

Data Doesn't Need to be Dormant

A new approach for proficiency, profitability and long-term success

By Kip Tom

Tom Farms has existed for more than 175 plus years. The technology and business of farming has changed dramatically over those years. When I think about the next 175 years for Tom Farms, the one thing I know for sure is that the pace of change is going to be even faster. To be successful, we will need to react to changes in markets quickly, learn technology fast and use data to improve our efficiency and decisions. In fact, the single most important advantage for any farm business is becoming its ability to “learn fast.”

With this in mind, it's critical for our industry to take an honest look at how much we learn every year in the forty chances we have in a lifetime as a farmer, how we manage information and how we make decisions. Historically, farming has been a “learn from your dad” and “learn by doing” industry, which is good, but we need to increase the velocity of learning and change. Even the best run farms don't spend enough time understanding what works and what doesn't every year. Many important decisions get made with intuition, not data. Most of our institutional knowledge lives in people's heads and in Excel worksheets.

We can do much better. We need to bring the intuitive nature that we've learned over time out of our heads and into a system that translates it quickly for the next generation. Other industries have successfully used software to get control of their data, improve their efficiency and make better decisions. It has been difficult for farms to use software because most of our critical production activity and decisions happen outside and away from the office computer. However, advances in cloud computing, mobile phones and big data analytics have made it possible for the whole farm team to access super powerful capabilities right from their smart phones.

Some of you may be familiar with farm management software, but farm decision systems take the value much further. They not only empower us to better manage our farms, but to also take the data – that has been sitting dormant in our office, on our fields, or in isolated software – and transform it into a valuable resource that allows us to make better decisions that dramatically improve our businesses.

Tom Farms is one of a growing group of enterprise-level farms that has adopted Granular's farm decision system. Granular is a San Francisco company backed by Google that has assembled a top team of software developers, designers and data scientists. They are focused on serving large, enterprise-level growers and are building a sales and support team in all the major farming states. Granular is rapidly adding new capabilities to its software and aims to support all the key operational, agronomic and financial processes on the farm.

We ran Granular’s farm decision systems for the entire 2014 crop season and found that it made our business more professional, more efficient and smarter. Some of the key benefits we experienced were:

More professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We used Granular instead of Excel for many things this year. It is much faster, easier to use and less error prone. • Rather than going back and forth between multiple software systems, Granular gives us one system to collect, organize and analyze our data. • Granular allowed everyone on our team to see what was happening on the farm in real time from any device.
More efficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Granular allowed our whole team to work from the same production schedule and list of tasks. Sending work orders to mobile phones replaced dozens of phone calls, texts and emails every day. It even allowed us to connect when some of us were away from the farm. • Granular’s smart scheduling tool estimates field conditions, growth stage and grain moisture. This allowed us to set the order of field operations without having to drive around the farm.
Smarter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Granular helped us better understand how long it took us to complete each major field operation and highlighted ways we could get more work done faster. • As we roll into the 2015 cycle, Granular gives us all our 2014 results – agronomic, operational, financial – right where we need them to make key crop planning and budgeting decisions.

Like any new technology, it took some time to adapt our workflow to Granular’s farm decision system. But, very quickly we saw our team operating more efficiently, more collaboratively, more informed and with fewer fire drills by running the business on Granular. And, I am confident that Granular is setting Tom Farms up to learn faster, make better decisions and quickly adapt to what the future has in store for us.

About the Author

Kip Tom is the Managing Member of Tom Farms LLC and the President of CereServ Inc. In addition to being active in Agri-Business operations in Indiana for the past 39 years, Kip has also served as a crop production consultant to various companies in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Today Kip leads finance, strategy and production operations for Tom Farms and CereServ in the U.S. and Argentina.

For more information on Granular and Farm Decision Systems, please email learnmore@granular.ag.