Y2K Is Coming
Country Fresh eliminates Ear 2000 problems with foresight and careful planning

Jan. 1, 2000, won’t leave Country Fresh Dairy with an expired computer system. The Grand Rapids, Mich.-based company has had an implementation team in place that has been addressing an elaborate software/hardware selection for the past four years. While other business solutions also have been targeted, the Y2K issue has been at the forefront of the implementation process.

By utilizing an IBM AS/400, Business Planning Control System (BPCS), Numeric’s Route Management System (RMS) and Norand Mobile Systems Div.’s hand-held computers, Country Fresh Dairy has a system in place to tackle Year 2000 issues and improve data collection for better business decisions.

“The process has been a lot of work, but very necessary,” says Tom Parks. “Increased productivity and improved, real-time information are the outcomes.” Country Fresh is ahead of a lot of companies. The year 2000 is only one year away and the clock is ticking for those who have not prepared their electronics-dependent businesses.

If you have not already begun to assess whether your route distribution system is Y2K compliant, don’t panic. But do act. Keep in mind: The longer you wait to address Y2K issues, the more costly it will be to fix them. And for most systems, starting in 1999 is rather late. For some, it may even be too late.

Y2K basics
Seeds of the Y2K trouble were planted in the 1980s, when commercial computing was new and storing memory relatively limited. Developers saw a chance to shave two digits off the date stamp by giving it only six values (mm/dd/yy) instead of eight (mm/dd/yyyy). This date stamp eventually grew like a weed, embedded in the billions of lines of coding that run the world’s computer systems.

So when the clock reads 12:00:01 on Jan. 1, 2000, computers the world over that still use the original date stamp will read it as 01/01/00. Unless it’s told otherwise, a computer will always treat a double-zero year as coming before any other year. Here you have the potential for grand-scale problems.

Computer programs that sort by date may not run or may introduce errors. Invoices, delivery schedules and orders dated for the year 2000 and beyond may be treated as if they are 100 years old. Manufacturers could face massive equipment failure, delays in receiving raw materials and product that gets dumped because a computer perceives it to be so old it is unsellable.

Complicating things is the fact that 2000 is a special kind of leap year, one that comes only every 400 years to fine-tune the Gregorian calendar. The extra day in this year will have to be addressed in the computer coding as well.

Fix won’t be easy or cheap
Actually, for all the hand-wringing that has been going on, nobody knows exactly how bad it might be when the millennium arrives. All you can do is try to assess how much your business is at risk for computer errors and prepare accordingly.

Essentially what you’ll need to do is change your system’s date stamp, or at the very least, change the way your system interprets the date stamp. Altering date stamps can be done several ways. The two most common are expansion and windowing.

Expanding date stamps to eight digits involves the tedious process of looking at every line of source coding. Freelance programmers can do this for you, at a cost of about $1.50 per line of code. With average codes for route accounting systems numbering 70,000 lines, this can be the most expensive fix. It is, however, a permanent solution to a company’s internal Y2K problem. It’s also the safest and most recommended, given time enough to complete the process. But, let’s face it, at the eleventh hour you probably don’t have that luxury.

A quicker but temporary fix is to insert a date window into your computer programs to amend the way the original six-digit date
Seven Steps to Y2K Compliance

Don’t be fooled by the seeming simplicity of the seven steps listed below. Seeing them laid out neatly on a page is one thing: completing them is quite another. Step three, for example, can be especially prickly, costly and time-consuming. But for computer-dependent businesses that plan to see the new millennium, there are no shortcuts.

1. Establish a task force to address Y2K issues.
2. Seek outside computer programming experts and contract for their services, or set up an in-house team.
3. Identify which systems will be affected.
4. Rank affected systems by importance.
5. Convert mission-critical systems first, then tackle lower-ranked systems.
6. Conduct trial runs and ferret out glitches. Test, test, test.
7. Insist on proven Y2K compliance from outside computer systems (suppliers, vendors, etc.) that link with yours. Be prepared to do business elsewhere, if necessary.

The date stamp is interpreted. The most common window tells the computer to assume that all year digits higher than 50 will be part of the 1900s, and all year digits less than 50 will be part of the 2000s. Using this logic, a sample date stamp of 03/21/05 would be read as March 21, 2005.

It is essential to begin any Y2K compliance conversion first by identifying affected systems and then ranking them by their importance. Which ones are critical, i.e., the ones you can’t do business without? Spend the vast majority of your resources fixing those. Next will be the systems that are extremely important but are not the life-blood of operations, and on down to those systems that are helpful to have but won’t cause grief if they fail.

Unfortunately, once you have protected your own computer systems from a Y2K meltdown, you’ll need to look at outside systems that network with your business. For route accounting this may not be a concern, since most systems will be self-contained. But if your computer connects with a grocer’s noncompliant system for invoicing or ordering, faulty incoming data could corrupt your pristine system.

If you can accept the idea that completing this task is going to cost money, perhaps a lot of money, you may see the Y2K Problem as an opportunity to run a smarter and more efficient business.

Replacing or updating your current system could solve your internal Y2K woes while providing the thrust to boost your business ahead of the competition. Many route distributors are finding it more expedient to replace a mobile computing system with a new one rather than to upgrade old technology.

You’ll find several resources that can help meet your company’s specific needs for route distribution equipment. The Norand Mobile Systems Div. of Intermec Technologies Corp. is among them. Intermec’s Year 2000 policy states that all the products released into its manufacturing system after Dec. 31, 1997, are Y2K compliant. They are programmed using the eight-digit date stamp.

Norand products include handheld terminals that store customer sales histories so your drivers can suggest the most profitable mix of product. It also makes high-speed modems that can considerably reduce the cost of transmitting information.

Deciding to replace your old system doesn’t mean you can wait until next December to place the order. Installing your new system also means customizing software and testing it for efficiency. This can be a painfully slow process.

Whatever method you choose, remember that you don’t need to go it alone. Numerous web sites on the Year 2000 Problem (a listing follows) can help. For instance, the Year 2000 Information Center can give you access to Y2K user groups, so you can query similar businesses on their Y2K conversion; the Information Technology Assn. of America web site offers a Year 2000 buyers guide.

In addition to the higher-tech modes of information gathering, you can try the old-fashioned approach. Follow-up on word-of-mouth recommendations for programmers. Shamelessly call other route distributors and ask how they handled their Y2K conversion. Learning from their mistakes could help keep you on track.

With any luck, New Year’s Eve 1999 will find you toasting the promise of a new millennium, secure in the knowledge that, as far as you’re concerned, the only ball dropped was the big glittery one in Times Square.