

Case Study

How TraceGains Accelerated Collaboration at Smart & Final



Smart & Final, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, is the smaller, faster grocery warehouse store headquartered near Los Angeles in Commerce, California. Smart & Final's 254 store locations offer quality products in various sizes, saving customers time and money without a membership fee. "We're an in-between a Costco and a traditional grocery retailer," Director of Quality Assurance Celia Workman explained.

Today, Smart & Final operates 254 stores in the Western United States and 15 in Northwestern Mexico via a joint venture with Calimax, a Tijuana grocery chain.

Challenge: Communication

Despite decades of success, Smart & Final faced several challenges:

Supplier collaboration: At any given time, Smart & Final works with up to 300 manufacturers for its private label brands. This many collaborators creates significant paperwork, and Celia's team has spent most of their time chasing down suppliers to receive the proper documentation.

"Many suppliers are hesitant to provide documentation," Celia said. "However, we need it. Most suppliers understand the need, but vendors struggle to comply. So, I spent the majority of my time trying to convince our vendors that we need transparency."

Obtaining the necessary documentation for regulatory compliance was a battle. Celia and her team relied on email and phone calls to communicate with suppliers, which was often inefficient and slow.

Internal cooperation: Internally, Celia's team connected with other departments through meetings, emails, and voicemails. The team stored working files, like product specifications, as Word documents in shared drives that everyone could access, but this led to other problems.

"Everyone had access to the documents, so we'd find specifications missing or other issues, especially around version control," Celia said. "Someone else would open the file, then put them back, and often something was revised or changed. There were specifications we'd put together, then they were gone, and my team or I would have to recreate the file."

An unworkable solution: An unwieldy, big-name, bigger-budget PLM system made Celia's already challenging job nearly impossible. Following a complicated implementation process that dragged on for more than a year, Celia fought to manage supplier documentation from the confines of a system that turned small tasks into time-consuming projects. Her suppliers disliked it, too.

The system was exceedingly slow and prone to crashes, which required users to start the painful process all over again.

"At one point, we went an entire year with the system not working properly. It crashed constantly," Celia said. "I can't tell you how many times I reported the issue and demanded our money back."

"I was afraid to speak with vendors," Celia recalled. "I tried to be patient because it took suppliers multiple hours to enter the data for a single product."

Celia and her team needed "the latest and greatest version of supplier information, regulatory documents, and specifications in one place" that employees could access but not change without appropriate permission, approval, and tracking.

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– Celia Workman, Director of Quality Assurance, Smart & Final

Solution

TraceGains Supplier Management with Market Hub: TraceGains makes supplier onboarding quick and easy for the Smart & Final team. When a new supplier is selected, the supplier receives an alert to submit all required supplier and ingredient documentation, such as annual audits, FDA facility registration information, or allergen, kosher and organic certifications. TraceGains automatically highlights risk by supplier, item, geography, and more, identifying the most critical threats, so Celia's team can take action to prevent business disruption and other concerns.

"Before TraceGains, I ran a monthly query to learn which documents were going to expire, and then manually notify each vendor individually," Celia said. "We're a small team, and we have important business needs to address. We don't have the time to babysit documents."

Now, with TraceGains, Smart & Final's suppliers receive automatic alerts if documents are missing, incomplete, or about to expire, so everything remains up to date. It also helped that most of Smart & Final's suppliers were already on the TraceGains Network.

"We heard from many of our suppliers who were delighted with the transition to TraceGains. They especially appreciate PostOnce®, which allows suppliers to complete a document or provide information once and send it to all their customers with a single action. It's a huge selling point for suppliers," Celia pointed out.

Celia and her team frequently take advantage of Market Hub, TraceGains' comprehensive sourcing directory for ingredients, items, packaging, and service providers. Advanced search criteria like country of origin, organic, non-GMO, kosher, and more delivers precise sourcing fast.

"We use Market Hub to find new suppliers when a vendor performs poorly, or our preferred vendors don't carry an ingredient or item that we need. It saves us an enormous amount of time compared to how we had selected and onboarded vendors in the past. Just a few clicks and we're connected, and we instantly have the documentation and information we need."

TraceGains Specification Management: Celia's team also selected TraceGains Specification Management to create, publish, and update raw material and finished goods specifications on the TraceGains networked platform. When implemented, the team won't have to worry about chasing down supplier, ingredient, or item details to build and update specifications because they're already connected. They'll be able to auto-populate configurable templates. It also allows the team to collaborate directly with suppliers to create and update specifications – a new approach that will let the team work faster while also improving quality.

Digital transformation: TraceGains allows Celia's team to digitize everything from allergen forms to certifications to specifications. This provides the team the data to power configurable dashboards and reports to determine compliance against label claims, nutrition targets, thresholds (like Prop 65), country of origin, and more.

"It really works," Celia said. "It's user-friendly and makes it easy for us to collaborate with suppliers and determine how they're performing. Before, we didn't have the colorful dashboard that we have now, thanks to TraceGains. It's exciting that we can spot issues and track trends in real-time."

Conclusion

TraceGains Specification Management helps retailers like Smart & Final transform disconnected specification management steps into highly automated digital workflows. Teams can conduct real-time tasks alongside automated steps to improve consistency, eliminate errors, enable measurements, and vastly improve outcome reliability and quality. This is visible to everyone on the team from any connected device.

About TraceGains

Founded in 2008, TraceGains connects people and information so teams can work smarter. As a global technology company, TraceGains provides networked innovation, quality, and compliance solutions to consumer brands that want to reduce supply chain risk, speed up business processes and take control of data. On average, companies find 80% of their suppliers already on TraceGains Network, allowing them to connect and collaborate instantly.

Learn More

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