Tech in the Time of Covid

Best practices in a pandemic

By Leonard Pierce

Businesses may have scrambled at the onset of the coronavirus and the shutdown that followed, but the months since have seen many find simple and/or ingenious ways to combat the limitations brought on by the pandemic.

Blueprints spoke to industry experts about how they used both existing and new technologies to maintain channels of communication and the positive relationships vital to their businesses. For a rundown of these technology fixes and how they helped operators survive, and even thrive, read on.

REMOTE CONTROL

It would be a massive understatement to say Covid-19 has changed the way the produce industry operates from field to store to fork.

Some crops weren't harvested, others not planted, receivers struggled to maintain supply, and retailers made significant, often costly changes. Foodservice, as everyone knows, was hit even harder.

At the terminal markets, it wasn't business as usual for some time. Although the flow of fruits and vegetables is moving briskly again, social distancing is still in force, eliminating handshake deals and a cadre of buyers strolling the stalls to select their orders.

Leveraging existing tools

The good news is that many of the technology tools put to good use by the pandemic were already at our fingertips, even if they weren't in widespread use. One prime example can be summarized in four letters: Zoom.

The conferencing service offered by Zoom Video Communications has become such an omnipresent feature for businesses that "Zoom call" has entered the lexicon in the same way that "Google" has become synonymous with "internet search."

Zoom's stock prices increased by nearly 600 percent in 2020, with 52 percent of users reporting they started using the service for the first time following the rise of Covid.

"We have always had weekly sales and production meetings via an in-house video conferencing system," says Robert Verloop, chief operating officer of Coastline Family Farms, Inc. in Salinas, CA. "After the shelter-in-place orders

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KEY ELEMENTS

Which tech tools proved most useful during the pandemic?

- Zoom became the go-to for conferencing
- VPNs provided added flexibility for workers and employers
- Slack and Microsoft Teams gained new users
- Meeting Owl helped transform home offices.

To learn more about each key element, look for the symbols throughout the article.

were issued, our sales team started to work from their homes, and we switched to Zoom meetings. Overall, this technology has worked well, even with our field staff, who can be in the field during our weekly meetings."

Virtual private networks (VPNs) are another technology that existed prior to the changes wrought by the pandemic, but found new uses for businesses looking to take advantage of its features. Originally designed to give employees who worked remotely the ability to access private company files and applications, VPNs also proved helpful in increasing cybersecurity and provided additional flexibility to employers. Use of VPNs has more than quadrupled since 2010, rising from 1.57 percent engagement to 6.26 percent by the time the coronavirus hit.

"Our company made the decision, given our national network of employees, to move to a virtual office platform two years ago," explains Rachel Leach, category manager for RPE, Inc. "However, no one could have predicted the entire staff would be going virtual."

Bancroft, WI-based RPE uses a VPN infrastructure to connect laptops and desktops directly to its network, and virtual desktop infrastructure, or VDI, to enhance security and connect non-network computers to specific programs and files within the internal system.

Marc Hatfield, national sales manager for Produce Pro, Inc., based near Chicago, IL, notes that while no one would have wished for such a disruptive change to the way companies worked, the coronavirus crisis woke up many owners and managers to the importance of keeping their technological capabilities current.

"There are many companies where technology wasn't really a focus before the pandemic," Hatfield says. "Our industry is realizing not only how important technology is, but [companies] are making sure they're adopting the right technology for their types of operation.

"Being flexible and agile is essential to keep business moving forward when unforeseen changes like a pandemic hit," he adds. Technology can not only help businesses run more efficiently, Hatfield notes, it can provide better visibility into operations and help them stay competitive in the marketplace.

A report from the IBM Institute for Business Value indicates that as many as 59 percent of businesses have undergone an "accelerated digital transformation" since the pandemic began, with 55 percent undergoing permanent organizational strategy changes, 60 percent reporting changes in their approach to management, and 64 percent shifting focus to cloud-based data and storage—which many companies were reluctant to do before Covid.

Further, owners and managers are more willing to invest in not only technological upgrades, but better usage of existing technology; the same report found that 66 percent of those polled were finally able to complete initiatives and adaptations that had previously encountered resistance or delay in implementation.

Integrating new tools

Stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and limitations on face-to-face interactions haven't just led to more widespread use of existing technology, but prompted a full leap into new universes.

A study by CNBC found that 60 percent of companies have brought in new technological solutions to deal with the disruption to their businesses, from customer-facing applications to internal virtual platforms to facilitate constant communication.

Even produce sectors such as transportation and grocery retail, deemed essential businesses by the government, explored the advantages of new technology, with as many as 3 out of 10 upgrading capacity to meet the demands of an evolving landscape.

"During this time, we've seen our customers more eager to launch electronic data interchanges (EDI), embrace reporting and analytics, shift to accommodate business-to-consumer (B2C) sales as a way to increase different revenue streams and target new markets, and participate in produce box programs," observes Hatfield.

