Technology Tools for the Field 2012

Thank you to the Ontario Vegetable Processors Association for inviting me to speak to your group at the 2012 Convention. This blog entry is a link to some of the comments made during my presentation today and a link to a list of interesting apps that I have either downloaded, tested or feel are interesting to others.

The main focus is on Mobility, Connectivity and Productivity. So I invite you to explore the available technology and judge against those three criteria. I have also listed a bunch of "really neat, but maybe too regional for my users" apps that I have checked out over the last couple of months. Avoid them if you do not want to bother, or give them a look and let me know if you think they have merit for Canadian users. My advice is to get something and try everything. Apps are relatively cheap to acquire and only you can tell if it will be useful to you. Do not think of this as a forever purchase. If you plan to get a year out of it, you will be prepared for the fast paced changes. The rule is keep updated to get the most out of any software. This is true of traditional as well as app-based software.

What I am using:
I have chosen to purchase an iPad (iPad 2 3G- but no SIM card yet-just using wifi) so I can check out iOS apps, and an Android phone so I can check out Android compatible apps. I will try to separate any comments on apps to their source, but with all this wealth to contend with I might mix the odd one up. My advice is try it for yourself. YOU be the judge of whether it is good or not. I truly love the iPad for its feel and weight and a lot of other intangible qualities. I also think that the comparable droid tablets would probably give me the same experience, but I have to give kudos to the iPad for even making me care.

I think of the tablet/notepad/laptop as a tool to do stuff. The iPad has made me love the object as much as the potential purpose. It just feels good. And, as I always say, the best [software] is one you will actually use. So I am finding many ways to use the iPad, just so I can. It is shallow, but there you are! Be prepared to spend as much in extras as for the tablet. If you intend to take the device outside, a more rugged shell is a must (both Griffen and Otterbox run about $80 for an enclosure). They will protect against a drop or ding, but do not make the unit truly rugged. To be truly rugged you need to look at purpose built tables such as the Juniper systems Mesa or Trimble Yuma, but those systems are Windows or Windows Mobile only for now.

My top favourites for general purpose apps on the iPad are Logmein and Splashtop to remote access back to my office computers and programs. Both run efficiently and let me run any program I need, any place I need to be.

All of my GIS programs are Windows baced and standalone. However, by leveraging remote access, they are as available to me as any web-based program. I am using cloud storage with increased confidence thanks to Dropbox. I tried the free version for a while and was so happy with the ease of use I opted to purchase the full package that allows me mega storage. I use it to have files available from any of my systems or devices, alleviating the need to actually remember where I put stuff, and to share seamlessly with my full service clients. I know there are other programs that use cloud storage in more automated ways, but I still like to be in charge of where my files go, or don't go! Needless to say I am still not trusting my truly important information to any venue that could go out of business tomorrow or compromise my client data or personal data.

I am also making OneNote a part of my file storage routine. Again the ability to share is important, but the ability to organize is equally important. So far, OneNote is an online equivalent of the right-hand drawer of my desk: a little messy but full of all sorts of important bits.

I have been checking out a number of apps for mapping capability. So far the top picks are: Google Earth and Google maps are a given. They are light weight from an ag perspective, but these are programs in which everyone should become fluent. Read the permissions page though; you are giving Google pretty big access to your location. GIS Roam from Cogent 3D-because I can transport and add to shapefiles from the office via the DataConnect utility. Their Precision Earth product is more like an actual software, than an 'app', but it could replace the task specific soil sampling products currently sold for Windows based systems. Cogent 3D products are going to be a very important component of AgTech service delivery in the near future as we deploy iCropTrak for our full service clients. Incredible app! More on that in the future.

Map Measure Pro-because it allows me to both draw over imagery or map with GPS and export in a variety of formats like CSV, KML for Google and even a printable PDF (although sadly not shapefile). It also has a direct link to Dropbox. VERY convenient! For quick record keeping I like Field Notes for the Phone or iPad. This program is designed to be simple and it does everything easily. It too can export to a web viewable report or a CSV file. Quick easy and exportable to something else for long term storage. Not bad for free!

In the not so free, but perfectly reasonable category is ScoutDoc from AgNition here in Ontario. This is a worthy entry with plans to add more options as it develops.

In the Android arena I am checking out a couple of apps: GPS Area Measure and GPS Area Calculator which can also export shapefiles and Map Tools, which aggravatingly runs in demo mode until you actually pay for it and it does have pop up ads unless you pay for it. That is fair enough as it is only a couple of dollars. Only deficiency is that it does not measure area in Acres.

Also from the Android market is a group of tools for my phone from Smart Tools. I love the level, compass, sound level meter and even metal detector-magnetic field detector actually. I do not know why I like that one, but it is really cool.

Things I have looked at and ruled out for now: There are a number of recordkeeping apps from every corner of the globe, but here is where it gets tricky. They all read like the next best thing from sliced bread, but once you are in, their regional bias becomes apparent. I think regional bias is good in an app for agriculture. It tells me that the developers are working hard to create a custom product for their intended users. I invite the curious to form their own opinion. I found most of these to have at least one glaring inappropriateness for Canadian users, and some very questionable translations for a couple, but at least it shows there is movement in the Ag-App industry.

Some notables are: Smart Farm App (Ireland) AgriCompass (ASIA-not sure exactly where) Crop Monitor (UK) eFarmer (Ukraine) Crop Base (New Zealand) Spray Lite (Australia) SprayLite and others (Australia) Meanwhile I am still working through the new-to-me and newly released options. I welcome other ag opinions.
Have you found something you would like to share? email mapping@agtechgis.com or comment via Twitter: @AgtechGIS
Karon