Top Questions for AgTech Vendors[1]

Use these questions to guide your decision making around the digital technologies and services that you buy, lease or get through subscriptions. Then, do your homework.

Sometimes, it helps to be clear about your needs and requirements. That can be difficult, but it's worth advocating for yourselves, individually and collectively. This is a bit like the way the consumer rights movement in the 1970s led vehicle manufacturers to introduce better passenger safety features into the design of their products. In the long-run, this benefitted everyone, including manufacturers by making their vehicles more attractive to safety-conscious consumers.

Data Residency

Question:

☐ **Where would my data actually be housed and does it ever move between countries?**

A reasonable answer should include:

✓ A clear statement about the countries where your data may be stored or the national boundaries it may move across. For example, storage in North America is common.

NOTE: This applies even to cloud-based storage. Some countries and jurisdictions (such as the European Union) have strict privacy and data residency requirements. Other countries (such as the US and China) have legislation that permits national governments to access data-in-transit under certain circumstances beyond a warrant from a law enforcement agency.

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1. R. Kotak with J. Botschner (2022)

Security

Question:

☐ **What security measures do you have in place to protect the information you store about me and my farm business?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ Customer data is encrypted (it is not stored as plain text)
- ✓ Customer data is backed up off-premises and in a different geographic location
- ✓ Our company has been certified against established cybersecurity standards (such as ISO 27001 or NIST)
- ✓ Our company regularly conducts penetration testing and maintains records of findings and practices to address any identified gaps
- ✓ Our company maintains physical security (such as fire, flood, intrusion) for customer data and audits this periodically

Question:

☐ **What access controls do you have in place?**

Access controls are ways of making sure that only authorized people can get into systems and places, and the information held there. Examples include: login credentials (e.g., user name, password); locks; monitoring systems; alarms

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ Confirmation that access controls are in place
- ✓ A description of the access control measures that are used
- ✓ A list of the kinds of people who can view your data
- ✓ Whether logs are kept and regular audits are conducted

Question:

☐ **Does your company and its customers use multifactor authentication (MFA) to access customer data?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ Confirmation that MFA is active and is used as a regular practice within the company
- ✓ A description of the options for MFA that are available to customers to use (such as an access code being sent to your mobile device along with having to use a login identity, a password, and having to answer a secret challenge question)

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Customer Support

Question:
☐ **What type of support is available to your customers?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ 24/7 support is available
- ✓ Support is provided by the company, based on knowledge of your specific account
- ✓ Support can make decisions to fix a problem or connect you immediately to a consultant who can work with you to explore options to improve your service
- ✓ You can escalate issues, if needed
- ✓ Support is not provided by a generic third-party contractor

The Business

You should be able to get answers to the following questions directly from the vendor, but also from an Internet search that you can do yourself.

Question:
☐ **Who are your customers?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ A description of the main group(s) of customers the company supports, which may indicate degree of familiarity with the needs of businesses like yours

Question:
☐ **Who owns and who runs your company?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ Clear information about whether the company is publicly held (traded on the stock market) or privately owned
- ✓ Clear information about who owns the company or how much of the company is owned by other companies
- ✓ Information is available about where the head office of the company and any of its owners is located (such as Canada, the USA, the UK, Israel, the Netherlands, China)
- ✓ Information about who the key executives are
- ✓ Information about who is on the board of directors

Question:
☐ **How long have you been in business/has your company been involved in this specific line of business?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ The length of time the company has been in business, including the specific line of business you are dealing with

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Question:
☐ **Have there been any complaints or major lawsuits or legal decisions against the company?**

A reasonable answer that you should be able to find through an Internet search should include:

- ✓ Whether there has or has not been complaints or legal actions (civil, criminal, regulatory) against the company
- ✓ What the focus of these complaints or actions were
- ✓ What the results were
- ✓ Whether there were any subsequent complaints, actions or lawsuits

Privacy and Ownership

Question:
☐ **Does your company have a privacy policy?**

A reasonable answer should include:

- ✓ Confirmation that there is a privacy policy
- ✓ The policy is easily available for your review
- ✓ The policy is clearly written and understandable by a lay person
- ✓ The policy covers basic things like:
  - If the company shares customer data with others (even if this is a free trial)
  - The kind of customer data that is shared, who it is shared with and for what purposes
  - Whether cancelling your agreement with the company means your data is no longer available to it or its partners, and whether it will be extracted and returned to you in usable form
  - Options you have for expanding or limiting the amount of your information that is collected and/or shared

NOTE: Larger companies that provide IoT equipment and software to farmers have different software compatibility requirements and restrictions. Talk to each other about what these are and ask your sector associations and farmer-owned organizations to bring your questions to vendors. This creates opportunities for vendors to build trust and confidence among their consumer base.

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For further information

CSKA Community Safety Knowledge Alliance
Research to Practice to Alignment

www.cskacanada.ca

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About this project

The *Cyber Security Capacity in Canadian Agriculture* project is a national, multi-year, initiative funded by Public Safety Canada's Cyber Security Cooperation Program that aims to strengthen cybersecurity capacity within Canada's agricultural sector.

The agricultural sector has increasingly become a target of cyber attacks in ways that can cause serious disruption to the livelihoods of rural communities, and to critical infrastructures, including supply chains. This project is aligned to efforts to strengthen and support domestic food security and wellbeing, rural economic development and resilience, and national prosperity.

The suggestions offered in this document are intended as education about options for further exploration. They are not a substitute for professional technical advice tailored to an individual business.