From field to fork using an app

FreshSpoke founder tells how digital disruption is changing how food is sourced, sold and transported

Marcia Woods, CEO and co-founder of FreshSpoke holds the tools needed to connect farmers, buyers and drivers in the shared economy, utilizing digital disruption to develop a new model in food logistics.

FreshSpoke is an emerging company opportunizing on digital disruption to transform delivery systems for field-to-fork models.

FreshSpoke's web and mobile apps connect farmers, drivers and buyers through an UBER-like delivery system that disrupts traditional local food logistics models.

CEO and co-founder, Marcia Woods, was one of several innovative presenters at the AG 4.0 Summit and Innovation Tour. Digital disruption was a theme running through the two-day event held recently in Meaford to shine a spotlight on creative technological innovation in agriculture and food.

So what is digital disruption?

"Digital Disruption refers to changes made possible by digital technologies that occur at a pace and magnitude that disrupt," explains Woods.

How have we seen it happening?

• When the world’s largest taxi company doesn’t own any taxis (UBER)
• When the largest accommodation provider doesn’t own any real estate (AirBnb)
• When the largest phone messaging company doesn’t own any phones (WeChat)
When the most popular media owner creates no content (Facebook)

The UBER-effect is leading the way and changing industry, changing how we do things, how we embrace technology and how we interact with others.

Change makes us uncomfortable and uneasy but Woods says we are the ones who have actually changed. If we had not changed how we communicate or how we embrace technology, there would be no disruption.

Ultimately, disruption is good for business, she believes. “It moves us forward from the old way of doing things to a new way of doing things.”

It encourages us to reimagine, rethink and be creative. Generally, successful people are more creative than intelligent. The ones who embrace digital disruption are creative, didactic thinkers who find new ways of doing things using advancements in technology.

Woods obviously must be one of those creative and didactic thinkers because she is the co-founder of FreshSpoke which is a direct result of digital disruption in the food and transportation industry.

It’s a brand new approach only possible once consumers began moving away from brick and mortar toward platform-based technology.

In this technology the middle man is becoming obsolete as the platform becomes the avenue connecting those who want to sell with those who want to buy.

“We are in a sharing economy,” explains Woods. “We have the ability now to have our needs met by each other, instead of relying on big corporations to do it.”

Customers want to be masters of their own domain and they want aggregated content in one platform.

It’s the Internet of things that makes this all possible. We can monitor everything from the palm of our hands with our mobile devices which gives us “long-game focus” says Woods.

So how has FreshSpoke taken advantage of the new technology, the new mindset and the new possibilities within the sharing economy? FreshSpoke created a marketplace platform that simplifies order payment and delivery for local

Winners of the Apps for Ag contest earned $500 to further develop their livestock tracking app which allows farmers to see all production and reproductive data on their livestock via their mobile phones.

Dexter Fichuk and Laura Mann, both computer science students at Trent University were named winners at the Ag 4.0 Summit and Innovation Tour held in Meaford recently. The contest involved a Hackathon at Georgian College in Owen Sound on October 1 where mentors AgNition and Palmer Anderson helped participants refine their applications.

Fichuk and Mann wanted to develop cost-efficient way to track livestock with QR codes, or NFC tags or other preexisting tags using a mobile phone. “It will allow farmers to keep track of when an animal is calving and other relevant data,” explains Mann, who sees it primarily used in the dairy and beef industry but also valuable for other livestock sectors, including sheep and goats.

Mann grew up on a beef farm so her thought process was on developing something her dad could use.

The pair began developing the program three weeks before the contest closed. “We sat and coded and got very little sleep,” admits Fichuk.

The tracking app is currently named LIVEstock. It’s not quite ready to be released as the pair continues to fine-tune the programming and decides how to market it. They may offer it as a pay-per-month service or provide the app free and sell the collected (but de-personalized) data to research companies that could benefit the industry with the information.

“Data analytics is a way of sharing your data to learn more about other farmers with similar parameters,” explains Mann. “You share your data for a better outcome.”

Dexter Fichuk and Laura Mann of Trent University won first prize in the Ag 4.0 Summit’s Apps for Ag Context with their livestock tracking app.
food producers and wholesale buyers.

Buyer clicks, producer picks and drivers deliver using FreshSpoke’s software system that connects all three to the best possible advantage.

“We take advantage of excess capacity and product aggregation,” explains Woods. “We process the entire transaction from order to delivery so cash flow is also taken care of.”

Order, payment and delivery are key pieces to the platform. “Buyers do not order from 9-5 anymore,” she explains. “They are working too and they want a tool where when they realize they need a product at one in the morning, they can place their order. They do not want to pick up the phone,” says Woods.

The advantage to transporters is reducing the times they travel empty. “Ask transporters if they would like back haul and they’ll answer, ‘hell ya’. Nobody wants to come back from Toronto with an empty truck.”

Sellers, meanwhile, have access to a larger marketplace that is looking for their product.

“There are a lot of moving pieces,” admits Woods. “We’re calculating distance, load capacity, vehicles, etc. But software engineers have created an algorithm that goes out and fetches information and then pushes and pulls data that matches information coming in at the time.”

Welcome to the new food economy!

The best part for everyone is that it’s all accessible via a mobile device so no one has to stop working. Buyers, sellers and drivers are notified every step of the way.

It’s the way millennials like it and they are one of the main drivers behind digital disruption and platform technologies like FreshSpoke.

“They are the biggest cohort since the Baby Boomers and for millennials, food isn’t food…it is community,” says Woods. They are asking questions and they want to work on their own terms. Driven by motivation and output versus putting in eight hours a day, the millennials embrace the shared economy. They want access, not ownership.

“Where our generation wanted to buy a house, they would rather work hard to travel and rent a home on Airbnb,” suggests Woods.

They do their research. They ask why. They are educated. The parents of millennials encouraged their offspring’s intelligence and independence.

And they want local food. They want to know where their food is sourced and how it was grown. “Millenials are putting pressure on buyers to buy locally so they need a way to source that food.” It’s one of the precursors to the launch of FreshSpoke.

So was corporate investment.

“There has been a surge in food and agriculture investment,” says Woods. Corporations are realizing they aren’t keeping pace with startups and are choosing to buy them outright or take part ownership rather than having their market share taken away from them. This has led to startups finding it easier to raise seed money. “It’s not always easy but the investors are more than ever before.”

Finally, any project requires leadership. Woods says she is a disruptor. “I’ve always looked for solutions to problems. I am a fixer. When I see a problem I want to fix it.”

Growing up in a rural community, she watched as her dad “rigged” everything and she grew up learning you needed to be creative to fix things.

Having the mindset is one thing.

“But you have to back it up with a solution and a system that actually works and others will buy.”

Also, it’s critical to have skills to motivate, gather and partner with people as well.

FreshSpoke relied on digital disruption, the millennial push, seed money and Wood’s innovative thinking to launch in September out of The Creative Space in downtown Barrie. They are up and operating in Ontario and will begin to scale to select regions in Canada and the U.S. late in 2017 when they have the full business model.

“We soft-launched in Simcoe and Grey counties to test our prototype and expected to onboard 50 food producers by December. We started on-boarding producers on our second day and had our first 50 within 40 days. We have over 500 buyers signed up so far.”

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