

Just a Click Away

WEB INTEGRATION SOFTWARE LETS FARMERS ACCESS ACCOUNT INFORMATION ONLINE



An example of a grain software program integrated with online offerings.

FIRST IN A SERIES

By Susan Davis

The grain industry is approaching a new era in services. Integrating grain accounting software with online offerings is opening new ways to communicate with farmers, suppliers, or other agribusinesses.

There are many applications for the tools. The technology—referred to as online account viewing tools, e-services, or web integration—allows farmer customers to do everything from viewing contracts, pricing, shipments, and settlements to eventually paying their fertilizer bill online.

Within a company, the technology allows grain inventory to be updated from a remote elevator, without reentering storage and bushels. Agri-businesses can track virtually everything from identity-preserved commodities to a salesperson's herbicide sales.

Access from the Farm Office

Similar to online banking, the services allow customers to access their accounts any time day or night.

"They can review, print, or communicate with the elevator 24 hours a day, without leaving their home or

office," says Shelley Laracuate, vice president—marketing, **AgVision Software**, Ankeny, IA (800-759-9492/www.agvisionsoftware.com).

The company began offering the e-service, called AgVisionAnytime.com, in 2001, because a few larger agribusinesses wanted to offer farmer-customers access to account information.

Offering farmers secure access to their account information at their lei-

ment, shipment, or financial information and to have the ability to print copies of actual transactions on their home or office printer. This really saves a lot of time and unnecessary phone calls," Howe says.

Web integration software was developed, Laracuate says, because grain elevators wanted farmers to have access to information, even when the elevator was closed. Even though hard copies are still mailed, farmers can obtain a second copy or receive the information, before the mail arrives.

AgVantage Software, Rochester, MN (877-282-6353, www.agvantage.com), wrote its own software in 2002 to allow customers to look up their monthly statements, says Michelle Blomberg, president.

When eAgVantage first became available in 2002, only five to eight coops participated; now there are about 40 coops utilizing the software integration package.

"Coops and farmers are really big on monthly statements," she says, adding that another popular link is grain delivery information. "Farmers can click on the settlements and find out the load, discounts, moisture, and test weight of the grain they delivered that day."

Technology. Although each ag software company offers different ways to view the data (Java, XML), here's how

Online tools offer farmer customers account access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Grain elevators can update inventory from remote locations and track commodities.

sure is a great customer service feature, says Bill Howe, vice president, **Grossman & Associates**, Savoy, IL (800-779-1978/www.gman.com). The company provides online access to its software via a new Internet-enabled module called eWOW.

"It's a major plus for farmers when they are able to go online and retrieve all of their contract, delivery, settle-

the technology works. After the farmer pulls across the scales and delivers the grain, the weight, bushels, etc. are automatically stored at the terminal location. From there, the data is sent to the software companies' data storage system. A farmer or remote elevator accesses the data from the elevator's web site, the software company's web site, or a third-party vendor using a password.

Elevator Benefits

Grain elevators also see benefits from using the web integration technology.

"With increased competition, improving customer service became an even stronger need for agribusinesses," says Christine Zimmerman, public relations manager, **AGRIS Corp.**, Roswell, GA (800-366-2747/ www.agris.com). In November 2002, the company released iView: Accounts. The software lets elevators offer a customer service while reducing the facility's time, labor, and paper usage.

Usage. Ag accounting software companies report that only about 5% of their grain industry customers use interactive services. Many grain companies do not have web sites or high-speed Internet access.

"The ones using it just love it and the ones not using the service say their farmers are not asking for it," says AgVantage's Blomberg.

Vertical Software, Peoria, IL (309-676-0700/www.verticalsoftware.net), developers spent a year designing its web integration software, Grain Trac PASS.

"We put 10 tests out to grain elevators, and in turn, they presented the option to their farmer customers. Only one bit," says Pat Gilroy, president. "Providing web integration to farmers is still five to 10 years ahead of its time."

Instead of farmer-customers linking to the sites, Gilroy sees the grain industry using the technology to link to other grain companies in a business-to-business fashion.

For example, four local grain companies own an Illinois rail facility. When the grain is delivered to the rail facility, a scale interface system records the data. Once a day, the rail company updates the information and sends the data back to the four shipping elevators.

The information is sent as an e-mail with an attachment, so it's faster and

easier than sending a data file.

Elevator employees don't have to re-key each piece of data. Customers using the technology save an hour or two of re-keying data every day.

The savings can add up to 1 to 2 cents a bushel in margins, Gilroy adds. Agribusinesses using the software for inventory management really like the service, he says.

In the future. More developments are quickly coming online. In the near future, farmers will make grain bids over

the Internet, have them accepted, and immediately print out a copy of their contract on their home or office computer, points out Grossman's Howe.

"The business-to-business transaction changes the paradigm by which agribusinesses and their clients will communicate with one another," he says.

This is the first in a series on interactive services in grain accounting software. In upcoming articles we'll explore the technology's uses, costs, and security.



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