"The RFgen system is quicker and much more customizable. It enables us to be very effective, efficient and flexible."

JIM KRUSE | BOARD SECRETARY AND CONTROLLER

Blue Bell Creameries

One of the largest ice cream manufacturers in the U.S. uses RFgen mobile data collection solutions to serve up more efficient inventory transactions and improve food traceability.

At a glance...

Industry
Food manufacturing

Application
Inventory Management
Process Manufacturing
Purchasing

Environment
Oracle E-Business
Suite Release 12

Blue Bell Creameries has been making delectable ice cream products since 1907. The company operates four manufacturing plants, 57 distribution centers, and a large fleet of delivery trucks. Known for its unique mixtures, Blue Bell ranks as one of the top three, best-selling ice creams in the U.S.—even though it is only available in 26 percent of the nation's supermarkets.

The Challenge

Moving from Oracle E-Business Suite 11i to Release 12 provided Blue Bell with many benefits, but it also eliminated some needed functionality. Process manufacturers require complex inventory transactions as ingredients are received, used in batches or mixtures, put back into inventory and then reworked into final products. Because Oracle Release 12 combined discrete and process manufacturing functionality, many of the shop floor transactions in Blue Bell's existing data collection system needed to be recreated.

The management team at Blue Bell began looking for a replacement for their existing automated data collection solution. The new solution would need to be easy to learn and use. It should be capable of adapting to various types of mobile devices used in the company's cold storage facility, receiving dock, warehouse and shop floor. Because Blue Bell manufactures food, the solution would also need to help the company comply with federal food traceability guidelines.

Led by Controller Jim Kruse, the management team at Blue Bell evaluated several solutions and eventually selected RFgen Mobile Foundations for Oracle E-Business Suite.

The Solution

RFgen works with all of the mobile devices in use at Blue Bell and offers multiple modes for mobile data collection including real-time data collection with a thin client setup and high availability mode for batch transactions.

Built on open source code, RFgen is designed to empower customers to create and customize their own transactions in-house instead of paying for outside programming. "Whereas our previous vendor needed at least a week or two to create a new transaction for us, RFgen enables us to create new transactions with our own staff in a fraction of the time and cost. That was a big selling point," recalled Kruse.

Program Analyst Vitalina Lisovaya agreed. "It's nice that we can create a transaction and continue maintaining it. I personally like the RFgen interface. It's more user-friendly than our previous solution."

Lisovaya was also impressed with the speed of RFgen implementation. "The ability to install RFgen and all of its transactions out of the box, test it, and get it running within two hours was a big deal for us."

Cost Control Analyst Clint Eilers conducted RFgen user training for the employees working in Blue Bell's four plants. "Training our users was very easy. The functionality was similar to our prior solution, but it was even simpler to learn the user interface," he said. After presenting live training at the first plant, he trained employees at the other plants using only a webinar.

RFgen

The Result

Blue Bell employees use RFgen to receive ingredient inputs from vendors on the load docks using handheld barcode scanners. They can quickly scan information from purchase orders, enabling them to work more productively and improve information accuracy. On the inventory and production side of the house, the scanners are used to do cycle counts, keep accurate inventory in real-time and keep track of the inputs going into batches of products.

"RFgen handles our inputs, outputs, returns and also some quality control transactions on the handheld," stated Kruse. "All of the lots going into this system are tied together with quality information as well as receiving adjustments of inventory, inputs into batches, returns back to inventory and outputs that are basically a WIP completion or a finished intermediate item such as a mix, chocolate, or cookie."

Using RFgen has enabled Blue Bell to:

- Transition from Oracle 11i to 12 without losing data collection capabilities.

- Eliminate "drops"—lost data that occurred in the prior system when handheld device connectivity was interrupted.

- Track and trace food products efficiently, in compliance with federal food safety regulations.

- Easily create the complex transactions required in process manufacturing of food.

- Use open source code to customize existing transactions and workflows in-house and reduce programming time and costs.

To comply with federal regulations, Blue Bell must be able to track ingredients and finished food products through its supply chain. "As a manufacturer, you've got to be able to trace food back within two hours. We have different auditors that come in auditing for customers or for governmental agencies. You've got to have a mobile solution to collect lot numbers of all the different items and ingredients that you're using and where they're going," insisted Kruse. "There's no way we could collect so much data without the RFgen system."

Warehouse employees have provided positive feedback about RFgen. The prior solution had a bad habit of dropping its connection with the handheld devices, and when that happened, warehouse employees would lose all of the data they had collected, sometimes many pallets worth of information.

"That would happen especially with the receiving guys on the dock," remembered Eilers. "The inventory guys would then have to go and find the pallets that they had already stored in the racks."

Kruse added, "With RFgen, the handheld holds the information until you get to a better connection, then you can proceed with the transaction or your data collection. The guys are really enjoying that!"

The Blue Bell team is already thinking about more ways RFgen can be used—especially in the high availability batch mode that would enable information to be stored on handheld devices and then uploaded to Oracle at predetermined times or whenever internet connectivity is established.

"We have 12,000 freezer cabinets that are located all over in retail stores, schools and hospitals. The challenge is that we don't have connectivity everywhere. We need to have a batch transaction in order to conduct the cycle count," explained Kruse.

"We can handle a normal movement of a fixed asset via a PC, but we don't want a different system from our mobile field devices. RFgen operates on both."

Other possible improvements include exploring how the high availability batch mode could be used to improve route accounting for the company's delivery of ice cream products to supermarkets and convenience stores. Kruse is also considering introducing touch screen devices into their environment.

Laughing, Lisovaya added, "We have a lot of ideas for RFgen. I have a feeling it's never going to end!"

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