

Agricultural Services, Inc.

Improved Collaboration and More Time with Customers translates into Competitive Advantage for Nebraskan Agronomist



ESSENTIALS

Client Challenges

- Limited collaboration among employees
- Limited management visibility into work orders
- Decreased customer interaction

PCA Solution

- Replace home-grown MS Access system with custom Smart Client solution
- Leverage investments in unique system capabilities

Key Benefits

- Anywhere employee access to vital information
- Best practices shared among 7 office locations
- Increased customer face-time / satisfaction

ABOUT AGRICULTURAL SERVICES

The US is the world's largest agricultural producer, and the State of Nebraska consistently ranks in the top 3 US states for total agricultural production, measured in cash receipts (USDA).

With 7 locations throughout Nebraska, Agricultural Services, Inc. (ASI) helps large commercial growers maximize crop yield through sophisticated soil and fertility analysis and planning services. Soil treatment products are a commodity, so ASI relies on deep domain expertise, frequent customer interaction and value-add services to differentiate their business model, and retain satisfied customers.

NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Like many specialized, data-intensive businesses, ASI developed out of necessity a home-grown MS Access database to support ongoing data management and reporting needs.

Over time, management observed that many professionals on the ASI staff—agronomists, field scouts, operations and sales—were spending more time at their desks using the MS Access system, and less time out in the field with customers. As a result, costs associated with managing customer data was increasing, and more concerning, valuable face-time with customers was decreasing.

ASI business needs were outgrowing the limitations of MS Access, so they contacted PCA to understand their options.

"It is important to us as an employee-owned company that we share certain information among all employees. The PCA solution made this possible. It has also enhanced morale and productivity among the members of our team.

It is not any easier to justify our investment in the PCA solution than it is to justify \$300,000 for a combine or a \$250,000 sprayer. You either buy them, or you aren't going to be able to conduct business."

Dave Jakubowski
Agricultural Services, Inc.

PCA ASSESSMENT

The PCA team recognized that moving customer data management functions from MS Access to a more efficient, Internet-enabled platform would address many of ASI's needs. ASI had invested many years in refining unique MS Access functions to suit their specialized business needs — so preserving this investment was a key consideration during the initial Prototype Design phase. Following detailed conversations with ASI about their business needs, PCA also recognized many opportunities to further streamline common business functions and fill important functional gaps — all geared toward improving customer-facing capabilities, employee efficiency and collaboration.

PCA SOLUTION CAPABILITIES & BENEFITS

Capabilities and benefits that the PCA "Field Tracker" solution afforded the ASI business included:

- Improved collaboration — customer recommendations are now accessible to all 7 locations, in "real time." Sharing of crop production strategies — from the most seasoned agronomists to the newest employees — promotes more sound recommendations based on proven practices. In addition, Scouting records are available to everyone, enabling scouts to recall previous records and "cover" for fellow employees.
- Improved workflow efficiency — Work orders can now be created from the field, thanks to internet connectivity. Within a matter of minutes a job can transition from identification by a field scout, to creation of a work order, to implementation of the work order, a process that used to take days or sometimes a week or more to accomplish.
- New performance measures — Work order reports now allow employees to monitor their productivity on a day-to-day basis. Daily production can easily be compared to previous years, providing a reliable "barometer" of a team's effort.

"Only now, after using the new PCA system, have I realized how much time had been devoted to the MS Access database. That time has now shifted to customers, and they have noticed.

Now that we have been able to re-direct our human resources back to where they belong, relationships with our customers have stabilized to the point that they are much more consistent with our business model.

As you can imagine, the value of these improved relationships and the stability it has lent to Agricultural Services Customer base is significant."

Dave Jakubowski
Agricultural Services, Inc.

- Work anywhere — The PCA system affords ASI employees the option to work anywhere an internet connection is available: at home, or under a shade tree. This flexibility results in more creative thinking, and ultimately, better recommendations for customers.
- Better resource management — Work orders created from all 7 locations are now visible by management, allowing more efficient dispatching of labor and equipment to where it is most needed on any given day.
- Increased Customer Face Time — Field Scouting reports are now created and emailed to customers directly from the field, which has significantly reduced the amount of “desk time” for scouts, with increased customer interaction.

AGRICULTURAL SERVICES MANAGEMENT OBSERVATIONS

“Many in our industry are focusing their value-added efforts on products like remote sensing devices and smart phone apps, things that don’t require a great deal of personal contact with the customer. The application PCA designed for us may not fit everyone’s needs, but it fits our business model well. Our employees must remain engaged with the customer throughout the planning process and growing season, and the new system helps us disseminate the information we gather throughout this process.

We are truly commodity oriented and all of our competitors sell the exact same products. We have found that when we provide superior value, profitable sales follow naturally. ASI’s strength is in its people and we must give them the tools that help them be their best. We think Field Tracker is one of these tools.

We have been impressed with PCA’s quality and would like to thank everyone at PCA for developing the new system for us.”