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Time/temperature monitoring crucial to Pacific Rim shrimp imports

Shipping food products from the Pacific Rim poses formidable quality control problems for importers, buyers and distributors.

Ondine, Inc., a Philadelphia shrimp importer, supports its quality control program by using time/temperature monitors (TTMs) for distribution from the Pacific Rim. The TTMs measure and record temperature changes that occur inside frozen shrimp containers throughout their 10,000-mile journey from Asia to Philadelphia. When the importer receives the shipment, he checks the TTM temperature charts to make sure his shrimp cargo was transported within proper temperature environment.

"Seafood is coming from farther away these days, so more can happen to it," says Rolfe Glover, president of Ondine. "In the old days, it was coming from New Orleans. Now it's coming from China, Taiwan and Thailand. It goes on a ship for up to 30 days, then into California, then the container goes on a truck or train cross-country. The point is, you need to know what happens to that cargo."

Ondine is a "medium-sized" importer, according to Mr. Glover, and has been importing shrimp for four years. For the past three years, he has relied on TTMs from Ryan Instruments, Redmond, Wash., to oversee the temperature care given to his valuable shrimp shipments. With customers in over 40 countries, Ryan provides 75 percent of the world's in-transit time/temperature monitoring services.

"The basic reason that we use Ryan is to make sure that the quality we put into a container is the same as the quality that comes out," says Mr. Glover.

Ondine's office in Bangkok, Thailand, arranges the company's purchasing, packaging and inspection of the shrimp. "We have our own people inspecting the cargo at the point of origin," Mr. Glover says. "We want to make sure that we're getting quality product at the point of origin."

Temperature control is especially important to Ondine because it buys Individually Quick Frozen (IQF) shrimp, which is much more temperature-sensitive than shrimp that's block-frozen in ice.

"Shrimp frozen in blocks has more thermal momentum," Mr. Glover explains. "The freezing system for the container could be turned off for 12 hours and the shrimp might still be okay. Whereas with IQF, each shrimp is frozen individually—like pretzels in a bag—and is much more sensitive to temperature."

Ryan's temperature records were valuable on one particular occasion, according to Mr. Glover, when he was anxious about the condition of a shrimp shipment.

"I was informed by a shipping company that they opened up our container when it arrived in California, then they repacked it into another container before putting it on a train. I never did find out why."

"I was nervous about that one," he says. "I checked the temperature readings and was glad to see that they packed it quickly enough, so that no damage was done."

Mr. Glover estimates each shrimp cargo is worth at least $100,000. He pays $35 for a TTM on the trip, which includes Ryan's testing and calibration of its temperature information related to the shipment.

"At $35, it's a minimal cost for a $100,000 cargo, for the insurance you get," he says. "In terms of price to peace of mind value, it's a bargain."

If Mr. Glover's shrimp shipment had spoiled, he could have used Ryan's TTMs as the basis for a legal claim. Ryan's monitors—because they are tested and calibrated

before and after each trip—are so accurate and reliable that they've been accepted as legal evidence in claims cases involving spoiled food shipments.

For example, in September, 1988, the U.S. Department of Agriculture ordered a food broker to pay $11,228.65 to a California strawberry grower. Previously, the food broker had received a spoiled strawberry shipment, blamed the strawberry grower, and refused to pay. But the grower had used Ryan monitors, and was able to prove that the strawberries were spoiled by temperature abuse unrelated to the growers.

Ryan recognizes the needs of those who have to ship foods from the Pacific Rim, according to Pat Vache, president of Ryan Instruments. "As each month passes, the corner grocery store is becoming more and more like a global supermarket," Mr. Vache says. "We saw this trend coming a long time ago and designed the Ryan Export specifically for the purpose of shipping long distances."

The Ryan Export comes in two models which measure time/temperature for 32 days or 75 days. Each measures temperatures from -13 Fahrenheit to 97degrees Fahrenheit, with a degree of accuracy of plus or minus 2 degrees.

That measuring preciseness gives Mr. Glover not only insurance, but assurance that he's getting a high-grade product.

"I have to guarantee quality to my clients and the way to do that is to make sure that my product is good," Mr. Glover says. "The best way to do that is with a temperature monitor." □