Smartphones And Tablets Drive Changes In
DISTRIBUTION
Software

Software for smartphones and netbooks opens horizons.

BY BOB JOHNSON

The demand for food safety traceability ushered in the age of computer-based distribution software that can monitor produce from field to fork, and pay for itself through superior inventory management.

The next step looks to be the emergence of distribution software that makes the information available at all spots in the supply chain — software that can be used in the produce field, the distribution center, the store, and everywhere in-between.

"Our modern way of life and access to smartphones and tablet devices fueled demand to access information on-the-go and in remote locations," says Ron Myers, executive vice president at LinkFresh in Ventura, CA. "The upgrade to the latest modern-enterprise, resource-planning-software systems gives producers the flexibility to access critical information in real time wherever they are, and the ability to speedily respond to issues."

The charm of smartphones and the cloud is you do not have to leave the warehouse floor, your car, or even your tractor, to access the information.

"Everyone wants the information right now," says Charles Shafae, president of dProduce Man Software in Half Moon Bay, CA. "They don't want to have to go back to the office; they want to be able to get the information on their smartphones. But in the produce industry, there are people still using faxes."

FROM FAXES AND PAPER TO SMARTPHONES AND CLOUDS

The latest development in produce distribution software is the shift from personal computers and laptops to the more portable smartphones and netbooks.

"Everything is moving toward mobile technology," says Shafae. "The sales of PCs and laptops are down; the sales of smartphones and tablets are up. Everything is moving toward mobile technology, like cloud-based accounting."

Produce software developers are already feeling the consequence of this shift, as more of their customers are asking for programs that can be used on smartphones.

"We are seeing a significant increase in requests for our software to be used on mobile phones and tablets," says Charles Waud, president of WaudWare, Brampton, ON. "This makes sense given how popular these devices

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have become."

Software developers are responding to this demand with new products, or upgrades of older ones, specifically designed for use on smartphones and tablets.

"Modern smartphones and tablets are really driving the development of new upgrades across the board, for us and for other software suppliers as well," says Gene Reynolds, national sales and marketing manager at Edible Software in Houston. "Many companies are realizing smartphones are substantially cheaper than the heavy duty handheld computers you used to see in any warehouse. Plus, software development for the phones is cheaper and faster."

There remains wide variation in the adoption of these new technologies, as the produce industry is not far removed from the days when paper, pencils, telephones and faxes were the only communication tools.

Other technology providers are also offering cloud-based services that include a full range of inventory and distribution information.

"Our latest product is an online order entry web page that retailers can log into and enter the store's own orders," says Reynolds of Edible Software. "They can schedule deliveries, enter orders 24/7, and review orders in process to ensure their product is being supplied as needed. The orders immediately sync to Edible Software for the warehouse to start picking and making any needed edits right away. This helps retailers control their inventory, and helps the warehouse fulfill orders."

HUMAN ERROR VERSUS COMPUTER ERROR

"We see the full gamut of companies running their business on pen and paper, to spreadsheets and unspecialized accounting software," says Reynolds. "Traceability is near impossible with pen and paper systems, because there isn't any confidence in accuracy. Many of these companies are meticulous in keeping proper records, but in the end, they are still human. Spreadsheet software like Excel, was the obvious next step, but these are prone to just as many, or even more, errors. It takes skill to program calculations and add the needed levels

of security to spreadsheets, so data isn't being left out. It also takes a lot of time that high inventory turnover companies like produce distributors, don't really have."

The decision by most major produce retailers to require labels that can be used to trace produce back to the field brought most shippers into the computer age.

"They're just starting to get into it a little more with the case labels," says Steve Dean, general manager at ProWare Services LLC in Plant City, FL. "A lot of shippers and retailers don't see the need to do anything differently. Produce could have been harvested days before it was packed, and then packed with different product."

Food safety initiatives are giving growers and shippers no choice but to adopt computer technologies.

"More demand is being put on the supply chain between growers, packers and shippers from retailers for both produce traceability, field to fork and food safety, quality control and audit trail," says Myers of LinkFresh. "Typically these processes have been managed through a paper trail, especially within the smaller to medium-sized producers, but as demand increases these producers must look to modern integrated systems to meet this need."

