Lester Thornhill, President and CEO Life's Abundance

Wellness Company Fit as a Fiddle After Software Systems Overhaul

There's nothing worse for the supply chain than having bad numbers, especially if you're operating with warehouses around the country. "If you're only right about inventory 99% of the time, it's a disaster," says Lester Thornhill, president and CEO of South Florida-based Life's Abundance.

That's why Thornhill asked OZ Digital Consulting to custom-build an inventory and warehouse management system for his growing health and wellness company. The new system was so successful that he asked OZ to start work on a new ecommerce platform and website refresh for Life's Abundance.

Life's Abundance's old inventory management system was prone to spitting out unreliable numbers: It was clunky, and had so many manual data entry points that human error was unavoidable. It depended heavily on the use of spreadsheets, and it wasn't unheard of

for pallets with 100 cases on them to be entered as having as 1,000 cases. Handwritten numbers on packing lists were another stumbling block. One person's 7 could look like another's 1, leading to mistakes being entered into the system.

"Inventory management is very unforgiving, especially when you're placing orders to keep 500 individual bins stocked," Thornhill says. "We'd get the call that we're out of product and we'd look at the numbers in the computer and tell them, no, you have 100 left, you just can't find them." Retracing the chain to find out whether there had been an error along the way was time-consuming and costly, particularly when a product was actually out of stock.

The mistakes were bad for morale — and for business. "What I wanted was to create a system where we could trust the numbers," Thornhill says. "But I didn't want to spend seven figures to do it."

Complicating matters was the fact that every Life's Abundance vendor had its own procedures and processes. Thornhill needed a fast, reliable and highly customizable solution to accommodate them all. His team and OZ's consultants met multiple times to sketch out the parameters of the problem and come up with a solution using design-thinking
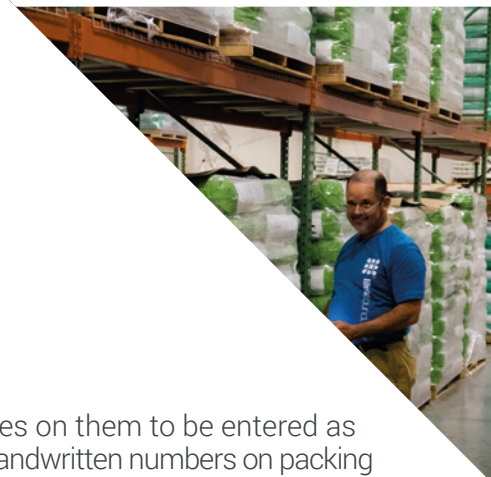
methodology. Thornhill says he appreciated OZ's agile development process, which was very collaborative. "Some of their questions actually moved us in a different direction," he says. "And it meant that we weren't locked into a rigid plan that could not be altered without significant delay and cost."

Instead, he saw multiple, on-the-go iterations as the teams moved further into the development phase. If a requirement changed to meet a newly discovered need or correct an issue that cropped up, the OZ team pivoted quickly to come up with a different, workable solution. When the product launched, Thornhill says he knew immediately it was a winner.

The new system monitors inventory in real time and automatically flags suspected errors. Now if a pallet that's expected to have 100 cases on it is listed as having 1,000, supervisors can double-check the accuracy immediately. That means Life's Abundance eliminates errors before they're entered into the system. Thornhill is also pleased with a feature that enables warehouse data to transfer automatically into the accounting system. "Nobody's manually typing all the information anymore," he says. It saves time and removes any possibility of costly typos.

Warehouse employees also have ditched their handwritten inventories for iPad minis. "The great thing about iPad minis is that they can take pictures," Thornhill says. "So as the pallets come in, we can take a photograph and have a record of exactly what's on it."

These innovations are already making a difference. The company has a lot more traceability and better predictive capabilities. Plus, the new system is significantly more flexible, so it can adapt to individual vendors without any problem. "With this new software, the level of detail we have is incredible," Thornhill says. "We know which item off which pallet went to which customers. There are no more mysteries." And, whereas only basic inventory information was available systemwide before — anything else would require laborious legwork to find out — now huge amounts of data are entered automatically and can be accessed in seconds. Employees from the warehouse, purchasing and inventory teams are excited about the new OZ system, because "it's been a huge weight lifted off

their shoulders," Thornhill says. "We can trust the numbers in the system."

The new ecommerce platform and website refresh have been equally effective. In fact, the sales conversion rate — the percentage of people who buy after landing on a web page — is up 30% year over year. "It's been wonderful," Thornhill says, then laughs. "But it's kind of ridiculous: We're doing so well with the new system I'm not even sure how to set goals anymore. We blew past the ones I'd set originally."

Using the same agile development process, the OZ team reconfigured the ecommerce platform to make it more user-friendly. They also updated the mobile adaptation function to make the website easier to see and use on a mobile device, which Thornhill says has been invaluable as mobile traffic continues to grow.

The website refresh is a work in progress but can be seen already on the new skincare line pages. Those pages are cleaner and more sophisticated, as well as being more streamlined so they're easier to navigate. "It's more visually pleasing, and from a technical standpoint, it's simply a better experience for the consumer," Thornhill says.

Although huge changes like these are often difficult and frustrating, Thornhill says there was surprisingly little drama. Leaders from OZ and Life's Abundance worked well together and created a fully integrated team, so everyone was pulling in the same direction. But OZ wasn't afraid to speak up if they saw a potential problem. "They would say if what we wanted was a bad idea," Thornhill says. "Or that something we asked for was going to be really time-consuming and expensive and not work as well as another, cheaper option."

At the same time, OZ was open to feedback, and willing to make adjustments to meet the specific needs of Life's Abundance, so they switched directions a couple of times. "The relationship worked because there was back and forth," Thornhill says. "They weren't afraid to tell us no, but they always explained here's why, so we understood why our way wasn't the best way to approach it. But if we needed something, they'd make it happen."