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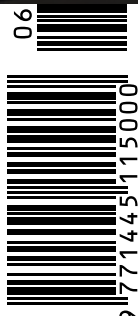
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Another Link in the Cold Chain

Getting the operation just right, so you are not just another link in the cold chain is working well for Link Cold Storage and Transport in Wangaratta. **Tim Giles** calls in to see how the job should be done.



Arriving at the main base for Link Cold Storage and Transport on the outskirts of northern Victoria's Wangaratta, it's clear this is no ordinary local fridge operation. The yard is immaculate, a late model clean prime mover sits with its half-loaded trailer next to the cold store door as the load is finished off.

The trucking industry is changing, it has to change, to engage with the large corporate customers, for whom everything must be very professional, so their corporate lawyers can sleep securely knowing there is no chain of responsibility investigation around the corner.

The trucking operators' function does involve getting the freight from A to B in the right condition and at the right time, but there is so much more to the relationship now. A high level of service is required and there must be no need, on the part of the customer, to worry about the intricacies of getting the freight moved.

This is the kind of set-up Simon Frazer and his wife Anna-Lisa have developed in Wangaratta. It has grown to the point where they are looking to expand cold storage capacity and move ahead with the business.

The fresh-looking yard has been the company's home for the past three years. The business has grown organically from a small wholesale food business Simon was running twenty years ago. That business was simply a small fridge truck with Simon driving around Victoria buying and selling gourmet food.

The work involved weekly trips to Melbourne to top up on particular goods and this offered Simon the opportunity to run other people's refrigerated goods in

“A STRONG LOCAL ECONOMY ALSO HELPS IN KEEPING YOUNGER PEOPLE IN THE REGION AND WORKING IN THE GROWING BUSINESSES.”

and out of the city, at the same time. A few boxes here and a few boxes back grew over time to become a steady flow of regular ongoing work.

“A few years in and we had a business which was a good food wholesale business, but was also a refrigerated transport business,” says Simon. “At that point I understood we couldn't do both, there was a conflict of interest. You can't do selling as well as carting.

“We were able to sell the food wholesale business and it is still running today. We spent another two years building the transport business and then we were bought out by Roadmaster, about 15 or so years ago. That was fine, I worked for Roadmaster for a while and then decided to get out of the industry.

“I was looking for something else to do and ended up buying an Enzed franchise, supplying and fixing hydraulic hoses. It was a great business, but I always had a love for the coldstore business.”

While running the hydraulic business Simon built a small coldstore/freezer. He wanted to gauge the level of interest there would be in such an enterprise and it just took off. At the same time the hydraulic business was also going quite well. He was very upbeat about the prospect at that

stage. However, later that year everyone took their stock out of the store, the changed season meant suppliers ran their stocks right down and Simon was left with an empty cold store.

“We decided to buy a little van to run around and do some Woolworths work. That was enough to keep the cold store running. We kept in touch with a few customers and one of them, Rivalea, was looking to change supplier of refrigerated transport and cold storage.

Rivalea is based just over the border in New South Wales, 50 km north of Wangaratta. The company distributes pork throughout Australia, Asia and other parts of the world. It's local delivery and export requirements mean it was looking for a comprehensive distributor for its products. Simon and Anna-Lisa had to demonstrate their competence in a complex field. They were also able to become licensed in handling export goods.

“I sat down with them and made a few recommendations about what I would do, and they went with it,” says Simon. “As a result, I went out and got a subcontractor with a prime mover so they could pull my refrigerated trailer, and away we went. We have now grown with them to the point where we handle 80 per cent of their production and they are the largest producer in the southern hemisphere. We are now also Woolworths approved, so we do a lot of direct work for Woolies themselves.”

WANGARATTA'S MICRO-ECONOMY

The local economy in and around Wangaratta appears to be quite strong. Businesses like the Link operation have

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been able to grow because small niche suppliers are basing themselves in the area, as a result of the quality-of-life available there.

Wangaratta is a relatively small town with some larger ones nearby like Wodonga, but it is big enough to have all the essential services the locals need and to be a pleasant community in which to live. A strong local economy also helps in keeping younger people in the region and working in the growing businesses.

