IT ALWAYS PAYS TO CHECK THE LABEL

With supermarkets dishing out punitive fines for incorrect labelling, and product withdrawal and replacement often costing in advance of £50,000, there has never been more need for a cure for what is known in the trade as label blindness. Anglia Business Solutions believes it has created the answer with its mobile LINKFresh LABELCheck product. **Tommy Leighton** reports

THE MOST common reason for a failed delivery is mislabelled product and the penalties for often elementary errors have reached such punitive levels that they can literally wipe out the profit potential of supermarket suppliers on wafer-thin margins.

Most major retailers have a fines system in place, although each enforces their policy in their own way. With a three-strikes-and-you-are-out policy also in place at most supermarkets, and the further requirement to collect, remove and replace any offending articles, the warning on labels is that failure to cut out mistakes can seriously damage your business' health.

Quality control checks, whether they be in the field, at quayside or in the packhouse, have traditionally involved a small team of people working long hours with reams of paper. Human error therefore is hard to avoid. While labels on the face of it may appear to present a relatively straightforward challenge, the increase in the amount of information involved has added a number of degrees of complexity to checking their accuracy. When a quality controller (QC), 10 hours into a shift, looks at the 500th label of the day, it is little surprise that label blindness has kicked in.

LABELCheck, ostensibly to the user a hand-held terminal, aims to remove the paper chain and reduce the human-error risk. It is an industrial-strength, totally secure, mobile application, designed for use in any environment. Each delivery

can be checked, at any point in the supply chain, against information held in a central business management system, before the product is allowed to leave the premises.

Richard Jones, development director at Anglia, tells FPJ: "The high quality of data is an absolute necessity and this is a standard real-world application that can remove mistakes that can kill companies. We recognise that most people using this system will be non-IT people, and it is totally transparent and very easy to use. It is a LINKFresh add-on, but it can be used by any company that runs a Microsoft SQL-based back office solution." G's Marketing, which has a JD Edwards system, has in fact carried out the initial trials of the concept.

"The problem until now has been that, even when errors are picked up, the time lag between detection and acting on that has often been considerable," says Jones. "Information picked up in the packhouse and put on paper then has to be entered into an Excel spreadsheet or a back-end system. It can take more than four hours before the alarm bells ring, by which time the goods could be well on their way to the distribution centre. The only way to solve these issues properly is to correct errors immediately, at source."

The LABELCheck user would pick up a hand-held terminal which, when switched on and in range, will synchronise data from the back-end system through Anglia's unique Microsoft .NET based Drizzle technology. This checks the required labelling details with the information entered at the ordering stage for verification purposes. There is no need for keyboard skills as the workflow is shown on an easy-to-navigate touchscreen. On zapping the barcode on the box or pallet, the application recognises the products being tested and walks the user through the series of necessary tests, depending on customer, such as checking colour, customer name, sizing and data accuracy, that would previously have been on sheets of paper.

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The technology is available in more than 30 languages, which caters for the growing number of nationalities working in the UK fresh produce industry and also allows for the system to be co-ordinated across overseas sites. The multi-lingual facility is easily interchangeable to suit the user profile. And visual aids can also be built-in, with images of a correctly configured label.

"We think we are the first company to put a workflow system of this sophistication onto a hand-held device," Jones says. "And we believe that a process that would have taken an experienced QC 12-14 minutes on paper will take two to three minutes for a less experienced QC using this application.

"In the event that any of the tests produces a fail result, a virtually immediate SMS text message or email is automatically sent to selected, key personnel." The QC, packhouse manager or logistics manager can then intervene and take corrective action, before the product moves along the chain and starts to incur costs. "We want to move error-checking as close to the initial source of the product as we can and this can be used on rigs as easily as in the packhouse. The earlier you can use it, the bigger the window left open to you to change things," says Jones. "If at any stage the test fails, the last thing you want to do is carry out another 20 tests before the flag goes up. You want to stop everything dead in its tracks. It is too late to do that once it's loaded on the back of a truck.

"Increasingly, companies need not just to know that the process has failed, but exactly why and precisely where it has failed. It is no good just collecting the information, you have to use it to improve your business, in this instance to enhance intelligence about the labelling process."

Anglia's managing director David Hurley adds: "This is a business that is constantly searching for ways to drive costs out of its processes. Time-saving, money-saving, error-avoidance and – if that fails – error-correction are the things that make a real difference. If you can speed up QC by a few minutes on each pallet and make it more accurate at the same time, it doesn't need us to tell you that the cost savings could be enormous." ○

LABELCHECK testing can be configured to check against any combination of labels and label attributes, including:

- picked from location / country of origin
- destination customer
- description of product
- label colour
- best before or display until date
- product count
- class
- minimum and maximum weight
- product notes
- packaging
- Red Tractor etc...

RAG (TRAFFIC LIGHT) testing can also be carried out via the hand-held devices. The number and types of tests are fully configurable and can be pre-defined depending upon the product and the customer, say ABS. The tests could include:

- chill damage
- disease
- dehydration
- scuffing
- excessive water
- pest damage
- soiling
- uniformity
- product length