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DCT Solutions Group: A Decade of Mutual Trust

Customer: Butterball, LLC   Headquarters: Garner, N.C.   **BUTTERBALL®**

As in any relationship, be it personal or in business, mutual trust is essential for that relationship to flower. And for DCT Solutions Group, a relationship that began as a small seed planted with the iconic poultry company Butterball, LLC has now fully matured and is flowering profusely.

The DCT executives who planted that seed back in 2001 realized that strengthening the initial bond between the two firms required a lot of hard work learning Butterball's business and internal processes. DCT then applied that knowledge incrementally as it consistently created novel solutions to meet Butterball's challenges to this day.

Because of the succession of system enhancements that DCT Solutions Group delivered for Butterball over the last decade, the poultry giant today considers DCT to be a virtual partner in its operations.

"At Butterball, LLC we don't regard DCT Solutions Group as a mere vendor," says Ron Wells, Chief Information Officer for Butterball. "Because of the excellent working relationship that they have built with Butterball on several major projects over a period of years, we strongly consider DCT Solutions Group to be a true business partner."

That's high praise. Partnerships don't come easily and DCT earned the respect that Butterball now holds for it through old-fashioned effort and learning as much as possible about Butterball inside and out.

Planting the Seed

Ten years ago Butterball was looking for a solution to replace an aging bar code system at its processing plants that would record the single turkey, package or pallet weight and then create appropriate labels for internal and external use. It was vital that Butterball management be able to keep track of production and inventory through a system of serialized bar codes, because no two items are the same. The types of turkey products coming off the production lines varied greatly from season to season. The system needed to be consistent between Butterball plants with the ability to be centrally monitored.

In 2001 Butterball IT officials made contact with DCT Solutions Group at a trade show. DCT recognized at the show that it could help, says Randy Black, MIS Field Support Manager for Butterball. "They gave us a listing of their clients and we interviewed them," Black says. "They were a much smaller company than they are today, but what appealed to us was their flexibility. Canned solutions don't work for us. DCT seemed to have the greatest ability to make adjustments on the fly."

Shane Langston, DCT Solutions Group CEO, concedes that his young bar code development company, then known as Data Collection Technologies, was lean and hungry at the time. "Through a direct mail campaign, we made contact with Randy

Black who was new at Butterball at that time. He agreed to meet with us at an upcoming trade show. We listened to his needs and realized that we had the ability to help," Langston says.

Val Palhoriès, DCT Vice President, was the company's chief programmer when DCT got involved with Butterball. He carefully studied Butterball's turkey processing systems at several of its plants and how production changed in the course of a year. Most of Butterball's products are sold in the last quarter of the year for Thanksgiving and Christmas. "That's what they call the 'fresh season,'" says Palhoriès. "It's when thousands of live turkeys are delivered to various plants around the country.

They never know what's going to be coming off the trucks, yet they have to be divided according to weight and then processed and labeled for any number of retailers, who have very specific guidelines for the products they receive," Palhoriès says.

Needless to say it was a complicated and time-consuming process.

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Palhoriès took in the big view and designed the system to look at all orders for fresh Butterball turkeys in the country. Based on where they are located the system then determines which plant will process each turkey from a specified warehouse and on what date. It was much more than a simple barcode and labeling system, it was a complete production planning system.

"It was very innovative. They had never seen anything like it," says Langston. "We were able to automate processes that Butterball hadn't even conceived of yet."

"DCT came up with a customized solution based on our requirements," Butterball's Black says. "What they created was a weighing and label generating system, which was Web based. That effectively centralized it for the entire company. It was the first of its kind in our industry and it's called ProTrack."

Nurturing the Garden

At that time Butterball was owned by the agribusiness giant ConAgra. "We were able to get Butterball off their old corporate system and in the process we were able to save them millions of dollars a year," says Langston. "Butterball purchased it exactly as we designed it, lock, stock and barrel. That initial success led then to more work for Butterball."

"I can't say enough about how DCT and especially Val Palhoriès want to learn your business. We considered several companies for this project and none was as eager to know our business as DCT," Black reports. "They worked with everyone from the scale operator on the floor up through the layers of management and plant leadership. DCT knew our processes front and back before designing the first system. The ProTrack system was the most successful and seamless implementation of any system that I've ever been involved with. It has multiple applications," says Black.

Above all it was flexible and easy to use by Butterball employees.

When not in the "fresh season," Butterball's product lines vary during the rest of the year and between individual facilities. A lot of the product is put into the freezer and then sold later, so the company also needed to be able to track inventory around the company.

Based on its deep knowledge of Butterball, in 2002 DCT then developed the FGI Track system that monitors inventory throughout the company. "Again it was success right out of the box," Black says. The Web-based system allows Butterball managers to get insight into what's going on at any Butterball plant at any time. "It gives us real-time information which allows us to make adjustments as we go. That really cuts down on making reports and frees up a lot of people time," Black says.

ConAgra sold Butterball to Carolina Turkeys in 2006. What could have been a threat to DCT Solutions Group's relationship with the company instead turned into an opportunity to expand its systems into the Carolina Turkey plants.

By 2007 all five of Butterball's Midwest plants were on the FGI Track system allowing them to work together even more smoothly. "It allows us to track a single product from one plant to another and monitor how it is finally packaged," says Black.

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In the last year, Butterball began deploying the ProTrack system initially developed by DCT in plants that were acquired when it merged with Carolina Turkeys, "Again, we needed an enterprise-wide weighing and labeling system, this time on a larger scale," says Black. Butterball put the contract out for bid and DCT Solutions Group won out over two additional finalists.

"We take a minimalist approach to IT," Black says. "Most of DCT's competitors wanted to offer a full industrial custom PC as the hardware component. DCT, on the other hand, has devised a system that can be operated with off-the-shelf hardware, which provides us with a lot more value. When a unit goes down, we can quickly replace it. That has been a real cost saver," says Black.

Talking Turkey

One of Butterball's most effective ways of building ongoing customer satisfaction is through its signature Butterball Turkey Talk Line, which allows consumers to speak directly with professional nutritionists for cooking tips and occasional kitchen "rescues."

Butterball had to recreate its operating system and database following the 2006 business reorganization. Because of the success Butterball had experienced with the ProTrack and FGI Track systems, they decided to turn to DCT Solutions Group again. The Talk Line goes live every year in October, because Butterball also supports Canadian Thanksgiving, which is about a month earlier than ours. "We needed to develop a new customer relationship system for our Talk Line," Black says. "Who better to call than DCT?"

Butterball offers promotional items to callers at regular intervals. The program that DCT Solutions Group created helps Butterball identify those callers. It also helps the company analyze such metrics as where calls are coming from, how often the calls come in, call volume and such, so Butterball can staff the phones adequately and better target their marketing efforts.

More recently DCT Solutions Group has added to Butterball's ability to do the same things from inquiries they receive through their Web site, www.butterball.com.

"Any time we need a custom application, the DCT programmers know our system so well, they deliver it in no time," Black says.

"It simply means that we are able to leverage our experience with what we are able to learn from our customer and then apply that knowledge to serve any and all of our customers," says Langston. "DCT Solutions Group becomes a sustaining resource for all of our clients."