

Grower Profile.

Diversity and efficiency
keys to business success.

R & C Conning

Robbie Conning.

For Nelson vegetable grower Robbie Conning, success depends on reducing the risk of market exposure and developing highly efficient cultivation methods.

These two disciplines of crop diversity and cost control underpin Robbie's 35 years of productive horticulture from 120 hectares on the Appleby Plains.

He operates R & C Conning in tandem with wife Cheryl and their sales and harvest manager for the past 12 years, Peter Watson.

The farm employs between 35 and 50 people for harvesting and packing, depending on crop seasonality for individual product lines.

In total these encompass 13 varieties — broccoli,

cabbage, cauliflower, celery, leeks, lettuce, silverbeet, spinach, onions, pumpkin, beans, courgettes and melons.

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rely solely on short seasonal flushes or on a limited range of products," Robbie says.

"Nelson's fertile soil and good growing climate typically allow annual cultivation, so in that

respect we are not unusual for this region."

Continuous production also allows a more regular sales income, which in turn eases financial pressures at otherwise lean times of the year.

Robbie grew up on his family's farm in the Waimere Plains before spending time in Australia in his early-twenties.

Soon after returning to New Zealand, he set up R & C Conning in Edens

Road to grow vegetables and has been dedicated to the livelihood ever since.

He has extensive personal and business links with the local community and enjoys an occasional break from the farm at the family bach in Kenepuru Sound.

"Over time as we developed the crop range to a fully intensive operation, we needed to expand onto leased land nearby," he says.

"While not an ideal working layout, it does give us more flexibility in terms of managing specific crops to suit different locations and plot sizes."

In pursuit of cost-efficiency he runs a GPS mapping programme for planting and harvesting, so as to maximise field productivity on a row by row basis.



Peter Watson and Robbie Conning.

At another level, Robbie and Cheryl have developed a consignment and delivery advice system tailored to their own management style, financial obligations and administration needs.

The system ensures that minimum time and cost are incurred at any stage of the day or night when processing purchases, sales and accounts records.

Yet another example of efficient practice on the farm is an extensive plant nursery which produces thousands of seedlings for transplanting.

Robbie says having full control of the seed-to-harvest process results in improved product quality and creates the potential for better returns from the market.

MG Marketing supports the Conning's operation with the sale of significant volumes of produce on domestic markets around the country.

As a member of the cooperative, Robbie has a long association with MG and says the relationship has been positive for his business.

He sees the biggest challenges for vegetable growers being financial sustainability and the capacity to cope with change.

"Growers with a regular and dependable supply of high quality products will be best placed to succeed," he says.

Grower Profile.

Avtam Orchard

Orchardist is resolved to control damaging pest.



As a former policeman Russell Joblin was used to dealing with troublemakers and these days he has the same resolve to control a damaging pest in his orchard.

Like all domestic tamarillo growers, his Avtam orchard near Opotiki in the Bay of Plenty is under constant attack by the destructive tomato-potato psyllid (TPP), which appears to be impossible to eradicate.

This season Russell expects to lose up to one-third of his tamarillo trees infected by the bacteria-carrying psyllid, which flourished during last year's mild winter.

Last year, he harvested around 130 tonnes of the red-skinned fruit, which is about one-quarter of New Zealand's total estimated commercial harvest.

"It is a constant battle, there's no doubt about it," Russell says.

"In recent years many tamarillo growers gave up trying to fight TPP, as well as the mosaic virus, but we are determined to make a go of it and minimise losses as much as possible."

That requires a carefully managed spraying programme

and extensive replanting to replace infected trees because once infected they are effectively as good as dead.

Considering national tamarillo production was almost wiped out five years ago, Avtam has shown it is feasible to keep a viable business and produce consistently top quality fruit for market.

Russell says 27 years' experience as a serving police officer in some rough spots around the North Island taught him the merits of persistence and dedication.

"My grandfather established an apple orchard on the existing property in the early 1900's and my father Les went on to grow summerfruit and tamarillos organically during the 1950's to 1970's.

"The Joblin property is now well into its third generation of family owners and there is a lot of pride and satisfaction in what has been achieved over a century of hard work."

When he left the police force in 1997, Russell decided to specialise in tamarillos and developed a successful export market to the United States.



"The key to a viable orchard is plant health and we have achieved this, sometimes against the odds"



MG's Brett Reid and Russell Joblin.

As production increased, he needed to shift the packing operation from the basement of the family home into a purpose-built packing and chiller facility.

With his partner Debbie and two part-time staff the business continually adjusts picking and packing to balance local market demand against export opportunities.

Debbie has a background in corporate business, and her management and accounting skills are a valuable asset when it comes to the hiring of staff, managing quality control and administering the company books.

Key staff members are Murray Townsend on general farm work and harvesting, and Caroline Brocklehurst on harvesting, grading and packing fruit.

"While production levels fluctuate, it is important for us to maintain certainty of supply for retailers and their customers in chosen markets," Russell says.

