

# Building and launching a live stream auction platform in three weeks

*A LayerX Case Study*

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## **SIDEBAR**

### **Case Study**

New Zealand Farmers Livestock

### **Industry**

Agriculture

### **Employees**

100+

## Summary

COVID-19 and the nationwide lockdown had a massive impact on many industries in New Zealand. Notwithstanding the fact New Zealand Farmers Livestock (NZFL) was classified an essential business during the lockdown, hosting large crowds at sale yards was not permitted.

NZFL's core business is running sale yards and on-farm livestock auctions around the country; a task made near-on impossible when farmers are unable to attend in person.

For farmers, the flow-on effects resulting from the inability to trade livestock – coupled with backlogs at meat processing plants (also as a result of the lockdown) – were impacting both animal welfare and sale prices.

LayerX had built a custom website and online sales platform for NZFL that was launched just before lockdown. Live stream hybrid auctions with real time bidding were not part of the initial build but when COVID-19 hit, it quickly became a priority.

In collaboration with its subsidiary companies — vGRID Cloud Services and ModuSense Electronics — LayerX designed and built the electronics, private networks, cloud services, and software development solution to host the hybrid auction platform on the MyLiveStock website.

The first live streamed livestock auction in New Zealand was built in just three weeks and was ready to launch when the country moved down to Level 3 at the end of April.

# The Challenge

New Zealand Farmers Livestock (NZFL) has a proud history dating back over 130 years. Their mission is to enable farmers to get the best value when they sell their livestock, whether that is through on-farm sales, their eight sale yards around the country, or their online sales platform known as MyLiveStock.

NZFL was the first company in the country to introduce an online sales platform over 20 years ago but MyLiveStock was hosted on a WordPress website that was out-of-date, unreliable, and holding the company back. Bill Sweeney, General Manager of NZFL, contacted Bruce Trevarthen from LayerX and asked him to do a Digital Asset Audit.

“I realised we needed to up our game and use IT to our advantage,” he says. “Before we started working with LayerX we were forever chasing our tail, fixing bugs and problems. Rather than having a website that worked and building on it, we were going backwards.”

LayerX recommended a re-platform of the website and a CRM system to gather more insights into their customers. Bill Sweeney considered a number of IT companies before deciding to work with LayerX.

“When I first sat down with Bruce, he didn’t come across as an IT geek,” he says. “He explains complicated IT concepts in layman’s terms and makes a lot of sense. Bruce had a lot of ideas and suggestions to help improve the way we did things.”

“When we went to our previous IT company with an idea, they were happy to implement it but we had to drive the whole thing from whoa to go. I wanted to partner with a company that had their own ideas about how IT could benefit our business and Bruce was very proactive from the start.”

The first step was designing and building a website that worked. NZFL’s old website was a WordPress site with a series of plugins cobbled together to create a listing platform. It used a real estate plugin to list livestock which was far from ideal. The search function wasn’t sufficient for the level of detail required when buying livestock and the site took too long to load.

“The old website was a house of cards,” explains Bruce Trevarthen, the founder and CEO of LayerX. “If they touched anything, the risk was it would all fall down. Bill pretty much gave us a blank slate to start again and build a much better user experience.”

Bruce and Bill held weekly meetings to make sure the new website matched what NZFL wanted to achieve.

“Bruce sometimes took us down a different path to achieve a better result, but we trusted him and his understanding of how our system works,” says Bill, “We worked together to make the website the best experience we possibly could.”

NZFL and LayerX had already discussed a live streaming auction platform, “then COVID came along and we were in a race to get it up and running,” says Bill.

## Building a Live Stream Auction Site

Livestock sales were deemed an essential service by the Government and given the green light to resume under Level 3, provided they were supported by an online platform.

“We asked Bruce how long it would take to build a live stream platform and he told us he could get it done in three weeks, which was pretty phenomenal for a project of this scale and complexity,” says Bill.

The LayerX development team worked from home, on weekends, and into the early hours of the morning to make it happen. Regular collaboration with the client and an Agile approach to the development was essential because there wasn't time for a detailed design phase.

“Every day we built something new, then reviewed it and built the next piece of the puzzle,” says Bruce. “It was five steps forward, one step back but we made real progress every day.”

The LayerX group of companies were able to combine their expertise in electronics, engineering, cloud services and software development to manage the whole process, from the enclosure fabrication for the cameras and routers to the secure, high-speed private networks for the streaming services.

“When you have to outsource work to different companies it can get very complex and expensive,” says Bill. “The fact that LayerX was able to do it all was a big bonus and cost saving.”

NZFL has eight sales yards around the country and LayerX installed four permanent live stream auction kits and built another two mobile kits that can be used in different sale yards and for on-farm auctions.

“I was on-site for the first live stream at the end of April and we were still making minor tweaks minutes before the auction started,” says Bruce. “We took it to the wire which was nerve wracking and stressful but everyone on the team took it in their stride. This project was the epitome of that slogan, 'Test it Live' and we came through with flying colours.”

# The Results

During lockdown dairy prices were subdued and the demand for dairy cows on online listing platforms dropped significantly. The first live stream auction held at the end of April saw the average price per animal jump from under \$1,500 during lockdown to almost \$2,000.

“That shows the value of the auction and live stream process when used together,” says Bill. “There are people that will not buy without seeing animals in the flesh but because of COVID-19 some were forced to and commented on how easy it was and the view of the animals detailed the stock extremely well which made the process a lot easier. It also gave farmers from far afield, who might be interested in a couple of animals in a sale in Morrinsville for instance but couldn’t justify the cost or time, the ability to bid via the livestream auction.”

“If a farmer is selling his farm and needs to sell 1000 cattle, he can hold the auction on the farm using the portable live stream kit. That means considerable savings on carrier fees and is less stressful for the farmer and the animal.”

Since the platform went live, NZFL has been running six or seven auctions a week, often simultaneously.

“Bruce and his team did a great job of understanding the auction process and creating something really unique,” says Bill. “None of our competitors have anything like this.”

“Farmers and our agents have really embraced the new platform because it’s faster and easier to use,” says Bill. “We have significantly more visits and people are spending longer on the website. LayerX has gone beyond the call of duty to get the auction platform up and running in such a short time frame. The LayerX team have been outstanding to work with and I can't speak highly enough about them.”