

Knowledge Transfer Network

ICT

Case Study: FarmWizard



By Gillian Law
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There's nothing like knowing your market. Having grown up on a farm, Terry Canning of FarmWizard had a pretty clear idea of what sort of software might be useful to farmers - and also of the realities of farm life. A farmer isn't sitting in an office at a computer all day, and he's probably not highly computer literate - he usually too busy out working to learn to use new software.

With that in mind, and basing his design on his father's own farm, Canning set about creating software that would allow farms to track all of their beef, and deliver official reports to all the bodies that require it.

"I had been working for ten years in software development, and when I got the opportunity of voluntary redundancy I decided this was my chance," he says.

With some funding from both Invest Northern Ireland and a business angel, Canning set up an office in his attic and got stuck into developing his product.

There are some software packages that offer similar services to FarmWizard, but Canning could see that a SaaS based product would have distinct advantages.

"Farmers perhaps aren't as IT literate as most

commercial users. And they have to keep lots of records and share them with several bodies, so my thinking was that we could get that information from the farmers and simply integrate it with the right people, on their behalf. So it was very important to not leave the data residing on the farm PC, but to have it on a central server," he says.

Government departments, milk testers and processors, vets, beef processors and pedigree trackers - all of these bodies have information requirements that FarmWizard can now supply.

"It also means they don't have to install anything, they can swap to different computers and they don't need to worry about backing up the data," he says.

The Department of Agriculture took an interest from the start, providing funding for the first 50 farms on the system - and Canning now has over 1000 clients on his books.

The latest customer group is at the other end of the chain - supermarkets are now interested in the tracking system to know exactly what beef has come from where. Canning is developing a new version of the product for a South African supermarket chain with a real desire for provenance information.

“In the UK and across Europe there are government databases of traceability information. But in South Africa that just isn’t available, and customers want to be able to scan barcodes and see exactly where meat has come from,” he says.

The same product might also be sold in Brazil, Canning says. “Anywhere there’s no proper traceability in cattle movements, for clients wanting better more traceable beef, that’s where we’re aiming.”

Larger beef producers like Argentina and Uruguay, on the other hand, are already well advanced in this area, with Uruguay electronically tagging all cattle. “They’re actually further on than we are,” Canning says. A handheld, offline version of the software lets farmers work while out on the farm on their tractors.

“It’s a small-screen version of FarmWizard - people can synchronise and transfer the info onto their PDA or phone, then record information in the field and synchronise again to update.”

The current mobile product is based on Sybase’s AvantGo software, but Canning is looking into Android and iOS based versions. There are downsides to the SaaS model, Canning says. Customers who are used to a fully-featured desktop product can find it slower - and of course a lot depends on the farmer’s own internet connection. This isn’t generally a problem in Northern Ireland or Scotland, Canning says, but he has come across farmers in England who simply don’t have the broadband services they would need to use the product. “But we’re finding less and less people in that position - provision is pretty good now,” he says.

The security worries that plague many SaaS providers are less of an issue here, Canning says. “It’s basically cattle information, not anything that anyone’s going to take any value from other than the farmers themselves.”

What is essential, however, is the reliability of the service. “It would be catastrophic if we lost access to the data, but you just have to get a good steady hoster you can rely on - someone who’s going to stay in business and keep your business going in turn.”

And a hoster that won’t turn off your service due to an overdue bill of £30, as happened to Canning with a previous hosting service.

“We’d overlooked that one bill, and they switched us off, we had all these calls coming in - those aren’t the sort of guys you want to work with!”

Canning has now licensed the FarmWizard to a New Zealand genetics company, which will rebrand it and sell it under its own logo. “Almost 90 percent of New Zealand farmers use their software, but it’s old style PC-based software that is just too complex and won’t scale for them. So they’ve bought the rights to our software and rebranded it. We’re working closely with them to enhance the product and make sure it’s right for their customers,” Canning says.

Future plans for Canning involve refining the SaaS product for farmers and working on the products for his New Zealand and South African clients. Potentially the software could be developed for other markets, such as payroll and mobile sales applications, but for now he is keen to stay focussed on the farming sector.

“We’re looking to establish resellers, and to target the corporate farming market, plus more supermarket chains outside the EU,” Canning says. “And above all, we just have to keep innovating and keep the product as good as it can possibly be.”

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