



CUSTOMER CASE STUDY

Innovation Grows at Driscoll Strawberry Associates

Challenge

Driscoll Strawberry Associates' mission is to grow and supply the best berries in the world. The commitment to quality has made the California-based company one of the largest suppliers of strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and blackberries in the world. Quality and customer satisfaction are directly related to freshness. Keeping goods moving as quickly as possible, while satisfying complex traceability requirements, is a constant challenge.

Driscoll earned a reputation as an innovator in the agricultural industry by using handheld computers and mobile printers to streamline receiving for the berries it gets from contract growers. Farmers appreciated the error-free receipts and the significant time saved during check-in procedures, because every minute of daylight counts during the busy harvest system. Driscoll came to rely on the accuracy and efficiency it gained by applying bar code labels at receiving to associate berries with specific farms.

Three years after automating the product check-in process, Driscoll challenged itself to improve efficiency and velocity throughout its distribution operations. The company wanted to do more to ensure complete visibility and accuracy for all its products from receipt through shipment, and to reduce labor in product handling operations. Driscoll is extending its bar code system to provide wireless real-time visibility to more processes at more than a dozen of its locations in the U.S. and Mexico and at several third-party logistics facilities.

"We've gained complete visibility on the inbound side, now we're doing the same thing for outbound," said Rodney Bonds, director of distribution. "Driscoll will be in the top one percent of companies in our industry when we complete these projects."

Solution

Labels produced on mobile printers during the check-in process are again at the heart of the visibility system. When growers deliver berries, a Driscoll loading worker equipped with a Motorola® handheld computer and a Zebra Technologies QL 320™ mobile printer meets the truck at the receiving area. The receiving clerk identifies the grower, counts the number of flats of berries received on each pallet, and enters the data into the handheld computer. The information is sent over a wireless LAN and immediately updates Driscoll's warehouse management and ERP systems. Pallets received a serialized bar code labels and the contents get an ID label produced on the QL 320. From that point forward, Driscoll can associate each flat of berries with a specific ranch, and can access the information in real time.

"Driscoll is dealing with perishable goods that are in great demand nationwide. Real-time information is critical to their process and downtime is not an option. We needed the mobile solutions that were both durable and reliable," said Todd Baggett, president of Redline Solutions, Driscoll's mobility and wireless system partner. "The Motorola mobile computers' wireless networks combined with Zebra® mobile and stationary printers were the perfect fit."



Pallets are then routed for inspection and cleaning, with bar code scanning recording every movement. Driscoll builds records on quality, yield and other information specific to the ranch, day, lot and SKU.

At this point the berries are often still warm from a lifetime spent ripening under the sun. Even the box labels are warm, because receiving and labeling are often done outside. But berries are shipped and stored cold, and a rapid transition to a cold environment can damage the fruit and the label. Driscoll protects its berries by placing them into a pre-cool room to bring the temperature down as quickly as possible. Once cooled to the proper temperature, they are stored in the cold storage warehouse until they are staged into orders for shipping.

The cooling process is great for berries, but creates a challenge for identifying them. Temperature changes and condensation can make labels unreadable, and special adhesives are usually needed to ensure labels won't fall off in cold environments. As a Zebra Premier Partner, Redline Solutions is highly skilled and experienced in printing and media issues. It was able to quickly recommend a label material and adhesive that would remain affixed in cool and damp conditions, while remaining readable throughout supply chain processes.

Continued

The right asset. In the right place. At the right time.



The reliability of the Zebra equipment and the label material has been fine. That's important, because reliability is of primary importance for this system," said Bonds. "We deal with a perishable product, so we can't afford for the system to go down, and we can't have our people spending much time loading label media or troubleshooting the printers."

Results

The automated system prevents errors from entering the system, ensures growers are correctly credited for their harvest, provides handling efficiency, streamlines payment processing, and gives Driscoll real-time visibility into the inventory on hand.

Driscoll uses the accurate, real-time data on product movements and is developing key performance indicators that it will use to better manage and train its staff, which ultimately will raise productivity. Mobile computing, printing and bar code scanning have already boosted productivity in the facilities where the system has been installed.

"Our labor needs would increase 25 percent, minimum, if we didn't have the automation system," said Bonds. "Our product handling and loading would also be cumbersome, with a lot of accuracy issues."

The accurate, real-time data the system provides prevents losses from unsalable products by ensuring the right berries are shipped at the right time. Having labeling and scanning systems operational at all times is also key to Driscoll's distribution and inventory efficiency.

"Everything we're doing is geared toward increasing productivity or increasing visibility," said Bonds. "The Zebra equipment is a part of that. Zebra has met our needs for years and continues to meet our needs in a challenging environment."

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