"Our enterprise resource planning (ERP) software and technology solutions have allowed produce companies to increase efficiency and, when necessary, do more with less. If you have the right systems in place, it allows you to ride the storm more easily," he adds. While Slack and its primary competitor, Microsoft Teams, are not completely new technologies—Slack was introduced in late 2013, and Microsoft developed Teams as a

response four years later—their popularity has skyrocketed since the pandemic.

Integrating features like persistent chat rooms, instant messaging, private communication channels, and hierarchal nesting of topics, the platforms have proved ideal for building efficient communications in multiple user environments.

Slack's revenue increased by 57 percent in the second quarter of 2020, and the company saw massive spikes in usage over the space of only a few days in March of that year. Teams, with the added advantage of Microsoft Office Suite integration, grew to over 75 million active daily users during the coronavirus pandemic, a growth of 70 percent since its introduction.

"RPE was using Microsoft Teams on a somewhat regular basis prior to the pandemic for large meetings involving staff across locations," explains Leach.

"But when the pandemic hit, it became our lifeline. It was truly amazing how quickly we transitioned and trained our entire network of employees: we were literally all virtual—with the exception of our much-needed onsite staff to run operations—within a week's time," she says.

Some companies, such as Prophet North America of Westlake Village, CA, used Microsoft Teams as part of an overall across-the-board improvement plan for its staff. Upgrading both hardware and software allowed the company to present shared training sessions and implementations with existing clients, and new customers participated in remote workflow investigations with all of the company's offices in attendance.

"Prophet was faced with the challenge of how to continue with business as usual within the restrictions presented by Covid-19," admits George Roumain, the company's North America sales consultant.

"The solution came in the form of using Microsoft Surface Hubs and Surface Pros, combined with Teams," continues Roumain. "This has given us a new outlook on how we can manage future workflow investigations, training, and implementations, saving ourselves and our customers crucial time and travel expenses."

Not all new technology introductions have been big or complex. A simple one, accessible to even smaller companies with limited budgets, is the Meeting Owl from Owl Labs, a smart videoconferencing camera able to capture panoramic, 360-degree audio and video for a lifelike experience regardless of available space.

"Most all of us were already employing virtual communication and collaboration, but with the increased use of Zoom and other platforms in the 90 percent range, everyone had to have a webcam," explains Alex DiNovo, president and chief operating officer of D N O, Inc. in Columbus, OH.

"Meeting Owl gave us better lighting, a good speaker and microphone, and the ability to rotate around the room to multiple people while keeping everyone in focus. It's awesome, a really neat piece of technology," DiNovo marvels, adding no real or formal training or significant costs were involved.

IN THE LONG RUN

Even with all the advantages demonstrated by new technologies, no one expects the situation to last forever.

And both the produce industry and foodservice operators are more eager than most for a return to normalcy.

"The bottom line is that we need to continue to sell in person," observes DiNovo. "We knew we had to be sharper in the social media space, and we needed to really create and live in new channels. But even though we've gained efficiencies, our business is easier to conduct face-to-face, and it's just better done in person."

There is widespread agreement among businesses that the sooner the crisis ends, the better. Small businesses in particular—many of them cash-strapped and eager to make new hires—hope the situation is temporary. Sixty percent of respondents to the *Harvard Business Review* poll expected to resume in-person operations by the end of 2020—which didn't happen.

And although it's likely many of the technologies adopted during the pandemic will be retained by businesses once the crisis is over, Accenture's 2020 *Technology Vision Report* refers to Covid as an "innovation stress test" for companies and their systems and services. But our sources uniformly hoped to get back to their old ways of doing business.

"Over the last six months, we fully embraced this new way of doing business," observes Leach. Although the company will review next steps related to technology needs going forward, she points out, "Our productivity has increased significantly."

Of course, Leach admits, everyone misses "the day-to-day interaction with our peers—we have a great group—and a computer cannot replace the personal connection when you work with people 40-plus hours a week."

AFTER THE CRISIS

Coastline Family Farms spent over $20,000 upgrading technology infrastructure and equipment during the pandemic. Employees received new laptops, monitors, and printer/scanners, and IT systems were given remote upgrades with staff receiving training as needed.

In addition were harvest losses and inefficiencies, altered transportation and shipping costs, and safety upgrades, all of which increased the costs of doing business. But every crisis presents an opportunity, and Verloop tries to be even-handed in balancing the monetary burdens with the benefits.

"I am very pleased with our staff, who have done a great job communicating with Zoom, chat, text, emails, and the good old telephone," he says.

In addition, he mentions growers who have brought in medical professionals to explain safety protocols and preventive practices. "This has been well received by employees, as there are so many mixed messages about Covid."

Produce Pro's Hatfield echoes the view: despite enormous costs, the coronavirus has provided moments to be optimistic and positive about the future.

"Many of our customers were hit hard during the pandemic," he says. "The use of technology has become a pivotal way for customers to sustain their businesses—the more they've been able to embrace and adopt technology, the better the result." **BP**

Leonard Pierce is a freelancer with more than 20 years of experience in the food industry.