row) Tom Russell and Craig Campbell.

Campbell said he’s not retiring anytime too soon, but began looking at an exit plan about five years ago that would avoid the disruption he faced.

He started looking at a plan that would retain the APT team, establish an employee recruitment tool and form an orderly transition.

Campbell decided to form an ESOP. An ESOP (employee stock ownership plan) is an employee benefit plan that gives workers ownership interest in the company.

“We figured we had the right people here, a good management team, and a product line that was profitable and would continue to grow in sales and revenue,” he said. “We didn’t want our management and some of our best people leaving here upon a sale somewhere down the line.”

Campbell said the ESOP has allowed the company to recruit and retain a team of experienced people who see their efforts will impact their long-term success.

Vendor, Customer Relationship

Campbell said he expects changes to happen to the dairy processing equipment field ahead.

Perfecting performance and increasing efficiencies is a goal, and Campbell said his business has adapted and grown to continue to meet the demands of the industry.

“We are one of a handful of equipment suppliers out there who do a really good job of serving the industry,” Campbell said. “I think we all have built a better relationship with the industry now more than we have ever had. There is a lot more trust out there between customers and vendors.”

Campbell said that trust will allow the industry to improve the processing equipment, reducing labor, flow of the process, decrease repetition, and generally create a better and safer work environment.

“More and more we are viewed as partners, collaborating, having conversations that improve common trouble spots and the biggest hits to the industry’s bottom line.”

Sometimes that may mean building something that may never

work, Campbell said. That can be expensive but the processors are now in the game, they are part of the process like never before.

“Thirty years ago, Scherping Systems introduced the Horizontal Cheese Vat. That was a big step,” Campbell said. “Then the cheese belts came. There was a lot of innovation back in that era. Now everyone in the industry kind of got to that plateau. I think the next big revolution in equipment is coming soon.”

“They want to know what the whey fats are, different size cheese makes, underfillings, overfillings, where are the pros and cons with the new equipment versus what they are currently using, you have to bring that knowledge and experience to the table these days.”

Starkson, Mark Gustafson and Shawn Peterson make up APT’s food group.

“We are fortunate to have that group who have worked with a lot of different equipment and with several different cheese varieties. They are bringing things to the table the manufacturer needs.”

We are working together with other vendors better than ever before too, Campbell said.

“The manufacturer wants a competitive marketplace, that was the way it was back when we first started and that will be the way it is forever,” Campbell said. “If any of us drop out, there is a burden on the rest of us and a subsequent loss of knowledge. When everyone is busy there is no room for someone to drop out. And that will always be the way it is.”

Campbell sees a very healthy industry as more manufacturers work together to help solve common problems.

“It’s rewarding to work in a great and challenging industry with so many great and intelligent people. We’ve been proud to contribute and helped to make products that are healthy and feed the world,” Campbell said. “We look forward to many years to come.”

To view a 20th anniversary video or for more information, visit www.APT-Inc.com