

Business UpFront

CHEETAH SYSTEMS

By G. Shane Morris

In the business of agriculture, it really pays to know your customers. But as I found out this month, it also pays to know your fellow businesspeople – and the services they can provide. No one knows this better than John Darling, systems manager at West Coast Tomato in Palmetto. During our interview this month, John described for me his role in this family-owned business and a choice he made just over a year ago that forever changed the way West Coast Tomato operated.

In his capacity, John must select, purchase and maintain the machinery and software necessary to keep this high-volume tomato packing house running smoothly. “We’re a big operation,” said John. “Our plant is capable of processing and packaging up to a million pounds of fruit in a single day.” The product, which gets shipped as far away as California, and purchased by everyone from grocery-store shoppers to McDonald’s patrons, must be treated with care and precisely sorted.

“Our system relies heavily on labels,” John explained. “You’ve got to have a ninety-five percent or above accuracy on the labels for the packing house to function correctly.” With all of the sorting and boxing, plus the tremendous investment growers and customers put into West Coast Tomato every year, you would think a system of superb accuracy and efficiency would be in place already.

“Not as of a year ago,” says John. “Our old system was an absolute disaster. We had a label accuracy of about fifty-percent. Those machines were throwing labels on the boxes as opposed to actually applying them. Because of that, most of the labels that hit the boxes would later fall off. I think the whole setup was more of a canned-system that was poorly-installed. We tried for three years to get it working property. But in the end, we just gave up on it. That was when we started looking for vendors who could actually meet our needs. Eventually, we found Cheetah Systems through an internet search.”

Interested in the idea of partnering with a local business, John

contacted Cheetah Systems and scheduled an appointment. “They spent a great deal of time in our facility studying the process and material flow,” he said. “Then they started designing and making modifications until they reached an acceptable result. We here at West Coast Tomato looked over Cheetah’s proposal and decided to give them a try.”

I asked John what occurred in the following weeks.

“Well, Cheetah installed a lot more than just a label machine,” he said. “In fact, they helped us with everything from materials-movement to box-filling. They made some modifications to our blade-stops and also installed a new box-counting system, since the old system had never really worked. Within a short time, the folks at Cheetah were able to design and install an entire packing structure that is incredibly accurate and efficient. In fact, our labeling accuracy is now well above ninety-five percent.”

“Sounds like you’re pleased with the new arrangement,” I said.

“Oh, we’re entirely pleased,” replied John with a laugh. “Cheetah Systems has given us a very good service. I remember back when we used to have to employ someone to apply labels down at the unloading area since so many boxes were missing them by the time they got there. We even had to hire several people just to scrape the hundreds of labels off the packing room floor! But now that doesn’t happen anymore. We’re saving money in almost every area.”

Needless to say, John Darling, his Operations manager, Bob Spencer and even the McClure family (the owners of West Coast Tomato), are all tremendously satisfied with the services of Cheetah Systems. “I would happily recommend that company to other agricultural packing houses around the country,” says John. “We needed a service and they provided it. I’ve got to say, it’s really paid off.”