"At the same time returns must be sustainable so we can continue to invest in improving the quality and quantity of our product."

To meet these goals, stock placement decisions are made after daily discussion with MG Marketing's national sales team, which handles the entire orchard's domestic output.

Regional transport options are limited, so regular deliveries to market must be well co-ordinated to optimise product freshness and integrity from the farm gate to retail shelves.

During peak harvest from May to October, Avtam hires seasonal labour to pick and pack the fleshy red tamarillos. The number of workers varies depending on the volume of fruit and export demand.

During summer the focus returns to general orchard maintenance – pruning, planting and psyllid damage control efforts.

Russell says although spraying is necessary to combat the pest, environmental considerations include the use of organic agrissentials such as rock dust and fish fertiliser.

"The key to a viable orchard is plant health and we have achieved this, sometimes against the odds," he says.

"The important thing is that our efforts are paying off."



Tamarillos

Did you know?

New Zealand played a pivotal role in worldwide development of the tamarillo as a popular and versatile item of fruit.

Native to South America and related to the potato, tomato and pepper families, for generations its yellow and purple fruit was called the tree tomato. The first red variety was developed from imported seed by an Auckland nurseryman in the 1920's and set the standard for modern commercial crops.

In 1967 the fruit was renamed the tamarillo in New Zealand to differentiate it from the tomato and boost market appeal – a move which succeeded.

It is grown in numerous countries worldwide, while here the fruit is cultivated mostly in Northland and Bay of Plenty by about 20 suppliers.

Tamarillo production volumes were badly hit by the TPP (tomato potato psyllid) outbreak several years ago, but are slowly recovering.

The fruit is extremely high in Vitamins A, C, B6 and E as well as containing iron, magnesium, calcium and copper. Its excellent nutritional qualities and unique flavour ensure it continues to hold a strong market niche.



Branch Profile.

Wellington

Wellington centre puts emphasis on customer satisfaction.

Jade Reeves and Ben Ross inspecting daily arrivals.

Visitors to MG Marketing’s distribution centre in Wellington will find a hive of activity and a warm welcome from its new branch manager, whose policy is all about satisfying customers and working hard for their growers.

After two years as assistant manager, Jade Reeves took over in June from Kerry Baird, who transferred to Auckland. He is enjoying the job of overseeing a continued increase in business activity.

The branch is strategically situated in Grenada on the main route north of Wellington. It is a focal point for MG’s national supply chain, linking North and South Island growers and retail markets.

Jade says the branch prides itself on making excellent customer service a top priority

that applies to growers/ suppliers as well as to buyers of fresh produce.

“Our staff will go out of their way to understand and support every customer, no matter the size of their business or the time of day.”

“This approach has contributed a lot to the success of our operation in terms of increasing sales volumes and widening the range and variety of produce we distribute for sale.”

“One such relationship,” Jade says, “is with a loyal 80-year-old potato and onion grower from Horowhenua, who trucks in produce from his family farm three times a week.”

“He always makes a point of seeing me or one of the management team, to have a chat about market trends and get up-to-date buyer feedback.

“We love that kind of relationship and get as much out of the discussion as the grower.”

“The same principle applies to customers, who we are pleased to show-off the branch and talk about our quality control, storage and ripening systems.”

Jade, who joined MG as a storeman in Dunedin 15 years ago, says the pace of change in produce markets has really quickened in recent years.

“We are seeing higher seasonal volumes of summerfruit, berries and sub-tropical lines, as well as a rise in niche categories such as passionfruit, Chinese vegetables, cherimoya, and many other varieties.”

“A lot of this comes down to MG’s procurement programmes, but it also reflects changing food tastes and preferences by consumers around the region.”



MG Wellington Team.

He says one branch initiative recently adopted is to pre-pack selected lines of produce on the premises prior to despatch.

Examples of these include halved cauliflowers and cabbages, mixed fruit and also vegetable bags, with packing often done at the request of key retailers.

Jade says he is proud of the way his management team is working together to deliver results for growers and customers.

Key personnel are Phillipa Dunn in finance and accounting, Ruby Kaur in compliance and administration, Adam Grove in warehousing and Peter

Northern in key accounts. “In fact it is a tribute to every one of our 57 people working on site that the business is going from strength to strength. “In this line of work it is definitely about people, first and foremost.”

You talked – we listened

As a result of grower feedback, MG Marketing has been working hard behind the scenes to improve accuracy of information relating to our grower consignments.

We will be visiting growers throughout September and October to talk through how we can work together to achieve a more accurate receipt of consignments.

We understand our growers are different so we’ll be working with you on three different ways of advising consignments.

1. EDI

Some growers will have software that is compatible with the MG system and allow for the exchange of data electronically. MG staff will be in contact to talk through the options.

