

*National Center for the
Middle Market Case Study*

How a middle market manufacturer is embracing automation to support growth

COMPANY: **TOP SEEDZ**
HEADQUARTERS: **BUFFALO, NY**

TOPIC: **AUTOMATION**
INDUSTRY: **MANUFACTURING/
FOOD AND BEVERAGE**

OVERVIEW:

Compared to their larger peers, all middle market companies face resource constraints—human, financial and otherwise. This reality makes process improvement and cost reduction a high priority, especially for middle market manufacturers. According to midyear 2025 Middle Market Indicator (“MMI”) data, such initiatives are a high near-term focus and/or investment area for more than three-quarters (78%) of middle market manufacturers.

As companies look for ways to optimize operations and realize efficiency gains, technology and automation have a clear role to play. According to midyear 2025 MMI data, two out of five manufacturers said they would lean into digital capabilities as a means of resolving workforce challenges by transitioning at least some work from people to tech-enabled alternatives over the subsequent 12 months. Such changes, however, won’t come without headwinds. More than a quarter (28%) of manufacturers said digitalization and technology advancements are one of the top risks facing their companies today.

This case study shares the story of a middle market specialty food manufacturer that is currently in the process of automating its manufacturing processes to support its accelerating growth journey. The case explores both the opportunities and challenges of automation as middle market manufacturers look to grow and remain competitive in an increasingly digital world.



Top Seedz—a reference to the highest-ranking player or team in a sport—manufactures seed crackers and roasted seeds designed to make snacking better through clean, organic ingredients. Rebecca Brady launched the business in Buffalo, NY, in 2017, with the vision of turning her passion for nutrition, fitness and wellness into a successful venture. Initially, Rebecca built a loyal customer base by demoing her product at local co-ops and passing out samples at local sporting and athletic events. Love for the crackers and seeds quickly spread, and soon Top Seedz netted several major wholesale clients, including Wegmans and Whole Foods. Today, the company serves a growing list of grocery chains and specialty store clients as well as individual customers through both Amazon and its own online store.

The opportunity:

SECURING THE FUNDS TO SCALE.

Top Seedz has been a business focused on efficiency since day one. Because flaxseeds, a key ingredient in the company's recipes, is a controlled ingredient, Rebecca couldn't make her product in her own home. Instead, she had to rent time at a local commissary, and she was determined to make every second count. She carefully planned every detail of her space and processes to eliminate any wasted effort in producing her much-loved recipes, enabling her team to make as many crackers as possible in each shift.

The business grew quickly, and it wasn't long before the company was ready to move out of the commissary and into a space of its own. In 2018, Rebecca entered a local business competition, Ignite Buffalo, and won a \$50,000 grant, making such a move possible and allowing her to invest in equipment that would help her produce more product in less time. In addition to the award money, the grant included mentorship and education in areas such as HR and marketing—opportunities Rebecca fully took advantage of, learning the ins and outs of managing a growing business.

The Top Seedz customer list continued to expand, with Rebecca continuing to invest in more equipment, space and improvements, including earning an organic certification. Rebecca's team—diverse by intention with 70% of employees representing minority communities—played an integral role in the company's success, handmaking every product with many steps in the process requiring intense manual labor. While these efforts helped contribute to the product's uniqueness, they also introduced challenges.

"With manual labor, people get tired, people make mistakes. Even if they're not tired, there's still room for error," Rebecca says. "We made mistakes. But we learned from each one, and we are determined not to make them again."

Rebecca knew the company's next phase of growth would require automation to continue scaling efficiently as well as to make the work less physically challenging and more rewarding for the team. Unfortunately, initial efforts to pursue automation all stalled for various reasons—either the company didn't have the resources to pursue custom equipment, or the equipment manufacturers weren't taking the business seriously.

Then in 2021, Top Seedz applied for and won a spot in Buffalo's 43North business accelerator program, earning a \$1 million investment—exactly the infusion the business needed to take its next steps.



"I was renting by the hour. So I was really scared. I didn't know if this was going to be a success or not. I felt like I was just spending money on something that wasn't making money when I first started. So it made me very, very efficient. And I put in a lot of processes when we're making the crackers to make sure we were producing as many crackers as we could within that rented time."

