

9 November 2007

REGIONAL INTERNET UPTAKE TRANSFORMS REPS' WORKING LIVES

RAPID uptake of email and internet services by regional business in recent years has transformed the working and family lives of the rural-focussed technical sales rep.

A widespread and diverse rural territory once meant week after week of driving and face-to-face meetings.

For Crop Care Australasia technical sales representative Luke Collins, the internet revolution in country Australia has meant providing immediate responses and information to customers from Woolgoolga to Bega, and from Inverell to Cooma from a home-office in Sydney.

Luke Collins' territory covers the key eastern NSW horticultural areas of the mid north and central coasts, the Hunter Valley, the Sydney Basin and the central tablelands; the pastoral regions of the northern and southern NSW tablelands and highlands; and the broadacre cropping areas of central western NSW and the Liverpool Plains.

"There are still many miles to be driven, but that is part of the attraction of the work - getting out of the city and into the heart of it all.

"I remember what it was like in the mid-nineties before most regional people had email. At times it was tough work with all the travel required.

"Laptop computers, broadband internet availability in hotels and the home office, and much-improved mobile phone coverage have drastically changed our working lives over the past 10 years. I can now be significantly more productive and effective, plus have a very satisfactory work/home balance."

Having an excellent product-support network via Crop Care's Brisbane-based marketing team - backed by many years of trial work and data collection in a growing number of primary industry markets - also allows the company's technical sales representatives to confidently provide professional agronomic advice and sales support to rural distributors.

Luke provides support to distributors of a wide range of Crop Care products - with a portfolio including herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and growth regulants for the viticulture, tree fruit, vegetable and banana industries; for broadacre cereals, canola and cotton; and for the lucerne, pasture and forage crops grown by beef, dairy and sheep producers.

Now armed with a degree in agriculture from the University of Sydney and a graduate diploma in agribusiness from Monash University, Mr Collins first worked for IAMA Seed and Grain Sales (now Landmark) in Emerald, Central Queensland. From 1996-1998 he was based in Sydney with Nufarm Crop Protection, working much the same territory that he currently handles for Crop Care. That was followed by a stint at Narrabri with Bayer Crop Protection as territory manager, then five years as branch manager of Cotton Grower Services at Wee Waa - which provided a valuable insight into the business of rural distribution. Luke moved back to Sydney with Nufarm subsidiary company Nuturf to provide extended-family support for his growing family, and eventually moved to his current role with Crop Care Australasia in mid 2007.

Luke Collins: "The Crop Care portfolio continues to be bolstered with new and exciting products and there is always something going on in such a large and diverse territory - even when climatic conditions are not at their best.

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“Lack of consistent and timely rain in most areas continues to hamper sales for many distributors, and we are very conscious of the pain being felt by growers across most areas after such a promising start for winter crops.”

Despite reduced rice and cotton crops, and a depressed sugar cane market, Crop Care succeeded in meeting budget for 2006/07 and even managed a little growth in Luke Collins' eastern NSW territory.

“In recent months Raptor - the one-pass control herbicide for annual grasses and broadleaf weeds - has been proving its worth in lucerne and clover/medic-based pastures, and there was high use of Igran 500, Agtryne MA and Thistlekillen 750 to tackle early rain-induced weed growth. Similarly, sales of the Gladiator brands of glyphosate have been excellent. However, like many manufacturers, Crop Care has at times been unable to keep up with demand because of the worldwide glyphosate active-ingredient shortage.”

Even though dry conditions have not been conducive to record sales, Crop Care's expanding horticulture portfolio continues to draw strong support in the vine and fruit industries.

“For example, Spotlight herbicide for chemical desuckering, now available for sale under permit, has been widely adopted by grape growers to reduce labour costs and replace less effective chemicals.

“New products in the pipeline and the newly updated Crop Care Fungicide Program for Grapevines will ensure that grape growers are covered from dormancy right through to post-harvest.”

Being back working with key rural distributors, and being part of an experienced and motivated sales team, backed by outstanding leadership and head-office support has allowed Luke Collins to mix his two great interests - his family and rural business - in a terrific balance.

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