2. Online Grower Delivery Advice System

Most growers have access to an internet based system where each grower/supplier has their own unique login and password. This allows each grower to create and print their own GROWER DELIVERY ADVICE FORM for individual consignments heading to each MG branch. This system will be customised for each grower, including a full range of products they normally supply MG. Once a consignment advice has been created and confirmed, an office copy can be printed along with a copy to be despatched with the

produce. This will also be automatically sent to MG Marketing, awaiting the arrival of the growers consignment. This system also includes each growers BCTI’s (tax invoices) and Daily Sales Reports which can be viewed on screen or printed out. Members of the MG Marketing team will be in touch to arrange a time to walk you through this in detail. The start date is Sunday September 28, however this is yet to be confirmed. All seasonal growers who supply from December onwards will be contacted in November.

3. Improved Grower Delivery Advice Book

For smaller growers or those who don’t have broadband access, MG has updated their Grower Delivery Advice book (GDA). The improved system includes several new areas for growers to complete. When growers get a new

book they will also receive a sample Grower Delivery Advice form (GDA) as well as MG product codes for growers to use when completing a GDA.



Standpoint. Together. Stronger.

This is your cooperative and it is really important to your management team and Board that we understand your views on how we are going, where we are heading and how we're working with you.

Every three years we undertake formal research to measure perceptions and attitudes towards the cooperative. During the recent engagement, we undertook focus groups and interviews with growers, suppliers, staff and customers. It was a robust and comprehensive process and it was important that this was completed independently.

The information provides the foundation for an important collection of insights that help shape who we are, what we believe in and what we ultimately stand for as a grower cooperative.

While it's always pleasing to hear where we're succeeding, the most critical information we gain from this research centres on where we can further improve and add value.

We listened carefully to our stakeholders and, in particular, you as growers and shareholders. You told us very clearly that you want to work more closely with MG Marketing to grow and improve your business.

Together. Stronger. Not only does this statement capture the true meaning of a cooperative it also sums up the way we partner with our growers, the way we interact with our customers and the way we work together as a team.

The exercise highlighted that we are more than a company that deals with fruit and vegetables. It is what we do together with our growers and customers that makes the difference.

The research has inspired a programme of work to define and demonstrate MG Marketing's reason for being and our purpose beyond profit.

Together. Stronger.

This is what we will be living and breathing. Not only does this statement capture the true meaning of a cooperative, it also sums up the way we partner with our growers,

This approach represents a step forward in the way we do business. It is not a shared responsibility, but a shared commitment to being an organisation that truly values working in partnerships.

I have recently had the opportunity to share this renewed focus with growers across the country at our shed meetings and it has been extremely well received.

A point that also came through loud and clear was the commitment of our MG Marketing staff. I'm incredibly proud of our dedicated employees, who keep finding new ways to express their professionalism and passion for the industry.

I know they feel that our greatest reward comes from hearing that we served growers and their families well.

Thanks for your ongoing support and we look forward to continuing to work together.

PMA A-NZ Fresh Connections 2014.

Latest industry advances revealed at PMA A-NZ Fresh Connections.



The first Trans-Tasman PMA Conference was enjoyed by over 1,000 growers and rated a huge success by the MG Marketing staff.

MG national key accounts manager, Jerry Prendergast, said the ability to meet and share knowledge about key produce sector issues with leading local and global players was a beneficial exercise.

"We talked with domestic and overseas procurement agents at all market levels, giving us the means to explore and develop new trade opportunities for our suppliers," Jerry said.

"The quality of speakers was excellent," he said. "We had domestic and international procurement representatives, branch managers and account managers attending the conference sessions and trade show, and to have each area of the business be able to take away knowledge they can share with our growers and customers, was quite special."

"It was also an excellent opportunity to rub shoulders with each other, MG staff and key retailers."

As well as speakers, workshops and trade displays, a day was set aside for tours of local companies at the forefront of innovations designed to support the produce sector.

As tour leader, MG product development manager,

Mike Breitmeyer, said he was particularly impressed with Compac Sorting Equipment, Snap Fresh Foods and South Pacific Seeds.

Compac, a designer and maker of fruit sorting and packing systems, showed its latest 3-D modelling process for scanning and handling virtually any category of post-harvest fruit.

"Applying this technology to more fruit and vegetable lines will really help growers lift product quality, buyer satisfaction and potential margins," said Mike.

Snap Fresh Foods, the world's first salad company to gain carboNZero certification, is a major supplier of pre-packed baby leaf products including lettuces, slaws, stir-fries and sprouts.

Another venue was South Pacific Seeds' sales office, where visitors were shown the latest advances in protective and treatment coatings for a wide range of leafy green and root crops.

"All the visits provided those on the tour with useful insights into ways of adding quality and value to produce grown for domestic or export markets and we are excited about talking to our growers about the opportunities," he said.

For conference speakers and reports go to: pmafreshconnections.com.au

MG Marketing HR Support.

Free service to support our growers

As a grower you will inevitably have to deal with human resource matters and issues in your business including:

- Employee Relations
- Health and Safety
- Recruitment
- Food Safety

We are happy to share HR knowledge and provide practical tools to help you in your business operations.

Just pick up the phone or send us an email and you will receive friendly, down to earth and practical advice.

For further information contact:

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