

Bottoms UP



Automated product recovery system saves pharma packagers time and money

By Sarah Sookman

Alan Shuhaibar's engineering career began twenty years ago when he showed up at the McGill University Admissions Office. Hoping to be accepted into the Mechanical Engineering program, his only proof of graduation from high school was a dot-matrix print-out of his grades. Shuhaibar and his family had left their native Kuwait on July 26, on what was literally the last flight out of the country; Iraq invaded on August 2, 1990.

"They were very understanding," Shuhaibar says of McGill, smiling at the recollection. Prior to leaving Kuwait, his transcripts had been translated from Arabic to English, but its presentation was, at best, unofficial. "I could have done it myself at home," he jokes. Nevertheless, McGill granted him a conditional acceptance and Shuhaibar received his high school diploma – from a war-torn Kuwait – a year later.

As a young engineer in the workforce, Shuhaibar had a keen interest in the pharmaceutical industry, particularly in its use of packaging systems. He noticed that the product re-packaging process was both time-consuming and costly, yet there were no modern solutions to help pharmaceutical contract packagers. "Packaging systems specifically for pharma and nutraceuticals is a small and highly-specialized market," he says. Intrigued by the opportunities in this niche, Shuhaibar thought he might start his own business one day. "I thought

maybe I would start in my forties, after my MBA." But it happened a little sooner than planned.

At the age of 30, Shuhaibar was half-way through his MBA program when his employer consolidated its plants and laid off its employees. So in 2002, he founded BellatRx Inc., named for the star Bellatrix in the Orion constellation. Today, his company boasts a line of packaging machinery for the pharmaceutical, nutritional, food and personal care industries: systems for product handling, recovery, inspection, and filling and verification, to name a few. His machines are used by some of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. Most of his 25 employees work at the head office in Pointe-Claire (Montreal), Quebec, while his support staff are located in Puerto Rico, North Carolina, Mexico and Texas – areas where he has installations.

Opportunity for recovery

Despite the well-defined and controlled processes in pharmaceutical manufacturing, mistakes happen, and they can be very costly. "If a batch of 100,000 units has the wrong lot code, the manufacturer or contract packager must recover and repackage that product," explains Shuhaibar.

Generic drug manufacturers must also deal with their own product recovery issues. Typically, these manufacturers fill their warehouses with the generic product, anticipating the expiration of a brand-name drug's patent and the FDA's

