

# The Australian technology tracing fresh produce data from farm to retail shelf

Growing Australian supply chain tracking technology is constantly surprising fresh produce businesses with the level of transparency in the supply chain, according to its founding company Escavox.

CEO Luke Wood says the innovative system gives food suppliers more information to better manage the food journey from farm to retail shelf, and every time that clients are presented with the data, they are quite often impressed with the findings.

"I have met too few people in this business in the last few years who can accurately describe the end to end journey of the food itself," he said. "Some might be able to tell you parts of the physical journey it takes; some tell you about the quality; others about the financial trail. No one at either end of the supply chain can draw that whole journey, let alone how their product might be treated en route. Everyone is constantly surprised by the food miles our food is travelling. I can show you mangoes that regularly travel 5000 kilometres from pack shed to the retail shelf. It's not difficult to ascertain from that picture that the greater number of transition points your food is moving through increases the risk to the quality and shelf life of that product, especially when you have products moving through different temperature settings and dwelling for long periods in sub-optimal conditions."

Established in 2018, the Escavox model involves embedding a small, low-cost, easy to use data tracker with the fresh produce from point of origin to destination – meeting the need for independent and validated data about what happens to our food while on the supply chain journey.

"We know that this data and in-depth analysis of supply chain performance through each leg of the journey has not been available to the industry before in such a timely and user-friendly format," Mr Wood said. "So far, our clients are very excited about the results."

He added that there are three elements to the company's model: the hardware, the software and the analysis our experts apply to the data so that our clients have the full story of what's occurring with their produce as it moves through the supply chain.

"We've created a custom-designed and built Escavox data tracker no bigger than a mobile phone that is robust enough to travel with fresh produce in any conditions anywhere on the planet. Even in areas with zero connectivity the data tracker will continue to log data. The software we use to pull that data together once recorded and downloaded is completely unique to Escavox. At present, we're receiving some 2.5 million data points a day. Not only are we receiving information about where produce is going, such as locations on a map but we're also aggregating data on specific supply chain legs, giving us contextual detail on how that produce has been managed through each transition point, and what it has experienced in terms of temperature, distance travelled and dwell time."



Mr Wood says that the system provides more than just "a bread crumb trail", rather information regarding what happened and when, and the impact that may have had on the quality of the product. It is arming clients with the knowledge to make supply chain adjustments according to what their produce needs to arrive at the store in optimum condition.

"This information is going to be mainly useful for the brand owner or the supplier of that product," he said. "It's useful for people who want to protect the quality of their product and stand by its integrity. It's also imperative for suppliers who want to demonstrate how their management of the post-harvest supply chain supports the quality of the product they have grown. Here's the problem we currently have

in a nutshell: If I'm at the downstream end I can see where the product came from based on the label, but I have no idea how it got there, and if I'm upstream there's a very good chance that I don't even know where it's going. If I'm an avocado grower in the north of Australia, for example, it's likely I have no idea who or where the consumer is."

The Escavox tracking system has also been able to detail that it takes a lot longer to move food than people realise, and the food itself is travelling a lot further than people might think - meaning in the consumer pays for that in quality and price. While Mr Wood points out that there is not one part of the supply chain consistently making errors. The company's systems have been able to identify problems on-farm, at the packhouse, in transit, in ripening, in distribution and in retailing and the error rate is broadly distributed across the chain; no one party can be blamed for making all the errors.

Another area that the tracking technology helps identify, and ultimately reduce, is the amount of waste lost by fixable problems along the supply chain. Mr Wood says that waste is the measure by which we should manage the efficiency of our supply chains.

"If you are in the fresh produce business, you don't want waste, because waste is the measure of your supply chain's inefficiency," he said. "And it doesn't matter who you are in the supply chain – the less waste you produce the better. There is no silver bullet that's going to fix it all, but you can't start to address that until you get a picture of what you're dealing with. It's the adage you can only manage what you've measured. Right now, our industry is not adequately capturing and measuring the supply chain experience of our fresh produce that will ultimately help to create more efficiency and profitability. More efficiency means less waste. I



would also like to broaden the concept of waste to include waste in energy, carbon footprints, food miles, time and resources as well as the food that we plough back into the ground. Of course, I'm concerned about waste in all its forms."

Like many other companies providing fresh produce services, Escavox also found itself having to adapt with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Through later March and early April when there was escalated demand for food, Mr Wood says clients were certainly indicating that they were seeing some anomalies in the

movement of product, mainly related to the redirection of product. But overall, it was not having a significant impact on quality because everything was moving through the chain so quickly.

"Our supplier clients were very quick to say to us that it was more important than ever that we maintain our services," Mr Wood said. "They realised that the situation that was evolving would put pressure on existing supply chains, so it was more important than ever they have as much oversight of their supply chain as possible. As we emerge into a new phase, our clients are starting to think ahead and are seeking data to mitigate new risks. As a result, we have been working closely with them to see how we can improve our services, how we can cut and deliver data differently, so it provides them with more actionable insights."

For more information

Luke Wood

**Escavox**

[info@escavox.com](mailto:info@escavox.com)

[www.escavox.com](http://www.escavox.com) (<http://www.escavox.com>)



Publication date: Tue 12 May 2020

Author: [Matt Russell](#)

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