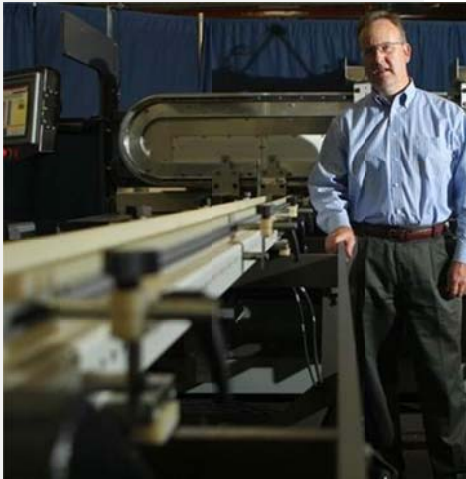


The Enquirer Innovator reinvents assembly line

2:03 AM, Sep. 11, 2011



Keith Jacobs, Jacobs Automation President, invented a way for machines to operate with magnets instead of chains and pulleys. / The Enquirer/Sam Greene



Written by
[Laura Baverman](#)

Keith Jacobs believes he's found a way to revolutionize the assembly line.

His Hebron firm, Jacobs Automation, uses magnets to power the machines that handle, assemble and package goods for companies like Procter & Gamble and Nestle. His iTRAK system eliminates the pulleys and chains that are typically used to drive and control parts along the line. ITRAK makes machines more efficient, reliable and environmentally friendly, Jacobs says.

The engineer drew inspiration for the system from the cutting-edge magnetic technology used to suspend and move high-speed trains in Asia.

"My team at Jacobs Automation is driving quantum-leap

innovations into the automation industry," he says.

Helping his cause is a contingent of local and regional investors, who recently provided \$1.7 million in venture capital to help Jacobs forge partnerships, develop new products and take iTRAK to market.

At the packaging industry's largest trade show this month, he'll partner with Oystar North America, an international supplier of high-speed packaging machines, to feature a machine that uses iTRAK. He expects the partnership to help him add clients and make a bigger splash in the \$3 billion-a-year industry that includes packaging, automated assembly and material handling firms.

A sales boom would be welcomed by Jacobs, who founded the company nearly a decade ago as he was consulting other engineers. He'd previously led research and development for R.A. Jones & Co. in Crescent Springs, which joined Oystar after a series of acquisitions. Jacobs led and financed his company until 2010, when it became clear his largest potential customers would need assurance that the small firm had the wherewithal and manpower to support the technology. A typical system can cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$250,000, a major capital expense for a client. "We needed to ramp up to develop partnerships in the industry," Jacobs says. "They wanted to be sure we'd be around in 10 years." Jacobs held an office at the Hamilton County Business Center in Norwood but moved to Hebron in May 2010 to qualify for Kentucky investment dollars.

Since then, he's cobbled together a group of investors that include downtown venture-capital firm Blue Chip Ventures, Kentucky's Commonwealth Seed Capital Fund and Kentucky Enterprise Fund and three regional angel investment groups - the Bluegrass Angels of Lexington, Queen City Angels of Cincinnati and the NKY Growth Fund.

Local investors say it's one of few deals to include public and private venture-capital sources from both Ohio and Kentucky.

"I really hope this is the beginning of things to come.

We as a region can pull together across state lines, city lines and put together a good deal for a local company," says Casey Barach, vice president of entrepreneurship at the Northern Kentucky Tri-County Economic Development Corporation.

"To compete with the East Coast, West Coast, we're going to have to do that."

Jacobs already has built a staff of 10. He expects to raise more venture capital in 2012, and to continue to add software and mechanical engineers, sales representatives and technical and administrative staff.

He'll also begin to explore other markets that automate assembly, like semiconductor, medical devices and alternative energies.