REBECCA BRADY,
TOP SEEDZ, CEO

*The approach/solution:***AUTOMATING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE BUSINESS AND ITS TEAM.**

43North was a turning point for Top Seedz in many ways. As part of the business accelerator program requirements, Rebecca completed a detailed business plan mapping out the growth journey and the role automation would play in driving the company toward \$100 million in revenues. Rebecca's husband, William Brady, joined the company as COO, bringing his engineering and manufacturing skills to the table to help drive the automation plan. The company moved to a 35,000-sq.-ft. facility in downtown Buffalo with space to bring its automation plan to life. All of this positioned Top Seedz to start having serious conversations with equipment vendors and move the automation plan forward full speed.

1 CHOOSING THE RIGHT AUTOMATION EQUIPMENT—DECIDING WHERE AND HOW TO CUSTOMIZE. Thanks to the notoriety gained through the 43North program, many automation companies and equipment vendors—some that previously wouldn't give the fledgling company the time of day—were now actively pursuing Top Seedz's business. The Top Seedz team spent 2021 to 2023 planning its automation needs, documenting the process improvements needed at all stages of manufacturing and carefully vetting potential vendors.

While the cold end of the Top Seedz process—cooling and packing the product—would require fairly standardized automation solutions, the “hot end”—ingredient handling, mixing, putting the product on pans, putting the pans on racks, putting the racks in the oven and baking—was another story. These processes make the Top Seedz product unique, and they would require custom automation to maintain product integrity. In addition, the company wanted equipment that would support safer operations for its people.

The Top Seedz team turned to an outside consultant for help. By leveraging the consultant's deep industry connections and considering each step in the process individually—rather than looking for one vendor to do it all—the team finally found the right fit for each critical step of its hot-end process. The Top Seedz team worked closely with each original equipment manufacturer (OEM) to design equipment that met their requirements, leveraging William's engineering expertise to tie all the different equipment together into a continuous flow.

“I think what's really important is to understand what parts of the process are more standard or conventional and what parts are really critical to the uniqueness of your product. So, in essence, know from an equipment or automation standpoint what will differentiate your product. And that's where you spend your money. You want to invest in an OEM who's going to help you customize that to really get your product right.”

REBECCA BRADY,
TOP SEEDZ, CEO





“We took the long view very early. Instead of saying what do we need for the next couple of years, it was more like, what do we need for the next seven to eight years? So, we have a facility design and an equipment flow and plant layout that will stretch into the future to maximize the output from this facility. Sometimes you can shortchange yourself by thinking too short-term. I’m glad we didn’t do that. We put in place a lot of elements which kind of looked redundant at the time but were necessary for that future state.”

WILLIAM BRADY,
TOP SEEDZ, COO

In some ways, the cold-end automation decisions were easier to make because they didn’t require the same level of customization. However, and perhaps because of this perceived simplicity, the Top Seedz team fell into the trap of making some decisions too early without the benefit of market research. For example, the team made a quick decision on product packaging early on without fully thinking through all the downstream implications for equipment selection and process flow or how B2B customers would respond to the packaging changes. “I think we may have ultimately ended up with the same decision,” Rebecca says. “But we could have worked through it in a better process, and we probably would have been able to move a little bit faster in the end.”

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TAKING THE LONG VIEW AND PHASING IN THE SOLUTION. “The size of the business that we had 18 to 24 months ago is nothing like what it is now, and it’s nothing like what we expect it to be four or five years down the road,” says William. This reality made properly sizing each component of the automation solution a challenge—one that Rebecca’s careful business planning during the accelerator program helped to solve.

Based on the goal of building a \$100 million business over the next seven to eight years and drawing heavily on market data and demand projections, William determined how many boxes per minute the company would need to make today and in the years down the road. This granular analysis, coupled with a strong desire to be prudent in how the company deployed its capital, helped drive some key decisions.

“It didn’t make sense to deploy \$10 million in capital on a tunnel oven for a business that only required a tenth of that capacity in the first year,” says William. “We decided to stick with what we know from an oven technology perspective and scale over time. We expect to add roughly another six ovens every 18 months until we have close to 40 ovens in this facility.”