The local population is growing, with housing being built around the town. New industrial land has been released for businesses relocating to the Wangaratta. For most people in the town their commute is just five minutes.

"In this area there are a lot of other small suppliers who require cold storage and refrigerated transport," says Simon. "The

initial freezer soon became overloaded and the business moved across the road, where we built a larger freezer and a chiller. It only took a further 12 months to fill the facility and the business had to look for and found a larger property on which to build a serious cold store facility."

Currently, the Link facility has a large chiller, but a blast freezer is about to be built on the same site. The company has also held on to its old cold storage facility, which they use as a backup when things get very busy, and they do.

"We had concentrated on just a few customers and then realised that in this area there are a lot of small boutique businesses like wineries, cheese producers, butter-makers, all these small pocket businesses," says Simon. "We went to see these businesses and told them that we understood that their produce was taking

three or four days to get to Melbourne. We introduced a more personalised service, so typically, we will pick up from them in the afternoon and it will be delivered before lunch in Melbourne on the next day. It can be anything from one box in the middle of the city and up.

"We had a small van which ran around and did this and it has been a runaway success. I initially told the customers we would try it out for three months and if it didn't work out, we would get out of it. They have all supported us, extended now from one small van to two vans and a small rigid fridge truck. Anything too big for the rigids can be picked up by our semis."

This kind of bespoke service which is adaptable to the small local business' needs that Link provides allows the smaller niche businesses to compete on a more level playing field with big city rivals. The trucks cover the region as far north as Griffith, nearly 300 km away and have managed to acquire both outward distribution and inward collection in these areas.

Loads can vary in size from a full trailer for Woolworths, down to a single box delivery out of a van into Collins St in Melbourne's CBD. The variety of products is very wide, but 60 per cent of the work comes from full loads out of the larger suppliers, with the loads stored at the Link facility before being made up into orders for distribution to end customers like the IGA stores in the region.

Some customers, like restaurants, also make purchases with Melbourne specialist suppliers and the operation can pick that kind of product up for the Wangaratta area clients and bring it back and deliver it to them. There seems to be quite a few companies who are moving out of the cities and into the country, where Link has been able to support them. Being able to handle their exports has also been useful.

LOOKING FOR RELIABILITY

"A big part of what we rely on is great equipment. This means we buy Volvo trucks, FTE trailers with Carrier refrigeration on them," says Simon. "For all three of them, it is their backup, the way they support us, which is great. So, we support their business in return. We are very loyal and that loyalty pays off for us."

Link has 12 trucks on the road, including eight semitrailers. There is also one long-term sub contractor. Apart from the semis there is a selection of rigid trucks and a few smaller vans.

"In the Christmas rush a couple of years



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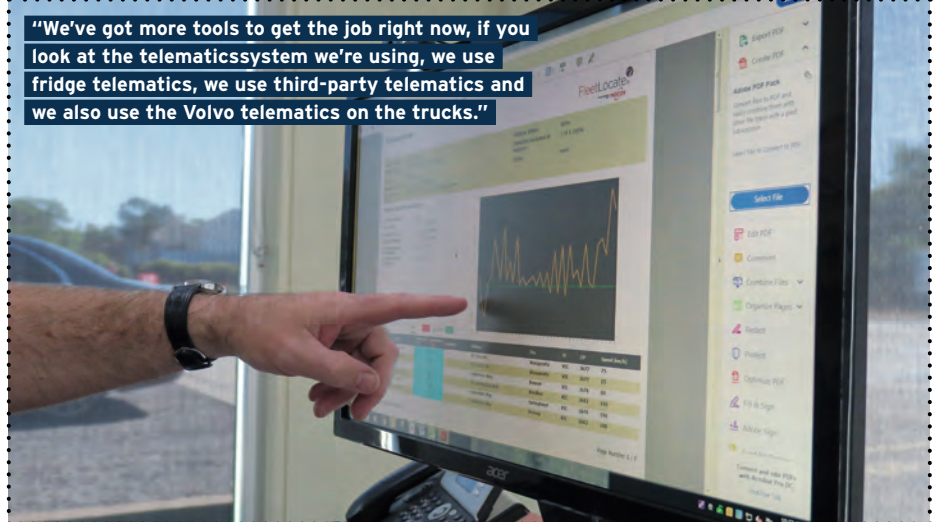
ago the company struggled to cope, while I was thinking I had enough staff to handle a lot of extra work," says Simon. "This led to a decision to recruit a good team of casual workers to handle the extreme rushes around holiday periods. As the operation has grown, several of those casuals have become part of the full-time workforce."

