



AgVantage Software Holds 27th Annual National Conference, June 13-15, 2012 in Minneapolis

BY ALYSHA BOHANON

The AgVantage Software National Conference is a fast-paced, high-energy annual conference, bringing customers and employees together for three days of educational classes, networking, and lively events.

Last month, AgVantage held its 27th annual national conference, maintaining its title as the longest running conference in the agribusiness software industry. The deep roots of this conference combined with the high retention rate of attendees sets the AgVantage National Conference apart from others in the industry.

Despite rapid advancements in technology and the company's change in management since the first national conference in 1985, the AgVantage Software conferences have survived and thrived.

It is AgVantage's ability to adapt to the changing technology and their dedication to keeping the conference fresh that keeps

customers coming back, said Lori Campbell, conference coordinator for AgVantage Software.

"When we started doing these, it was a different world. The first conferences that we had, we didn't have computer labs be-



Becky Kleeberger of Interstate Mills, Owatonna, MN and Julie Yost of Freeborn County Coop, Albert Lea, MN were each honored for attending their 25th conference! They received a glass crystal vase with a bouquet of flowers.

cause computers were too big, and you didn't have the Internet yet," she said.

Twenty-seven years later, the conference utilizes technology in every way possible. Wireless computer labs at the conference accessed data from the IBM i-series server, which is located at AgVantage's headquarters in Rochester, Minn. Employees demonstrated how to access AgVantage software on mobile devices and how to bring social networking to businesses in breakout sessions. And last year, conference attendees were able to easily exchange contact information through a Poken, a small handheld device that made networking a breeze.

"Part of being able to do conferences this long is about the evolution of the company. It's something this company has always believed in, regardless of who was in charge at the time. The company has always seen value in the connections and marketing of the conferences," Campbell said.

A unique aspect of the national conference is the number of attendees who come back year after year. Last month, AgVantage recognized two attendees who had participated in 25 conferences.

"I've been here quite a few years and still you learn something. It's a fun bunch of people to be with," said Nick Friend, controller for Bleyhl Farm Service in Grandview, Wash. Friend has attended the national conference for the past 14 years.

Educating customers is a priority for the AgVantage team, whether they have attended one conference or a dozen. "If they can learn something new, it's worth the time away from the office and the cost of attendance," Campbell said.

AgVantage customers are also given the opportunity to provide feedback on AgVantage software with Customer Driven Development (C.D.D.), as well as lead "Meet the Pro" sessions at the conference, said Michelle Blomberg, president and CEO of AgVantage.

"We started thinking, since our customers are the pros, and the ones that we hand-select are doing something kind of neat and unusual in the industry, why not have them come and share that with the customers, rather than just have us teach it all the time? I think that's huge. I think they love it," Blomberg said.

Gerald Jenkins, general manager of Ursa Farmers Coop in Ursa, Ill., helped lead a panel called "Getting the Most Out of Your Employees" at last month's conference. Jenkins enjoyed presenting at the conference because it provided an opportunity to meet people he may not have connected with, he said.

"I do think one strong component of this conference is that they bring in so many different speakers that represent different views from different companies. It is neat to hear the views of different companies," Jenkins said.

The AgVantage team also strives to keep the conference entertaining. This year, the theme of the conference was "Going for the GOLD." Attendees enjoyed an Olympic-themed social event dedicated to making personal connections and having fun. The night included volleyball, an arcade-style basketball game, Nintendo Wii Olympic games, a costume contest for the best sports attire, and more.

The group also attended a Twins baseball game. In the past, attendees have enjoyed a musical at the Chanhassen Dinner Theater in Chanhassen, Minn., a dinner train in Stillwater, Minn., and other attractions around the Twin Cities. And thanks to Blomberg's love of skits, the AgVantage team performs a comedy sketch each year to keep the attendees laughing.

"We let them have fun, dress up in silly costumes, go to a ball game. They know there's a fun component to the conference, and they don't want to miss out on that," Campbell said.

"It's always fun to see what the AgVantage team comes up with. It's almost worth coming just for that," said Sheri Boyken, controller for K & H Coop Oil Company in Wesley, Iowa, and 4-year attendee of the conference.

AgVantage's dedication to technology and customer experience combined with lighthearted fun result in an atmosphere attendees describe as 'positive' and 'energetic'.

"The positive energy that comes from Michelle and her group brings you in and makes you feel comfortable," said Brenda Wright, a first-year conference attendee and new em-

ployee for Ursa Farmers Coop in Ursa, Ill.

Jenkins also mentioned the AgVantage team's energy when he quoted one of his employees, who, following their first national conference, described it as 'infectious'.

"The AgVantage Conference is simply 'infectious'; you find yourselves asking for more and more. I think that 'infectious' energy began with Michelle but

it has spread throughout the entire staff of AgVantage," he said.

Blomberg's 'infectious' energy is not reserved only for the conferences, however, and neither is her team's.

"I think every single day here at the company my employees get to see me have a high level of energy, and day after day they get to have it, too," she said.

And when the entire team brings that energy to the conference, it rubs off on the customers, Blomberg said.

"Everyone wants to work where they feel good about themselves. It's fun to see people grab on to that positivity and high energy and try to bring it back. By the time they leave they are energized, inspired, and exhausted.

They can't wait to get home and put all of that to use," she said.

After 27 years, the AgVantage National Conference continues to evolve, thanks to the customers, sponsors, and the efforts of the AgVantage team.

To Gerald Jenkins, the conference serves as just one example of the growth and development of AgVantage as a company.

"I truly believe the conferences held by AgVantage are the best conferences I have attended in all my years. They offer great learning, great networking, great leadership. They really do become 'infectious'," he said.



Michelle Blomberg, President/CEO of AgVantage during her keynote "Going for the Gold with AgVantage."



AgVantage Staff Skit: Synchronized Swim Team

