

# Building Flexibility

Food distributor uses a custom mobile app to update inventory management

by LEN LEWIS

**H**ow frustrating would it be if your company couldn't capitalize on what it does best?

This may sound like a far-fetched hypothetical or a company that's simply badly managed. Nothing could be further from the truth, but this was the situation in which Wood Fruitticher found itself.

The 100-year-old broadline foodservice distributor had a homegrown enterprise resource planning system that used essentially outdated sales and inventory control software.

Furthermore, communications was fragmented, taking place through multiple channels including PDF files, spreadsheets, by phone, voicemails and even paper notes on legal pads.

Salespeople were also required to boot up a full-size laptop to gain access to information that was not consolidated in one place. The result was that salespeople and management didn't have

a holistic picture of orders, deliveries and performance.

## DIY CULTURE

From its headquarters in Birmingham, Ala., family-run Wood Fruitticher services restaurants, schools, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, healthcare centers, jails and other institutional customers throughout Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, Louisiana, South Carolina and the Florida Panhandle.

"Basically, we serve anyone that prepares a meal," says co-owner Martin Clapp, who is also deeply involved with in-house software development.

The 350,000-square-foot Birmingham warehouse, out of which the company racks up about \$400 million in sales annually, carries about 8,000 products.

"We're pretty maxed out where we are and a lot of people in this situation have gone ahead and built bigger warehouses,"

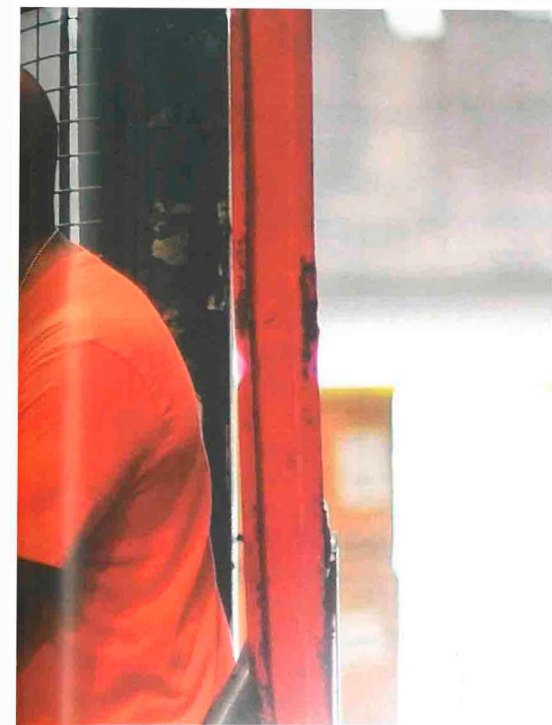
Clapp says. "But there seems to be some upper limit to efficiencies. We've been discussing another distribution center for a while but it will be our first foray and we haven't settled on what we want yet."

For the time being, the company has focused its attention on what it needs.

At the top of Wood Fruitticher's list is highly efficient, flexible software to allow the company's widespread sales force to coordinate orders, check inventory and generally make sure customers are getting what they need without delay — and do it all from mobile devices.

The solution came from FileMaker, a subsidiary of Apple, and its SalesPal software.

"In the past, we had issues that could be traced back to our culture," Clapp says. "We don't outsource IT work. We maintain our own homegrown ERP system. When possible, we like to do our own software so we can control it and be flexible in what we're doing."



It's not an uncommon situation, says Ann Monroe, vice president of worldwide marketing for FileMaker.

"People often turn to the FileMaker platform to build things around their own processes, the ones that serve the needs of employees, and help them be more effective," she says. "The platform is also flexible and scalable. So you can start using it for something like inventory management and just keep adding on to it."

### COORDINATING FUNCTIONS

For Wood Fruitticher, it was all about bringing the company's culture to its most important department — sales.

"There was coordination of data within the company but it was inefficient and confusing," Clapp says. "Salespeople had to call different places to get things done. You had to hope the right people got voicemails and emails. It was prone to error."

Functions like editing orders were done by leaving a voicemail and relying on someone to check it. Then you had to find out via email if the instructions on the voicemail were done, he says.

Additionally, every order that was changed had a separate email associated with it. The salesmen had no portal to look at any time of the day and see the current status of all their orders. They were logging in online to fill out forms which had to be sent as an Excel document from their laptops.

"It was just rife with problems," Clapp says. "Even if inventory data was an hour

old, they were sometimes unaware of out-of-stocks on items their customers wanted. When that was the case, we had to send an email to the customer to inform them, then follow up by calling them."

Fortunately, the company didn't have to replace its entire system, just augment it by bringing all functions together under a single SalesPal app.

"Salespeople can now make changes to orders themselves and see an updated order immediately," he says. "They don't have to leave a voicemail for someone at the company anymore."

The app can be downloaded onto an iPhone or iPad, after which salespeople and managers are given a user name and password. If they need assistance using it, there are video tutorials within the SalesPal app. The willingness of people to consult those videos has increased — this means fewer calls to a company's help desk or IT department.

### 'MORE AND BETTER' INFORMATION

Wood Fruitticher began working with FileMaker late in 2014.

"I received an email from the business team at the Apple store in town who wanted to set up a demo," Clapp says. "I'd never heard of FileMaker and I get so many of these requests I usually don't go to see them. But I was impressed enough to download the trial software. I didn't get around to trying it until six months later. But as soon as I did, I realized we had something good. Five months later we had our first working version of SalesPal."

The ability for Clapp to do the work in-house was a selling point.

"I program our backend system and I did all the synchronization and integration with the system myself," he says.

"The point is that one person was able to develop an integrated mobile app with an old 1977 ERP system. Every business out there has old code floating around and it's hard to get away from it. But this breathed some fresh air into an old system and it's been great for us."

Clapp picked up FileMaker from scratch and developed two versions of SalesPal quickly to integrate with the company's ERP system. "I never would have dreamed

we could create a sophisticated app in-house within such a short time frame. It's not a pat on my back, but a testament to FileMaker."

Asked about tangible results, he notes that being better able to service customers is the most important.

"Our salespeople have more and better information at their fingertips. You don't have to call a buyer about rutabagas and wait for him to call you back. We're also getting quicker responses on order corrections when a mistake is made," he says. "Fewer calls to the purchasing department gives us more sales time. And the feedback we're getting helps us build better products and increase productivity."

"Based on responses from our salespeople, the capabilities within SalesPal are saving them enormous amounts of time and increasing their opportunities to make sales and tend to customers," he says.

One of the most popular functions is the Missing Orders section, which ensures that customers' orders are placed and confirmed before the day's cutoff time.

"We have a tough time juggling everything in our business," Clapp says. "It's easy to forget an order but FileMaker helps us keep it all in order and keep customers satisfied."

Meanwhile, the platform is continuing to evolve. "Salespeople and customers want more real-time information on product availability. We have a high fill rate but it could always be better by knowing when and how much product will be here."

"We want to take advantage of the latest technologies," Monroe says. "So we'll have to see what's coming out with Windows and Mac iOS. Then we ask how we can make the technology accessible and easy to use for people who are not programmers. We're part of Apple and that's how we view the world — helping people use technology in their everyday lives." **STORES**

Len Lewis is a veteran journalist and author covering the retail industry in the U.S., Canada, Europe and South America.