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Buying Used Commercial Food-Processing Equipment

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Introduction

WHEN YOU ARE BUYING EQUIPMENT for your food-processing facility or commercial kitchen, choosing new models specifically designed for your product, use, and capacity is ideal. However, in many cases that route is cost prohibitive—or the perfect type of equipment is not readily available—so you have to consider purchasing used equipment. To make the best buy in this situation, do your homework: conduct a business-case analysis (explore the merits of the purchase in general); lastly, identify the most promising sales outlets for specialized equipment. This publication gives you the inside scoop on how to do this.

Making the Case

Prior to buying used equipment, analyze the business case for the purchase. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Will this equipment increase throughput and efficiency, attract more customers, support the creation of other products, and/or decrease the incidence of quality/safety defects?
- What is the purpose of buying the equipment? For instance, if you purchase a larger piece of equipment but another component upstream or downstream can't handle the new flow rate, the purchase isn't merited because it won't help you to meet your goals.
- What are your needs and wants? Complete a voice-of-the-customer analysis for yourself and your business to ensure that the equipment you are looking for meets both personal and business needs.
- Consult Table 1 for other equally important issues to consider in your analysis. Not all of the items listed are relevant, depending on the equipment under consideration. But they are a good way to begin your inquiry and may spark ideas about other more pressing ones.

Table 1. Additional business-case analysis issues to consider. Ensure that your food-processing equipment purchase will be a benefit and not a liability. Examine some or all of the following before deciding to purchase equipment.

Issue	Guidance/Practice
Size	Bigger is not always better. Think of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” and the main character’s deliberation over the porridge—too small may not help you meet your goals, but too big might overwhelm your processing system. Choose which size is “just right” for optimum results.
Materials	What kind of materials is the equipment constructed from and is it appropriate for your facility? Consider how pH affects different materials, how foreign material might compromise your product mix and suitability, among other possible effects.
Utilities	Do you have compatible utilities? What are the power requirements of the equipment (single phase, three phase, 120V, 240V, 480V)? Does it need steam; if so, how many pounds/horsepower-hour? Is the product conveyed via pneumatics and, if so, at what rate (cubic feet/minute)? What about heating, ventilation and air conditioning—will the unit create any condensation or cause temperature changes that need mitigation?
Control Systems	What kind of automaton does the unit require? Do you have the control systems or knowledge to operate it?
Sanitation	Do you have the necessary tools and equipment to clean the item? Consider the sanitary design of the equipment [CIP (Clean in Place) or COP (Clean Out of Place)].
Processing Facility Size and Location	What is the equipment’s footprint? Will the equipment fit in your current facility? Will its installation cause any processing or food-safety issues (e.g., placing a steam tunnel in front of a refrigerator/freezer)? Will its placement (like in a different room/area) create troublesome logistical issues (require additional transportation that might be wasteful or even hazardous)? How will its placement affect your food-safety traffic pattern?
Maintenance	What kinds of repair, preventive maintenance, or breakdowns do you anticipate? Do you have the necessary expertise to resolve these situations? If not, do you know of someone who does? What spare parts do you need to have on hand in a worst-case scenario and how easy is it to get them if you don’t?
Calibrations	Does the equipment have any instrumentation that needs to be calibrated? Do you have the ability to complete accuracy checks and calibrate them? If not, it might impact your facility’s food-safety performance along with compromising the machine’s operation.
Installation Costs	Is the unit essentially a plug-and-play device or do you need to have professionals install it? If the latter, what might be the cost and how might that impact the overall purchase price or time line?
Employee Safety	Complete a job-safety analysis of the equipment to protect your employees and operators: Do you need to install any safety features? They may have been removed or lost; or the equipment may have been manufactured so long ago that it cannot meet current safety regulations. Also, if manufactured in another country the equipment might satisfy different safety regulations than those required in the United States.
Current Condition	Visually inspect the condition of the equipment. Are there any niches, holes, cracks, or crevices? Any missing bolts/clamps or other parts? What is the condition of the parts that wear (like belts, sprockets, bearings, gearboxes, or other moving parts)? Are all the welds smooth and crack free and do they meet sanitary-welding criteria? Examine oils and lubricants—are they old, milky white, or have any grittiness, etc. that might indicate a problem? Listen for any abnormal sounds (thumps, grinds).
Prior Use	How was it used? How old is it? Are there any user manuals or standard operating procedures available? Any previous maintenance records that you can examine?
Warranty or Guarantee	Is the seller willing to offer a warranty or some sort of guarantee that the equipment will work as described?
Seller Reputation	Although not directly related to the equipment, is the seller reputable? Do you feel comfortable doing business with them?
Food-Safety Plan	Have you chatted with your food-safety team about the new equipment? Does their feedback indicate that the equipment might compromise or support your food-safety plan?

Searching for a Buyer

After you've confirmed the benefit(s) of purchasing used food-processing equipment for your business, begin a careful search for a buyer. There are numerous options: supply houses that specialize in food-processing and commercial kitchen equipment; food-industry facilities that sell their own equipment; or online auctions. It is also worth glossing general classified ads, Craigslist, online social media, etc. Some businesses have knowledge of the equipment they are selling, but some (especially independents or "pickers") may not even be familiar with their inventory. Consequently, understand very clearly what you are looking for and whom you are dealing with. If not, the used equipment you end up with could cost you more money in the long term.

Final Thoughts

Used equipment can be a great asset to your facility and help you meet your goals, but only if you accurately understand your facility's needs by analyzing the capabilities of your current equipment and identifying your future goals. Good luck and good purchasing!