



# The secret diary of a packhouse manager

Stuart Weston

**2.37am** - Fall, face first, on to unmade bed in on-site caravan (I'm not allowed to sleep in my car any more - apparently it's unprofessional). Technician finally has bloody bin tip working and I have grease up to my elbows. Which I don't wipe off. Fail to clean my teeth, too.

**6am** - Crack open first Red Bull, crank up AC/DC *Thunderstruck* to obtain the right frame of mind.

**6.05am** - I have 72 new emails ... check emails:

- Sales training course - once in a lifetime world renowned expert ... blah blah [delete]
- Daily submit from Zespri - [quick scan]
- Once in lifetime investment opportunity in Nigeria [forward "all"]
- Zespri packaging update "... now transitioning out of "new" labelled boxes, so old boxes are marked "new", and the new boxes aren't marked at all - please ensure all old "new" boxes used up before using new boxes [take Panadol with second Red Bull]
- Bulk deal on Viagra [move to "personal" file; review at end of harvest]
- Zespri packaging update - WTF? Another table showing variety/size/pack type/market destination for all 300 different labels [take second Panadol with third Red Bull]

**6.25am** - Abandon emails till tonight as shed is about to start up. If I've missed any earth shattering messages, someone will call me, screaming and spitting.

**6.30am** - Now comes the lottery. How many people haven't turned up to work this morning?

Wait in carpark for stragglers to arrive, while wondering which creative reasons they'll produce for being late this time. Seriously, these guys are so inventive, they should be in marketing.

**7am** - Supply manager explains yet another pack plan. I swear this guy makes it up as he goes along - every day is a new contradiction. Sometimes he asks for stuff that physically can't be done and I want to haul him down on the floor to spend some time in the real world. He reels off numbers - 18s to 33s in ITs, no wait, 36s into P1s, no wait, into MBs. It's too early in the morning for this many acronyms.

**7.20am** - Walk around canopy and complete a quick bin count. Why can't harvest guys count what they've just picked? Dream of the day I'll find exactly what they told me they'd picked, all sitting here ready to go.

**7.49am** - Grower services rep walks by and has audacity to tell me he's flat out - FLAT OUT? Give me a break! Having tea and scones with growers doesn't count as flat out. When I die, I want to come back as a grower services rep.

**7.51am** - Another text from next door neighbour saying one of our grower reps visiting my house at night. Can't understand why - we don't even own an orchard. (Note to self: ask wife about this next time I see her, probably in about September).

**8.20am** - Bloody bin tip. How is it that things only break down if a grower walks into the shed? Speed dial technician, who I see far more than my wife. Bloody bin tip.

**8.22am** - Grower approaching. In the immortal words of "Mr Rourke" off 1970s TV series *Fantasy Island*: "smiles everyone, smiles!"

Wipe bin tip grease on to pants before shaking hands. Show grower through, remembering to use polite words and listen attentively to details of his hip operation. Steer grower away from packer who is either break dancing or got something caught in his fly during a toilet break.

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**9am** – Wave cheerfully to coolstore manager as he trudges by encased in a heavily insulated jacket and gloves, like the Michelin Man. That poor bastard looks worse than I feel. Hope I don't come back in next life as a coolstore manager.

**9.05am** – Walk extra slowly past packing lane 10, where an unusually high number of stackers are hovering, while all the rest of the lanes pile up. Note to self - need to kick the packing supervisor. Nod politely to Sophia, the Brazilian backpacker, who just happens to be working in the vicinity.

**9.10am** – Watch the labelling guy stare into space while the warning light flashes. Shout to wake him up/stop him thinking about backpacking through Brazil.

**9.20am** – Swing by the QC desk. They're concerned about something so I don my concerned, empathetic face and drift away to the "happy place" in my mind. As the talking dies down, I re-join the conversation, repeat back a couple of things they've said and add a "thanks, you've given me a lot to think about". Stride sternly and purposefully away, as though

I'm about to do something with that conversation.

**9.40am** – Greet the little team picking off wrong fruit labels. It's a soul-destroying exercise and you can see it in their eyes. Remind them at least they're alive and reassure them their selection to this important job was utterly random (not sure they buy it).

**9.45am** – Completely avoid the team repacking the shitty lines. This job is horrible and they'd spot the bullshit if I made something up. Cross fingers they can hunker down and hang on until it's all done.

**10.05am** – Danger! Danger! Zespri field officer on the floor. Try to distract her from looking at anything too closely but the inevitable speech comes anyway "... our customers overseas, blah blah blah ..." Feign rapt attention while mentally howling "Listen lady, give me one pack type (loose fill please, not the layered), one label that actually sticks on the fruit and I'll give you the perfect product." Adopt exactly the concerned expression that worked with QCs.

**10.35am** – Arrive 5 minutes late to Health & Safety meeting after carefully negotiating 4.7km of painted yellow lines from the packhouse next door. Receive another reminder health and safety must be taken seriously or directors could face jail time. Nod seriously, while briefly enjoying mental image of imprisoned directors unable to hound me for the next six months.

**11am** – Smoko time. A seething mass of humanity presses in around the kettle. Exotic food is warmed and chatter levels rise – Spanish, Portuguese, French, Malay ... you name it, it's there. The body heat, the energy and laughter is fantastic. I feel my batteries charging as I sit in the midst of it all.

Aaaaaah, I love the smell of chaos in the morning. Damn, this is fun.

*Stuart Weston is the managing director of Apata Group Ltd, although none of the views expressed in this article are necessarily held by Apata Group Ltd, Brazilian backpackers or the National Guild of Frustrated Bin Tippers (NGFBT). ■*

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