

# How to Avoid Those Supply Chain Niggles

Article

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Buyers and technical managers employed by major potato packers are only human and anything growers can do to make their lives easier will be appreciated, writes RICHARD CROWHURST. Such efforts are likely to be remembered when the customer has the choice of working with two very similar suppliers

**H**ow do you retain your cherished place as a supplier to the increasingly powerful packers? The obvious considerations of price and quality will always be key but the 'niggle factor' should not be underestimated. There are a number of low-cost measures which are easy to implement and while most growers are already aware of them, the experience of packers across the country suggests that many people don't pay enough attention to the details. Here then, are ten tips to help smooth the passage of every load you deliver to the factory door.

**1. Box condition** Everyone has their own horror stories of boxes returning to the farm damaged, filled with product or worse. But the condition of boxes arriving at the factory can sometimes be unbelievable too. They are an expensive resource and it is understandable that everyone involved wants to get as much use from them as possible. However, boxes that are unsafe, or that have holes patched with paper sacks should not be used because of the very real food safety and health and safety risks they pose.

**2. Labelling** Boxes should be labelled clearly to ensure traceability and to confirm that what has been delivered matches what was expected. As a minimum, the box should give the grower's name or ID, field name or ID, variety and harvest date. It can also be useful to have the store name and details of certain pesticide treatments, including post harvest

applications. The subject of multiple labels on boxes creates much debate. While identical labels, or those giving treatment details may be acceptable, different labels are confusing.

David Edwards, a consultant with 30 years in the potato industry, makes the point that, 'it's always frustrating to see two labels on a box.' While the grower may know that a blue one relates to last year while this season's labels are yellow, this information is not obvious to staff on the packing line'.

Also, if you have agreed to send a mixed load make sure that each component can be clearly identified. If not, you risk having the entire load rejected.

**3. Box marking** Secondhand boxes in good condition can be a tempting buy but make sure you mark them appropriately. Boxes have often been sent back to another company because the grower hadn't repainted them or let the buyer know which ones he was using. Remember that boxes marked with company names that no longer exist may be mistakenly sent elsewhere too.

**4. Box contamination** Over the years some amazing things have turned up at factories – everything from one-tonne seed bags to pesticide containers. Even bits of dead livestock and engineering parts have been delivered with loads. The temptation to use potato boxes as receptacles for building waste or engineering parts is understandable. 'Growers must be stringent,' says Dr Brian Clutterbuck, head of the technical team at Holbeach-based QV Foods. He says if boxes are to be used as waste receptacles, then growers should 'mark them and isolate them for that purpose.'

**5. Other contamination** After 10 years of crop assurance schemes, most growers are familiar with basic food safety precautions such as systems for glass control. But how aware of the risk of contamination are your staff, especially casual workers and seasonal students? Remember that the risks go beyond the harvesting and grading seasons. How many times have we seen a plough go straight over that old mud flap left in the middle of the field, rather than the driv-

er stopping to remove it? What happens in a couple of years time when a fragment of that metal, now jagged and rusty, arrives on the packing line costing thousands of pounds of damage?

**6. Pesticide records** Records of all types are a bugbear for many growers, but are a legal requirement. Brian Clutterbuck says: 'We need to hold copies of [pesticide records], or have them available within hours not days.' David Edwards agrees: 'It would make life much easier if growers provided copies of the field pesticide records either with the first load delivered, or prior to the first delivery of every field.'

Some packers have developed systems for records to be exchanged electronically, but even then it is essential that all the information is provided. 'The system we developed with Farmade was good, but not enough people are using it,' laments Dr Clutterbuck. 'Growers also need to include all seed and ware treatments that went on to the crop.'

**7. Load passports** Most customers use their 'load passport' as the link between any paper records and the physical potatoes that are delivered. Systems and document names vary, but the purpose is the same. Brian Clutterbuck reminds growers that 'traceability is now a legal requirement. People must link the Chemical Declaration to the lorry, in our case by making sure the load number we issue is recorded on the paper.' The importance of the documentation in helping growers meet their own due diligence requirements is the same irrespective of the customer.

**8. Crop assurance and HACCP** 'I am sure there are still a lot of growers who do not fully understand HACCP,' says David Edwards. 'An explanation needs to be given as to why the process needs to be followed, i.e. to demonstrate the individual's due diligence and to protect their business should a problem occur,' he explains. By implementing HACCP and following your own systems you remove many potential problems, but you will also be able to react promptly should problems occur.

**9. Timely delivery** You've checked the quality, faxed through your load passport and pesticide records and waved the lorry out of the gate. Surely you can relax now? That depends on whether you're using your own transport. Making sure that any delays are flagged up to your customer and that any special delivery requirements are met can work wonders for smooth relationships.

**10. Communication** Most packers are only too happy to help answer questions and queries, and would much rather sort problems out in advance rather than waiting until the load arrives to realise that they have an issue. Talk to your customer at all levels of their business. Include the admin staff who deal with your paperwork and technical and QA staff. Don't just rely on the buyer as your point of contact.

By following these simple but effective steps, potato growers should maintain an easy working relationship with their packing customers. As Simon Bowen of Solanum says: 'Our philosophy is very much to ensure that growers understand requirements and all get to know the customer...We find that once the mindset is in place the detail is a lot easier to implement.'

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