

Pre-grading efficiency makes for extra profit

Squeezing the last fragment of efficiency out of fruit and vegetable packing is no longer a discretionary 'nice to have' concept but a crucial factor in keeping a business profitable, according to Compac Sorting Equipment.

Packhouses in the US have been quick to take up new technology, with installations of the company's pre-graders helping not only in saving labour but also increasing efficiency and packing capacity with consistent throughput on the packing line.

Compac says the story started in California in citrus where pre-grading machines were installed to maximise the return from Blemish sorting. Californian pomegranates, New Zealand kiwifruit, avocados, potatoes and now the apple crop in Australia, New Zealand and USA are benefiting from pre-grade technology boosts.

According to Compac's Phil Prior, this pre-grader technology has allowed packing sheds to install new technology reliably into an existing line with a number of benefits. "Pre-graders are an ideal place to put new technology, and offer sheds more flexibility, feeding to a variety of packing systems and allow technology to remove and separate as much of the crop as possible prior to human contact. It's this technology that puts the emphasis on the bottom line, allowing sheds to increase capacity without increasing staff, and supplementing existing equipment."

John Paynter, a 30+ year veteran in the New Zealand apple industry agrees, saying smart thinking and even smarter technology is becoming more important in the apple industry. He says despite a downturn in the pipfruit industry, there's still a living to be made from the prolific crop; a pragmatic philosophy drawn from more than thirty years travelling the world and delving into some of the industry's most diverse packhouses and looking at what makes them tick.

Paynter believes one answer lies in segmentation, and to help drive margins up he's using a combination of a pre-grader and online packing at Johnny Applesced in Hawkes Bay. "It's changed the whole way we run the business. Because we have more flexibility we are able to match marketing requirements very quickly. We've got a four lane pre-grader running with a high level of integrated mechanisation with a low level of staff to get the best results for business sustainability. We were very happy with the plant we



had and the service we got. When we looked around we realised that Compac is making more progress with new technology than anyone else in the market. Everyone talks their investment in new technology up, but our investigations showed that Compac is at the front of the pack, if not well ahead."

Paynter's mantra is the same as that of pack houses around the world: "We want the right fruit in the right box in the right market on the right day".

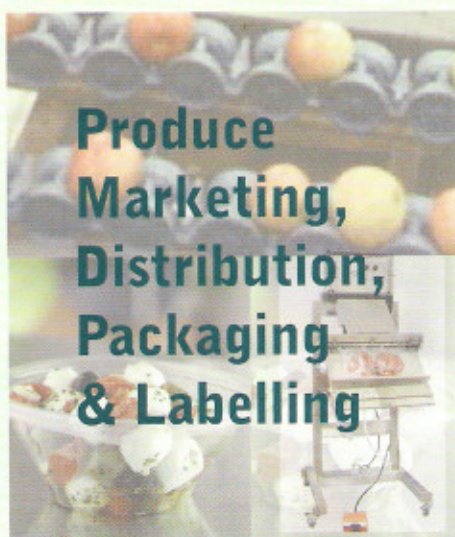
Reduced staff

Since installing Compac's pre-grader, he's reduced staffing numbers by more than 50% in the sorting area and believes in the company's goal of packing superior product through using electronics to see the fruit before human eyes light on it. "By the time it gets to our people (and they're good people) it's already gone through an electronic cut so people are seeing fruit that has been pre-sized, colour graded and blemish checked."

Paynter says it just makes the job easier: "The one sure thing to make money in the industry is to make sure you tie up all the loose ends in packing. If every year was a good year, we'd pack all on line, but it's just not going to happen like that and we need to make sure we keep up with the changes in the business."

Compac's Prior says while packhouses see a good return on investment, it has intangible benefits also such as reduced stress on staff and improved staff retention.

For more information, contact Compac Sorting Equipment. Ph: 0-9-634 0088 or visit the company's website at: www.compacsort.com



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