

BBx Goes Down Under with SERVE-AG

By Amy Petré Hill

Under the fierce December sun of Tasmania, Australia, Mike Gow and L. 'Buz' Green, managing directors of SERVE-AG Pty Ltd., slowly pick their way through a field of vegetables, stopping occasionally to carefully examine a few individual plants, cut off some leaves, or take soil samples.



For more than twenty years, Gow and Green have walked through such fields, using their extensive knowledge of agriculture to provide farmers with precise advice on the irrigation, fertilization, weed and pest control that will help crops flourish season after season. In that time, the two have built their business, SERVE-AG, into Tasmania's most successful agricultural advisory company and one of the largest companies of its kind in Australia.

Gow and Green, both degreed agronomists (soil and plant scientists), started SERVE-AG in 1976 from a small rented office at a commercial grower's site in Tasmania. Their goal was to provide the best information and advice on plant growth, crop nutrition, diseases, and parasites to commercial growers. They start from the very beginning of the growing processes, checking the soil before the crop is even planted, and consider each job done only when the crop has been stored in the warehouse. When they began, the idea of such extensive soil-to-warehouse agricultural consulting was unheard of, but farmers soon saw how this sound scientific advice could quickly improve their crop yields, and actively sought their services.

Now the company has more than 50 employees, and more than 15 agronomists (including Green and Gow) headquartered in Devonport, Australia, with five branch offices around the state of Tasmania. SERVE-AG is gaining clients from around the world, including farmers in South Africa, and along the West Coast of the United States.



As the company has grown, the need for a sophisticated database and inventory control has grown as well. According to Bob Kuns, the MIS Director of SERVE-AG, products created with BBx have given them the technology they need to use and modify a successful accounting program. "We use Open Systems Accounting Software (written in BBx) for our in-house accounting. It was chosen when we upgraded from an NEC Astra system, based on the recommendations of a consultant from Melbourne who had written a Sap Testing Software program for us entirely in BBx. We currently run on SCO UNIX, but we're looking into upgrading to Visual PRO/5™ on the Windows NT platform."

Kuns says the ease-of-use and flexibility of the language were the big selling points for BBx. "For us, the source code of the Open Systems software was of particular interest. We knew the Open Systems program was going to require significant tailoring and we wanted that tailoring to be as painless as possible. Because the company is located in such a remote location with limited phone, fax, and Internet access, we needed a language that was very easy to learn. BBx has been incredibly easy to work with. In fact, I taught myself the language from a set of BBxPROGRESSION/3® manuals three years ago and was immediately able to start making the necessary modifications. Our modifications to the software have been an on-going process, and I am currently working on numerous code modification projects."

The company was so pleased with the language, they expanded its use and wrote specialized programs in BBx that tied maps of fields into tracking systems that record exactly how much and what kind of fertilizer and chemicals each customer was using. The company also used BBx to create a revolutionary sap analysis program. It is one of the few scientific software programs written exclusively in the BBx language and has become the company's major diagnostic tool for crops. The system is able to analyze and measure hundreds of crop variables from a single leaf within a day.

The company now has over 3,000 customers and looks to continued expansion in the coming year. SERVE-AG's large research laboratory continues to gain research projects funded by large agricultural companies and the Australian government, and the company is planning to broaden its research program beyond the 80 research sites currently in place. SERVE-AG is also looking to expand its operations into China. In December 1996, Green visited China to see how the company could offer its services to this growing agricultural market.

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