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Save Time, Labor and Fuel With Telemetry

by Jim Ruen, contributor
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The President of the United States fought giving up his Blackberry. He is so dependent on his wireless communication device and convinced of its convenience and efficiency. Justin Welch at Co-Alliance, LLC, Tipton, Ind., knows how he feels. He would probably fight before he gave up his wireless dispatch system. Not only has it proven itself to him and the 10 branch managers using it, even the competition is envious.

"When we met with Excel Co-op about them joining Co-Alliance, LLC, one of their first questions was, "When can we get Dispatch Software?" said Welch. Although Welch didn't say how the question was answered, Excel is now a part of the LLC.

Having a wireless dispatch system in place has done more than attract new partners for the relatively new LLC, which originally was formed by four northeastern Indiana cooperatives in 2003. It is also pulling branches together.

Initially the dispatch system was piloted at two locations. Then it was installed at six more and in a total of 10 dry fertilizer spreaders. This year another 10 locations will be getting the systems. Welch is looking forward to having the system in all 60 fertilizer trucks as they spread between 350,000 and 400,000 acres each year.

"If corn had stayed at even \$6 per bushel, we would have had them in the full fleet this year," said Welch.

With corn where it is, system adoption will be slower, but where it has been put in place, it has earned accolades. The main job of the system is delivering and recovering data; however, savings in equipment, labor and fuel use have quickly emerged. Branch managers use it to track where fertilizer trucks are and make assignments accordingly. Thanks to the LLC's network-wide computer system, it is something they can do anywhere they have internet access, including at the coffee shop via wi-fi.

"Today, we use Central Dispatch to send out variable rate jobs to our fertilizer trucks and to receive as-applied maps when the job is done," said Welch. "While still primarily for data management, it has helped tremendously in vehicle and labor management."

That translates to increased branch manager and customer satisfaction. Managers are finding it is easier to organize the day and get more done with available manpower and equipment. They can see what has been done and check it off their lists. Operator overtime has decreased as efficiency increased. Welch estimated overall efficiency, including fuel savings, at about 15 percent where the system has been installed.

Sudden jobs or job changes as a farmer decides to work a specific field sooner can be handled with a new job order to the fertilizer truck closest to the field. Work is getting done faster with less time spent on the road and more time in the field.

"Better utilization of equipment translates into happier customers as we are able to add and change jobs in a more timely manner," said Welch. "With the higher fertilizer prices, customers also appreciate the as-applied maps being immediately available. In the past, we had to wait until the data was downloaded at the office and then go into the files and pull the data out. Now the map is in the office as soon as the job is done."



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Cooperation between branches, which only a few years ago were competitors, is increasing as a result of the dispatch system. Welch reports that several are looking at combining their dispatch system and trucks for greater efficiency between locations. The easy access to as-applied maps is allowing them to do so without jeopardizing customer satisfaction.

"Often in retail, a customer will want the same applicator who spread their field for the past 20 years to do the job again. They trust them to do it right," said Welch. "Now that the customer can see the as-applied map, they have peace of mind the job was done right, no matter who did it. It is a trust factor."

Maintaining trust is an important element of transferring customer loyalty in any merger. Any technology that can make that transfer easier is valued. Welch said the managers who have Central Dispatch now, aren't going to let go of it anytime soon. Like the President's Blackberry, it is a tool they have come to appreciate and depend on.

Ag Still in Low Gear on Wireless Highway

Navigation systems in cars tell you where you are and can alert emergency services if an accident has occurred or problems develop. Major trucking companies dispatch drivers, check speeds and vehicle operation and manage logbooks all with wireless technology. Why is agriculture slow to develop and adopt these systems?

Software and hardware are developed for the largest market segments first and then adapted for smaller ones such as agriculture. Another reason is resistance to change.

"GPS was very slow to come on in agriculture and didn't really take hold until assisted steering was introduced," said Mike Psumy, vice president, CTN Data, LLC and Farm Works Software. "Technology often needs something to push it along."

Psumy said his company's Dispatch Software and competitive products are finding an increasing welcome as management realizes the efficiencies offered. He noted that not just connectivity, but synchronized connectivity between customer and retailer, as well as within retail organizations, is something that customers will expect.

In the near future, connectivity may be as ubiquitous to application equipment and tenders as A/C and heat is today. Harlan Little, product marketing manager, AGCO Advanced Technology Solutions says utilization of telemetry or the wireless transfer of data from machine to office and back to machine as OEM options is close at hand.

While Little was unable to provide information on products under development, AGCO's technology partner, Topcon has a product called Tierra for capturing location operation information and more. Originally developed for construction and fleet management industries, it is now being promoted for agriculture.

Among interesting features Tierra and some other companies are jumping in to offer are the ability to alert managers to equipment malfunctions based on preset parameters, using a Geofence or virtual fence on a Google map that will notify when a machine leaves the fenced area (reporting the machine is available for assignment or perhaps being stolen), curfew alert to report unauthorized equipment use outside of normal operating hours and distant lock down so that a machine cannot be started. All of this is in addition to full reporting capabilities of machine status as well as data gathering on jobs.

Farmers and ag retailers are both the target for such computer oversight programs. Topcon CEO Ray O'Connor said farmers should "recognize the need to do whatever is necessary to create a lean, efficient operation in the economic conditions we are all facing today. The first thing to check out is what technologies are available to increase productivity in their operations...and do whatever is necessary to obtain that technology."