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Beyond the packhouse: How IT can help measure and improve quality in the field

This year's erratic weather has caused our industry no shortage of challenges. Producing quality finished product from scarce or lower-specification raw material has focused us like never before.

Of course, with the backdrop of our economic uncertainty this is certainly going to be a year to remember.

This familiar rhetoric has seemed to reflect most news stories and articles, so I apologise for being another merchant of this ongoing doom and gloom.

Working as part of the 'IT crowd' – or as it was formerly known, an 'IT provider' – in this climate has seen some peaks in interest reflecting our times.

Traceability has never seen so much focus of attention. When dealing with scarcer resources it is acutely important to be able to manage quality and look end-to-end right through the supply chain.

We are being asked to add solutions that go beyond the confines of the packhouse. Producers are looking to measure quality or grade product out in the field, well before it even reaches the stage of any kind of production process.

The goal is to be able to select suitable raw produce before margins are eroded further.

In previous articles we mused about how mobile computer technology, particularly the iPad, has gained popularity for field tasks and it has been the ideal tool to perform these tasks.

One of the mantras we maintain is that you may have the best tracking and tracing systems, either manual or automated, but if you can't keep it populated with real 'as-it-happens' data then very soon these two views of the world diverge.

Empowering a category manager with meaningful information sourced from every part of the production process is a valuable tool. The unexpected phone call from a retailer requesting an audit of exactly where a particular lot of product originated becomes less stressful with suitable tracking in place.

IT serves as a valuable ally for solving these kinds of issue. It's interesting to observe that field data capture has become almost a safety net to pre-empt any issues further down the supply chain.

I guess in turbulent times innovation is always at the heart of problem solving. Of course with any system, manual or automated, procedure and accurate record keeping are what we are really seeing a growth in.

Where IT lends itself is to remove the re-keying of data or duplication of effort, so information is entered once and used again and again. We've seen measurable improvement across all aspects of packhouse operation when this is put in place. — 