

The boss is always watching

Mobile technology allows business owners to keep a close eye on operations – even when they're out of the country

By Quentin Casey

Ryan Albright picks up his iPhone and with just a few flicks of his thumb is able to see exactly what's going on inside his potato chip factory.

Albright, the president and co-founder of New Brunswick's Covered Bridge Potato Chip Company, has 16 cameras capturing the activity within his Waterville plant, which churns out bags of chips in various flavours, including Smokin' Sweet BBQ and Creamy Dill Pickle.

"Right now I'm watching them grate chips. I'm watching them pack the boxes with the bags, and I'm looking at fryers three and four," he says of the live feed. "I can change these to any of the 16 different cameras I want to look at."

Albright typically spends a week or more each month on the road, drumming up sales and attending trade shows. It's imperative he be able to keep tabs on the plant, even when he's away.

"When I'm not here and I see something that's not running, I want to know why it's not running," he says from his office. "And I want to know when it's going to be up and running again."

As is the case with a growing number of East Coast CEOs, there is hardly an aspect of Albright's business that does not flow through his mobile devices, be it his iPhone or iPad.

In addition to viewing the plant floor, Albright uses his smartphone to access files on his office desktop. He uses Google Drive to view large files, and a mobile banking app allows him to easily deal with any cash flow or payroll issues.

Albright's plant manager can monitor and fix production line glitches from home, via his own iPhone. And special software helps monitor the building's airflow, refrigeration and heating. "We can monitor and change that all from the phone," Albright adds. There are plans to install similar software for monitoring the temperature and humidity of the company's potato storage warehouse.

The company also developed an iPhone app that allows the drivers of its 18 East Coast delivery trucks to record inventory, print invoices (via a Bluetooth equipped printer) and get storeowners to digitally sign for the new products they accept. All those transactions are automatically relayed back to company headquarters.

"Everything I use, it's here," Albright says, looking at his phone. "When we first started, it wasn't like that."

Mobile technology is pervasive and its presence continues to expand further into working and home lives. Mobile is central at Infnitus, a St. John's, N.L.-based outfit that aids companies with branding, marketing, and business and web development.

Infnitus recently created a mobile app that Eastern Health (Newfoundland and Labrador's largest health authority) uses to help teens access information about anxiety, break-ups, substance use, mental illness and other teenage issues.

"It's about using mobile technology to engage with (teenagers) in a way



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we've never been able to before," says Infnitus founder Scott Oldford.

His company's web development work often involves building "responsive" websites – those that are easily accessed on mobile devices. "When we develop a website or we develop a campaign, we start with mobile first and then build it out for the desktop," Oldford says.

No business in the current mobile environment should be without a responsive website, he adds. If your website is not mobile-friendly, you're going to lose customers.

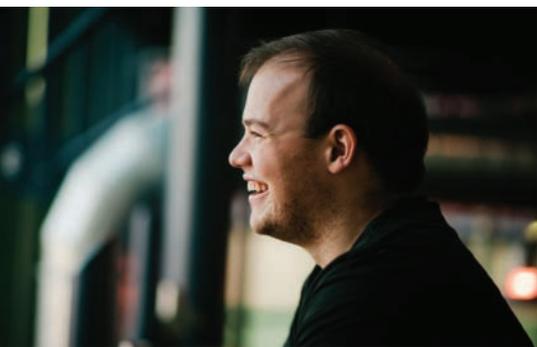
Mobile technology is also central to how Infnitus generates its own business.

The company produces free email newsletters, weekly podcasts and monthly webinars that are meant to help drive new business. Oldford calls it "value marketing".

The majority of Infnitus' newsletters and podcasts, and 40 per cent of its webinars, are accessed on mobile devices. "Ninety per cent of people that download our podcast download it through their mobile phone or tablet," he says.

For Oldford, it's a sign that mobile's influence is ever growing.

"Will mobile grow further? I think five years from now you probably won't have a desktop computer," he says. In fact, one of Oldford's client businesses is already desktop free, using only tablets.



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Scott Oldford
founder, Infnitus



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"Just because you send an email to me doesn't mean I'm going to respond in two minutes."

