

NATURES WAY TAKES THE LINKFRESH PATH

Information technology is playing an ever increasing role in the arena of fresh produce. This month we take a look at some of the issues and systems that are shaping the sector, from the success Natures Way Marketing has had with its IT update, to the work GSI UK is doing to standardise data in the market



ANY BUSINESS trading in the fresh produce business needs modern up-to-date business processes. Founded in 1991, Natures Way Marketing Ltd has established an excellent reputation for innovation and customer service in the highly competitive fresh produce industry.

During the past 15 years, the company has grown substantially to become one of the UK's largest packers and distributors of fresh produce. From its Chichester headquarters, Natures Way Marketing now provides a full range of fresh produce to major supermarkets, food processors and

operations. Powerful .NET integrated mobile applications track and monitor all stock movements and QC activities. All documentation is scanned on receipt and is centrally available to all users from the main system.

Working with Cambridge-based Anglia Business Solutions, the company has deployed a state-of-the-art fresh produce system, specifically configured to meet the needs of the business. The solution has helped to improve the company's efficiency in servicing its customer base, leading to a significant increase in customer satisfaction. Natures Way Marketing now claims to have

systems, to spreadsheets, to financial systems.

"This made it extremely difficult to get updated information on products and customers. With the fast moving nature of the business coupled with the growing demands of the retailers, we could see that it was no longer viable to continue to operate in this way. What we needed was a centralised store of information that all personnel could update and access. In short, we needed one version of the truth as a means of improving company efficiency."

The company needed a dynamic, powerful, modern company-wide business management system capable of meeting the very specific requirements of the fresh produce industry. Furthermore, the system needed to be flexible enough to meet the business procedures of Natures Way Marketing. "We have highly refined processes developed over the years that suit the way the company works," explains Natures Way IT manager Mike Fletcher. "We didn't really want to change or replace them with rigid methods of working dictated by a new IT system."

The key business need was to facilitate company-wide access to dynamic stock information. "This was quite an ambitious target," explains Fletcher.

Apart from live stock, the company needed full traceability of all lots to comply with customer and regulatory requirements. The system also needed to capture all quality control information at every stage of the process.

From a planning viewpoint, Natures Way Marketing needed full visibility of supply and demand to facilitate more accurate product forecasting. Incoming orders had to be captured via a variety of sources including EDI. Once captured, the system was required to manage all packhouse operations throughout the fulfilment process.

Natures Way Marketing also needed a solution that minimised paper handling throughout the business. "Paper handling and retrieval is an expensive overhead within any business," explains Barnes.

Having carefully evaluated a number of system options, Natures Way selected the Microsoft Dynamics NAV-based LINKFresh solution from Anglia Business Solutions. "We were impressed with the underlying Navision technology platform," explains Fletcher. "The two-tier dynamic architecture that instantly updates the system with every transaction is particularly suited to the fast-moving fresh produce industry. Three-tier batch-oriented systems are simply too slow to track items that can sometimes be processed through the business within a few hours."

The LINKFresh deployment provides the company with a totally integrated business management system that reflects events as they happen. This enables the company to improve customer service by more efficient management of the supply chain process.

"Having on-line access to live stock records provides Natures Way with a major competitive advantage," says Barnes. "It enables us to see what comes in and from where, who handled it, where it is now and where it went. The planning board helps us to quickly highlight shortfalls or surpluses in supply. We can now react more quickly to either situation which helps us to minimise waste."

"The reports from the system provide timely and accurate information on product and customer trends. Overall, the LINKFresh system has exceeded our expectations. The Anglia team has worked hard to understand our business and implement a system that precisely met Natures Way Marketing's needs," he adds. ○

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wholesale markets throughout the UK.

The company realised that targeted technology was the key to managing successful growth and was hampered by the shortcomings of its existing IT systems. It needed a totally integrated business management solution that provided a dynamic flow of information across the company about what was really happening to their customers and products.

The key was to ensure that the selected system supported all operations in ensuring timely deliveries of quality produce. The specific need was to provide accurate and traceable stock information virtually as it happened.

A totally integrated Microsoft Dynamics NAV-based LINKFresh fresh produce solution provides the base for a solution that supplies real-time information on all business

one of the most advanced information solutions in the industry. It is poised to capitalise on its market position using its business management applications as a competitive differentiator.

The key to the Natures Way's success is the commitment to quality, together with an innovative approach in meeting the requirements of its customers. This facilitates

the production of bespoke solutions that ideally meet the needs of the client. However, the growth and success of the business placed increasing strains on the variety of systems in use within the business.

"Like most people in the fresh produce industry, we had a variety of systems and processes in place to manage the business," explains managing director Stephen Barnes. "However, the data was held in disparate places throughout the company. These varied from manual