Designing for scalability means leaving placeholders for future equipment in the layout of the space. It also means phasing in equipment over time—something the Top Seedz team has been doing over the past 18 months since moving into its new space. The team introduced the ingredient handling and batching pieces right away with everything else following sequentially, hot end to cold end, allowing time for the team to adjust to each new process as it comes online.



“We’re a growing business, and we have new roles cropping up all the time. It probably means eventually that we won’t need to add people at the rate that we have been adding them. But certainly, we don’t expect to see a diminished workforce as we grow. We’ll just redeploy the staff that we have into new roles.”

REBECCA BRADY,
TOP SEEDZ, CEO



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VALUING AND PROTECTING PEOPLE AT EVERY STEP. The Top Seedz automation journey was never about replacing people but rather giving them new and safer opportunities to grow their skills and careers. Top Seedz has built a team of around 80 people, all of whom have played an integral part in the growth story and will continue to help the business grow in its next chapters. “We’ve always said our goal is to retain and redeploy all of our staff who want to continue working for us,” Rebecca says.

The jobs don’t and won’t necessarily look the same. For starters, they will be safer. As just one example, Rebecca and William elected to add a wash wall to an elevated combination scale used in the packaging process, enabling components to be cleaned in place rather than requiring employees to carry the components up and down stairs. “We were very cognizant through the design phase about deciding to do something that, on paper, is a lot more expensive and complicated, but we’re seeing the benefit of it now because of worker safety. I think that’s proven to be the right thing to do,” William says.

Decisions like these helped the company earn its Safe Quality Food (SQF) certification in September 2024. They’ve also enhanced worker morale. “People feel happier coming to work if they’re not going to have to lift a 50-pound bag of seeds and keep bending and scooping and getting tired before they’re even halfway through their workday,” Rebecca says.

The new roles also give employees opportunities to advance their skills, with much of the new automation equipment requiring technical literacy. Top Seedz has made investments in upskilling and continuous improvement training, and employees who are ready and willing for new challenges are given the opportunities to advance.

“It’s been great having those different steps and areas where people can grow into and learn more,” Rebecca says. “It’s not completely altruistic. They’re great workers, and we want to retain them and redeploy them. It benefits us just as much as it benefits them.”

As changes have been made, clear and intentional communication at each step has been key to helping employees make the transition—and helping everyone understand that the ultimate goal is for the entire company to keep growing and learning together. This effort has smoothed the path, but hiccups still arise, especially around the need for some employees to change shifts. Giving employees plenty of notice and time to adjust has helped the Top Seedz team work through these growing pains together.

*The results:***A SOLID GAME PLAN FOR PROFITABLE GROWTH.**

Top Seedz is well into its automation journey—and the company has come a very long way in less than a decade, evolving from a small business renting commissary space into a middle market company with a national customer base. Output has doubled, and efficiencies have been made in nearly every area of the business, including productivity, inventory accuracy and product consistency. Workers are safer and more satisfied with their jobs, and there is room to accommodate future growth. Output will only continue to increase, and the company expects significant improvements in other key metrics such as product shelf life, which the team anticipates more than doubling once the packaging automation goes live. Just as Top Seedz is phasing in its automation, introducing one piece of equipment at a time, the owners encourage other manufacturers to pace their own journeys. “Break it down into smaller tasks. And as you check off those smaller tasks, then you’ve done the bigger task. And you’ll get there before you know it,” Rebecca says.

100% INCREASE IN OUTPUT IMPROVEMENT IN INVENTORY ACCURACY THROUGH BETTER CONTROL OF INGREDIENT RATIOS

800%

REDUCTION IN MANUAL
LABOR FOR BATCHING

100%

RETENTION OF
WILLING EMPLOYEES

2%

WASTE
REDUCTION



“Even with a 100% increase in the volume of ingredients we manage compared to our old process, we’re spending less time on inventory checks and making fewer corrections—just one example that shows how much more efficient and reliable the new system is.”

REBECCA BRADY,
TOP SEEDZ, CEO



*To learn more about Top Seedz,
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