

NZ's 'fruit tech' startup Hectre picks up business award golds

Greg Hurrell | 10 Apr 2023



Hectre's Spectre app can instantly sample and grade a bin of apples. Image: Hectre)

Fast-growing fruit-tech startup Hectre has notched up two business awards as it looks forward to a new funding round in the next 12 months.

The New Zealand company provides a comprehensive orchard-management app to digitise complex paperwork and its Spectre fruit-sizing app for the apple – and recently the pear – industry.

Last week, Hectre picked up two gold awards in the Asia-Pacific Stevie business awards. Both were for the most innovative tech startup of the year, with one in the software category and the other in the business product industries category.

Hectre's marketing manager, Kylie Hall, provided BusinessDesk with some judges' comments, with one commending the company for helping solve food-wastage problems, particularly in the export sector. Another

praised Hectre's innovation in a sector suffering labour shortages.

The company has grown quickly since it was founded in 2016. When Hall joined in 2020, Hectre had 14 people and it now has 60 staff in several countries. Its core engineering team is based in Auckland, with a second research and development team in Vietnam.

It had customer support and sales reps across North America in the US states of Washington, Michigan and California, and in Mexico and Puerto Rico. It had also just hired its first European rep, Hall said.

No fancy drones, please

The three founders of Hectre included current chief executive Matty Blomfield and all shared a background in technology. One other thing they had in common was they'd all worked on orchards at some stage of their lives and could see the industry was being ignored by the tech sector.

Hall said the first step was to go and ask orchardists what they actually wanted, such as perhaps suggesting some drones and other "super techy" gadgets that could be of help.

"The growers were like, 'Hell no, we don't want any of that stuff,'" she said.

Their problem was paperwork – they were drowning in it. Even in 2016, orchardists were using pen and paper to deal with complex payrolls, different piece rates and fruit-bin ticketing and grading.

Often they would have a bin ticket where they had to write the same stuff three times because it had to go across to different parts of the business.

"So, just mountains and mountains of ridiculous paperwork," Hall said.

That led to the development of an orchard-management application, which became Hectre's first product.

Computers in, callipers out

The company's next initiative came after NZ growers introduced it to Washington state's huge orchard industry. The US growers took photos of their fruit bins but wanted technology to do much more.

"We went, 'Hold on, we might be able to do something like that,'" Hall said.

That led to an expansion of expertise and the development of some computer vision technology.

"Pretty much teaching a computer to see what we see."

Using artificial intelligence, the system was trained to size and colour-grade apples. By simply photographing an apple bin, orchardists can use Hectre's Spectre app to work out whether they are picking at the optimum time for the optimum price.

For fruit packers, it meant ditching the traditional callipers and ring gauges in favour of instant sampling and grading into sizes for storage and customer requirements.

According to a company statement, the app has so far sized more than 68 million pieces of fruit.

Raising capital

In 2021, a heavily oversubscribed funding round raised \$3.5m, and Hall said the next round, taking place in the next 12 months, would raise much more.

Already, 25 venture capital funds had reached out to Hectre before the company had contacted them.

Despite that, Hall said the company wouldn't raise funds beyond its requirements. "We're trying to get what we need to fund the next stage of what we want to do."

Beyond apples

The Spectre app is specifically tailored for apples and has only added pears in the past month. Hectre is taking a fruit-by-fruit approach to expansion, after all, there are plenty more apple growers out there.

The company is looking at kiwifruit and cherries and is aware of the potential for vegetables such as potatoes, onions and squash.

“We're not going to go in there all excited and just do everything, because we are very aware that that's a big trap. So we've taken a very focused approach to product development and market assessment,” Hall said.

While winning the awards was exciting for Hectre, Hall said the company's values remained grounded in feeling the pain of its customers.

“We are actually quite a humble Kiwi company.”