The savings from modern information technology is enticing the industry to the next level. "Tablets are being used in offices and warehouses," says Courtney Heim, marketing professional at Produce Pro Software in Woodridge, IL. "Companies are trying to cut down on paper costs. They are looking for solutions for data entry onto tablets rather than paper. Produce Pro customers have a mobile way to log food safety and quality control. With the Driver App, drivers can capture customer signatures and email them a copy of their signature on the invoice automatically."

EASY ORDERING

This technology empowers you to order from anywhere, at anytime, and have access to a wealth of information about your order, sales and inventory history.

"Our new online order entry solves almost

all of retailer demands," says Reynolds. "It allows them to enter orders from anywhere, and on any device, like tablets. This is also helpful for salespeople making onsite visits to go through orders, show item pictures, and build an order on the spot. The ability to review order history is a huge feature that we published with a live reflection of any changes made to the order in the warehouse. This also makes it easy for the users to review an order; for example, take an order from last year around Mother's Day, the user can plan if they should order more or less, or at a different time."

Mobile technology is the next step, because if there is a point in the chain where it makes sense to focus attention, it is the warehouse floor.

"The greatest bottleneck is at the inventory level," says Shafae. "Picking up the box and bringing it in is a smooth transition. The bottleneck is sending it from the warehouse to the retailer. Country-of-origin labeling and traceability make it even more complicated. The answer is simple: warehouse management. You speed up the process of letting warehouse workers know where to go, and what box to select."

The trick is to use the barcode already on most produce cases as the starting point for inventory management.

"Warehouse Management Solutions for RF scanning barcodes throughout the warehouse can improve inventory accuracy," says Heim from Produce Pro Software. "With a WMS solution, products can be tracked to the cooler, row, or slot location."

Growers, packers and shippers tend to be ahead of the curve in being able to keep stock of their relatively simple inventories. "In our experience, implementing proper one-up, one-down traceability seems to be getting done in companies where they have less than a couple hundred stock items," says Waud. "For example, growers and packing houses deal in higher volumes, and usually have fewer sources for the product. The demand from customers, retailers and other large customers, to have traceability systems in place is common."

Traceability systems are even more complex and demanding when distributors have more products to track.

"For wholesalers and distributors, implementing traceability isn't as easy, because they tend to have a lot more items," says Waud of WaudWare. "Furthermore, many of these items are handled in smaller quantities and come from several vendors. We also see less demand from the customers of wholesalers and distributors (often restaurants, hotels, small retailers, etc.) for traceability systems."

THIS STUFF PAYS FOR ITSELF

The produce industry operates on razor-thin margins, and the demand for precise traceability can be seen as another burdensome expense.

"While there is ever increasing demand for traceability in the produce sector, there is also continued pressure to lower prices," says Waud. "So many people in the industry are wondering how the additional cost to run traceability systems will be covered."

The technology that traces produce back to the field, however, can more than pay for itself by reducing shrink and making for fresher produce on the retail shelves.

"When properly implemented, there are many benefits to be gained from having accurate inventory," says Waud. "Some of these include knowing when you are running out, preventing overselling, reducing spoilage/waste, more accurate cost/profit information, and speed of dealing with recalls."

Shippers and retailers are moving past the learning curve to see traceability technology can save money.

"More people are solving this," says Shafae of dProduce Man. "They are paying much more attention to traceability. People in the business are actively interested in food safety. When they see the smallest thing, they are very quick to act on it. The better you manage your inventory, the more profitable your business is."

The bottomline to the economics of the technology is making sure the traceability, distribution and inventory management software helps reduce shrink enough to at least pay for the system.

"The correct software can help reduce shrink, improve order fulfillment, increase efficiency (decrease overhead costs), increase gross profits, and so much more," says Reynolds of Edible Software.

In the interests of better inventory control, it may be worth investing in higher levels of scanning technology than are required for food safety traceability alone.

"Barcode scanning is another big area that companies need to upgrade in their business workflow," says Reynolds. "Edible Software uses the barcodes for receiving; picking and order validation; physical counts; and adding items to a sale. Our software uses the GS1 barcode to link orders and product for full traceability backwards and forwards." **pb**