



The Content Experts

AGILE BUSINESS SERIES NATUREFRESH FARMS

TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES THE SOIL FOR FUTURE GROWTH



“With the technology we’ve installed in our greenhouse, we’re not only satisfying people’s desire for fresh, delicious and nutritious food but we’re also providing the information they crave about where that food came from.”

Dinner guests at Keith Bradley’s house are always presented first with the story of which farm the cucumbers have come from, which row the cherry tomatoes grew on and when their peppers were picked. Like so many of us today, the dinner guests at the Bradley home are hungry for information about where their food comes from. When Bradley is not hosting dinner parties, he’s the IT manager for NatureFresh Farms, where he has engineered an environment that is not only conducive to growing excellent produce year-round, but is revolutionizing the food industry with one seed of change at a time.

NatureFresh

From the initial company launch in 1999, NatureFresh has kept innovation as its main goal. Peter Quiring, Founder and President, recognized a void in the greenhouse industry and knew that technology and innovation would be the main drivers for growth. With a constant eye on doing what is best for the customer and the products they grow, NatureFresh has grown to become one of the largest independent greenhouse produce growers in Canada, as well as one of the largest Greenhouse Pepper growers in North America.

Technology does not traditionally play a big role in farming; but at NatureFresh Farms, technology touches every part of the business, from operations to marketing to the workers picking the product. Bradley immediately began to implement his digital strategy soon after he began working for NatureFresh.

“When I started working at the Farm, I was spending 60% of my work day dealing with a slow-running computer that would never work right. That sort of inefficiency is not only inexcusable for an IT Manager, but with the technology available today, it’s just not necessary for any area of the business. We did a complete tech flush, went to an OptiPlex and Precision Series from Dell and took that 60% of wasted time down to 12% where we spend just a bit of time dealing with local machine issues.”

The Grow-to Technology for the Grow-to People

Today, NatureFresh has a 130 acres of greenhouse facilities in Leamington, Ontario, with 135 total greenhouses, where they grow bell peppers, specialty cherry tomatoes and cucumbers. The company is committed to constantly improving varietal advancements (the company trials up to 300 varieties from seed companies every year), processes and of course, technology.

The nature of the farming business is to grow. Regardless of what the farmers are growing, having the ability to grow more is always in the back of their minds.

“There were two requirements I had for technology for the business – it had to be reliable and it had to be scalable. With the Dell FX2 converged architecture, we gained the confidence and agility to grow our business as we have planned,” said Quiring.

In 2015, when NatureFresh expanded its operations to Delta, Ohio, the ability to grow and scale their business was a top priority for everyone. Starting as 15 acres of greenhouse facilities, the Delta operation quickly grew to 45 acres. But the team at NatureFresh, committed as they are to growing, do not plan on stopping there. In the next six years, the facilities in Ohio are anticipated to grow to 180 acres.

Traceability

Traceability is a large concern in the food industry as consumer demands grow for ever safer products. For Bradley and the team at NatureFresh, being able to pinpoint the exact row that a particular bushel of peppers has come from provides the data necessary to make informed decisions about what is causing any irregularities.

Productivity

Having visibility into those conditions also brought about an unexpected benefit for greenhouse supervisors. The data collected by the workers as they pick each row of produce allows the supervisors to track productivity in real-time and react, plan and adjust scheduling accordingly.

Remote Control

Like a watched pot, growing vegetables in a greenhouse doesn't require someone to be physically standing over them. But what a greenhouse dependent on modern technology like NatureFresh does require is remote access so that Bradley and his IT team can constantly monitor all systems, from the lights to the server. And as the company continues to grow, with the possibility of future locations, the technology allows Bradley to watch what is happening in each row, on each acre and within every green house.

“The first set of computers we bought from Dell was in October 2011. Today, we continue to rely on the Dell EMC team to provide us with connected, easy to manage, and extremely scalable solutions that cover our needs end-to-end. We have such a responsibility to our customers in terms of security, traceability and trust, and Dell EMC knows that we rely on them for the same. We are confidently moving into the future based on our partnership with Dell EMC.”

From the head office in Leamington to the fields in Delta, Ohio, everyone on the NatureFresh team has their eye on the future. Efforts continue to be made in the varietal development and innovation in technology continues to be at the forefront but what is really driving the future of NatureFresh in the coming years is more real-time communication lines being opened with the use of video. Outfitting the workers or supervisors at the various fields with wearable video technology will allow for on the spot meetings to occur according to events that are happening and corrective action to be immediately taken. In such a competitive industry where profit margins are not high to begin with, if you are not leading, you're failing. And with the roots of NatureFresh firmly entrenched in innovation and technology, industry leadership is only growing.