

For fresh fruit and vegetable marketing and distribution in Asia



By Carl Collen

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The rise of Accu-Label

Joe Sleiman has spent the best part of two decades building up a fruit labelling company founded on strong environmental principles



Joe Sleiman

Accu-Label, the Ontario-based fruit labelling specialist, is underscoring its mission to improve food safety and reduce the environmental impact of plastic fruit labels by providing reliable, eco-friendly solutions on paper fruit labels.

"Ag-Tronic Control Systems is our main company, which this January is celebrating its 28th anniversary," Joe Sleiman, founder, owner and president of the company, tells Fruitnet. "In the late 1990s I was approached by our local greenhouse community to help a label company count the number of tomatoes in a tray – I created the vision system for them within a couple of weeks. Three years later (2001), under pressure from our local tomato growers who needed to get a label on the body of cluster tomatoes, we decided to enter into this new venture. What we didn't expect was a spinoff company called Accu-Label, but success was immediate."

This first product, the orb-it Vision Labeller, was a high-speed tray labeller that achieved over 90 per cent label application on the cluster tomato body.

Since 2008, the ORB-it G-2 Print & Apply labelling system has proven to be the most successful on-demand label printing solution, and Accu-Label's Waste Liner Rewind design has reduced operator maintenance by 90 per cent.

"We entered the US market in 2002, and our first generation of systems was out for probably seven or eight years," Sleiman continues. "During this time we were developing print-and-apply technology, and we tested laser, thermal and inkjet, before deciding to go to market with inkjet. Today we are a Hewlett Packard (HP) special partner, and our labeller has been proven, for ten straight years using HP technology, to be the most reliable and the most cost effective – the best labeller in the world."

He explains that Accu-Label's goal has been to help the agriculture community in automation solutions, not by replacing the worker but making work more efficient. Sleiman notes that he has been to certain countries where fruit is labelled by hand, literally peeling the label with no technological help, and this has been a driving force for the company.

A major positive of Accu-Label's products is the environmental consideration that goes into them. "We are environmentally conscious with eco-friendly products, and have been since day one," says Sleiman. "A couple of years ago we invested in a machine that allows us to formulate our own materials. It's been worthwhile – we have FDA approval for the paper label itself. My concern is that, if my grandchild, for example, accidentally bit into an apple and bit a label, would I rather they bit into a paper label or a plastic one? It's annoying when competitors say 'plastic is safer', because I have never actually heard that said by anyone in the real world! With our HP inkjet technology, it's a water-based ink too."

Accu-Label has been recognised by some important players, such as Australia's Orora Group, who it has partnered with as a distributor in Australia and New Zealand, and in North America throughout Canada, the US and Mexico. "That's an exciting statement for us, because they have looked at us and thought 'they are a company doing the

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right things', trying to reduce their carbon footprint, looking to leave a great legacy for the world," Sleiman enthuses.

Accu-Label designs, builds and writes its own software in-house, makes its own materials and is able to formulate different adhesive levels for different types of produce, depending on their individual requirements. It also has a new technology called 'Verify-It', which can be printed on the back-side of the label before printing, to prevent counterfeiting.

The future is bright for the labelling company, according to Sleiman, with word spreading rapidly across the globe. "We have started expanding globally with distribution in Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand and North America. We can say we have 17 years of solid technology, customer satisfaction and acceptability, while we have debunked other companies saying inaccurate things like our paper labels go mouldy. Orora Group's backing was a big thing for us, it validated us and it's nice to be recognised and appreciated.

"Our competitors might talk about having the latest and greatest technology, but to me, the latest and greatest thing is to be an HP partner, or being able to print and apply labels at over 20 labels per second, which is twice the speed of everybody else, and at a lower price with a more reliable machine," he continues. "These are the things that make me proud, when you provide something that no-one else can. When people say that we have the right product for the future – that validation is fantastic."