Jon Stanfield, president
Stanfield's North America

Jon Stanfield describes himself as a "dinosaur" because he still travels with a laptop. But that doesn't mean the president of Stanfield's North America has eschewed mobile technology.

Late last year he put money into ensuring the company's e-commerce website is mobile-friendly. "That's important for people who want to buy underwear at lunch – they can go on to our website and order it," he says jokingly. "(Mobile) is not cheap but you have to stay current and relevant, no matter how many pairs of underwear are bought through mobile phones."

Stanfield is a tablet owner and a BlackBerry user. Though based in Truro, his company (now more than 150-years-old) has a women's division in Montreal, a sales team in Toronto, as well as separate apparel companies in California and North Carolina.

A BlackBerry helps Stanfield bridge time zones and stay connected with teams in those varied locations. "It's just a way of life right now," says the fifth generation manager. "Your mobile devices are how you devour information."

That said, Stanfield laments that the ever-present nature of mobile means the technology easily bleeds into all aspects of his life.

So he has rules to ensure his BlackBerry doesn't dictate his



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behaviour. "Just because you send an email to me doesn't mean I'm going to respond in two minutes," he says. "I'll respond in due course."

On weekday evenings, Stanfield goes home, has dinner with his kids and then takes time to put them to bed. Only then, around 8 p.m., does he take a final peak at his phone. "Then I'm done for the night," he says.

On weekends, he'll check his email Saturday morning and Saturday before supper. On Sunday night he'll check to see if there's anything urgent for Monday morning. Stanfield still responds to texts and emails from his friends, but work emails are dealt with during work time.

"I try to set and moderate the usage because you can become trapped by it," he says.

Many business people, Stanfield observes, do not follow such rules and are constantly staring at their screens, even during meetings and conferences. "It drives me crazy," he says.

Stanfield recalls being out for dinner with his wife on Valentine's Day. He purposely left his phone in his hotel room. At the restaurant, he looked around and saw one table where both the husband and wife were looking only at their phones. "What is happening?" he thought to himself. "I use it to keep connected. But I manage my use of it because I don't want to be a slave to it."

Back at the Covered Bridge Potato Chip Company, Ryan Albright is preparing for a two-week trip that will take him to sales meetings and trade shows in Montreal, Pennsylvania, Boston, and Toronto. During that time he'll stay tethered to the activity at his New Brunswick plant via iPhone and iPad.

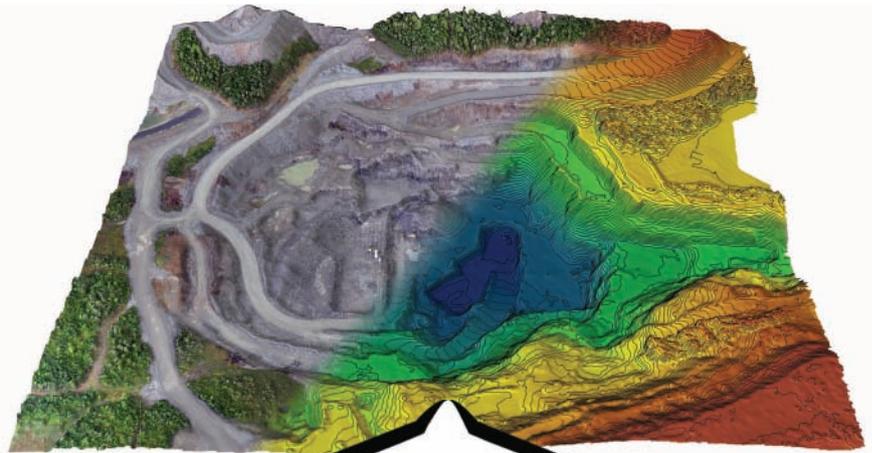
Albright admits it is difficult to cut the tether of his smartphone and tablet, even when on vacation. "I try, but it's very difficult. I'd rather fix issues as they come and not let them compound," he says. "But I try to limit how much I'm on it when I'm on vacation."

But as Albright sees it, if not for his iPhone, he probably wouldn't be able to take a vacation at all. •

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