Bean to bar
Product quality to data quality

JH Whittaker & Sons puts huge focus on the quality of its chocolate products. Likewise with its data on those products.

Over the past year, the company has completed a $10 million upgrade to refining processes for milk chocolate at its Porirua factory. The new process has further enhanced the quality & smoothness of its Creamy Milk range and has been met with strong market approval.

The same period has seen Whittaker's establish itself fully on GS1net™ with Foodstuffs (New World, Pak n Save, 4 Square) and Progressive Enterprises (Woolworths, Countdown, FreshChoice, SuperValue). The quality and accessibility of data on the growing Whittaker's product range has been well received by New Zealand's two major supermarket groups.

Chief Marketing Officer Philip Poole says having a repository of synchronised master product data supports the quality and trustworthiness that are integral to the Whittaker's brand. "Once you achieve a situation where everything is held at one point, is always correct and is always accessible, the information can be useful for a number of things," he says.

Whittaker's was among the first large New Zealand food manufacturers to embrace GS1net — reflection of the foresightedness of a company that has been around since 1896, and is now firmly established as a major innovator in local and export confectionery markets.

Whittaker's imports, roasts and refines its own cocoa beans, as summed up in the company's "bean to bar" market positioning.

Over the past 10 years, its product range and value of sales have seen manifold growth. Today it has over 95 products, ranging from the traditional Peanut Slab to new flavours like White Raspberry and Berry & Biscuit. And Whittaker's has comprehensive data on each product uploaded to GS1net for use in a growing number of applications.

Whittaker's began its data synchronisation journey in New Zealand in early 2009 in response to the call from Foodstuffs.

Mr Poole says initially one staff member was assigned to weigh, measure and gather the data required, and to upload using the GS1 browser template. The work proved more time consuming and complex than expected, and the company experimented with middleware before eventually deciding to outsource its data configuration and uploading processes to a specialist

provider. "That we needed someone with the technical knowledge and capability to quickly do what we needed was a critical learning for us," he says.

DB Media Services, a Sydney-based data management firm, took over the day-to-day management of the catalogue from September 2011. Today, whenever changes or additions are required to its GS1net catalogue, Whittaker's staff gather the data and supply it to DB Media Services for uploading to GS1net on both sides of the Tasman.

Whittaker's went GS1net Live with Foodstuffs Wellington in February 2010, Auckland the following August, and with Foodstuffs South Island in January 2011. Its commitment to GS1net marked the company out for inclusion in the Galaxy programme of Progressive Enterprises/Woolworths: Galaxy was a pilot for the trans-Tasman group's major transition into a new SAP-based business system encompassing GS1net and other e-commerce developments.

Being an exporter to Australia of 20 years' standing, Whittaker's recognised the need to support its trading relationships there with a GS1net catalogue tailored to that market. The company has been GS1net Live with the Coles group for several years.

Mr Poole says the three-year process was arduous at times but certainly worthwhile for Whittaker's. "Obviously there are costs involved but we must have GS1net because our customers want it and now we have a single source of valuable data that can be called on at any time."

Whittaker's was quick to see more uses for its higher quality of data in the new GS1net era. Finance Manager Michael Cooze says the data, especially product weights and dimensions, are shared with the company's third party storage and logistics provider. The latter is better able to allocate warehouse and freight transport space as part of daily operations to hold and move Whittaker's inventory at, and from, its nearby Porirua premises.

"Our major customers use the data also for providing space in their own distribution centres," says Mr Cooze. Whittaker's is currently investing in new IT systems and he says the single, accurate data source will fit perfectly into the new environment. "One of the avenues we are going down is EDI and having common identifiers on products means information can flow through to preparing our delivery notes," Mr Cooze says.

A production management system is another part of the new IT environment and with this, he says, Whittaker's will move towards implementation of GS1 numbering and bar coding on pallets of product at the factory and at the third party logistics provider.

Top left: Whittaker's factory and head office in Porirua, Wellington. Below from left: Cocoa beans from Ghana and Madagascar are the raw ingredient; molten chocolate becomes blocks, slabs and bars.

MOST TRUSTED

Whittaker's was named New Zealand's most trusted brand in 2012.

Each year Reader's Digest commissions a research house to rank consumer perspectives on hundreds of brands: The most trusted are those that people say stand out by delivering consistently on a promise to satisfy their needs, to make life easier and to offer value for money. Last year Whittaker's ranked ahead of all others, as well as coming out on top in the confectionary category (ahead of rivals Nestle and Cadbury).

Other consumer research in 2012, by Nielsen CMI, indicated a huge number of New Zealanders (1,045,000) had purchased a Whittaker's block, slab or bar in the preceding month.