The main group of truck drivers average around 55 years old, but Simon has engaged a number of younger drivers who are being trained up while working locally in the daylight hours. Learning how to do the job properly before being let loose on the longer runs.

"We have a training program," explains Simon. "For the first three or four months they will only run to Corowa about an hour away, there and back. After three months we can send them on daylight runs into Melbourne. After six months we will try them out on a single drop night run. By going through this process we find we have reduced a lot of damage to the freight. The only damage we seem to get is the occasional kangaroo."

"We recently advertised for some more drivers. We will get them in and spend plenty of time inducting them and bringing them up to speed before they go anywhere near a truck. At the moment we have two who are just beginning the process, and at the same time we have some customers who are talking about increasing the amount of work we do for them. When they say yes, we will be ready."

"We are very mindful with the casual workers we have. If we can't give them



enough work, they will go somewhere else. Sometimes we will have our regular staff working on cleanup duties around the depot, so we can get our casual drivers out on the road, they know we are thinking about them and keep them happy. Then, when the pressure is on we will have enough people to cover all the work."

Altogether, there are 30 people working in business including both full time and casual. There are 22 full timers, 15 of whom are drivers. This works out to be almost two per truck as most trucks run day and night. Everyone gets back to the depot on Friday to get a weekend at home. Just about all of the drivers are home every day or night, depending on their shift.

"The bulk of our work is in Melbourne, with occasional work going to Sydney and, recently, we did our first trip to Brisbane for

our biggest customer."

KEEPING AN EYE ON THINGS

Working for corporate clients means there is a need for transparency and accountability. Data confirming compliance with all of the rules around trucking and the requirements of a distribution contract is necessary to keep the corporates secure in terms of liability.

"We've got more tools to get the job right now, if you look at the telematics system we're using, we use fridge telematics and we also use the Volvo telematics on the trucks. The customer wants what they want, but they are also beginning to understand the chain of responsibility. We're telling them they can't just do what they want, we explain what is legal and they have been pretty good about it."

"For the larger companies and businesses like Woolworths there is a real understanding of chain of responsibility now. However, for the small niche customers which Link deal with on a day-to-day basis, it is very different."

"We have a compliance officer here and we are quite happy to follow up with the customer and tell them something can't be done because of these reasons. We explain the legislation. As soon as they understand that this is the right way to do things they are fine."

By using a mixture of different monitoring, the company can check one system and then a second to ensure the data is correct. Simon is looking forward to trying out a new system being brought in by Carrier. The monitoring will go way beyond just temperature, but monitor the performance of the engine, flagging preventative maintenance to





avoid any possibility of breakdown of the refrigeration unit.

Both the Procon telematics and the Volvo Dynafleet are used to monitor both truck and driver, as a safeguard to ensure compliance. Fuel economy gets plenty of monitoring and the fleet is currently averaging 2.65 km/l. The latest truck is getting close to 3 km/l while doing multi-drop work around Melbourne.

The rostering system Link use ensures one person may be responsible for pulling together a load, but someone else will be responsible for taking that job to Melbourne, for example.

“We want our staff to have a life,” says Simon. “We had a look, about six months ago, at going onto basic fatigue management and being able to drive for 14 hours a day, but we decided against it. We don’t want to wring it all out of our drivers and get every last minute out of them.

“We are trying to run a business where we all enjoy coming here and can get home afterwards. So, with the customers, we will take a hard stand and they have accepted it. We are people; not products.” **IID**



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