Soya bean crushing:
An industry comes of age

Historically, soya meal did not have a place in the South African feed industry. In the 1970s, fish meal supplemented animal feed requirements. Soya bean production was miniscule and only received real attention after 1996.

As production increased, raw soya beans were an export orientated product, while the local feed industry depended on soya meal imports. Being of an ‘inferior’ quality, it was believed that South African soya bean cultivars were not suited to value-add crushing. But bean quality was not the whole problem.

Crushing machinery had not been adapted to suit the unique characteristics of South African cultivars. Local soya bean crushing only really took off in 2012 when industry players began importing state-of-the-art crushing machinery, which was adjusted to optimise the crushing of South African cultivars into the highest quality value-added soya bean products.

The client is king
The client is king in the crushing industry. Consumers of soya products have precise specifications regarding protein content, urease, and fibre and moisture, as deviations cause complications in animal feed rations. Further, product specifications differ according to the consumer, forcing soya bean crushers to be versatile with a meticulous understanding of industry, machinery and beans. A holistic approach to soya bean crushing is the key to producing international standard meal consistently.

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While soya meal is the core output of any soya crushing operation, real industry players ensure nothing is wasted turning by-products into value-added marketable outputs. Crude oil is one by-product with a significant market, but with resourcefulness and an entrepreneurial drive there is always the potential of breaking new ground.

An industry specific example is the growth of the South African soya hull market, which initially was non-existent. Soya hulls are competitively priced and their fibre content is unparalleled. With the right people bringing this undervalued product to market, local soya hull production does not satisfy South Africa’s annual demand.

South Africa’s soya crushing industry has grown considerably in a relatively short period of time. Once dependent on imports, the whole of the reef region now consumes locally crushed soya meal. Coastal regions are still reliant on imported meal. Product delivered directly to ports is more competitively priced than meal sent from inland depots. But this is soon to change.

Higher production needed
In the ideal world, soya bean cultivars would be engineered to have a higher oil and protein content, variations that are currently not possible. For crushers to produce the volumes needed to outcompete meal imports, it is essential that farmers increase production. This can be achieved by planting high yielding and drought resistant cultivars.

Soya bean genetic selection is an industry on the rise. Role-players target regions with superior soya bean cultivars and carefully select those that are suited both geographically and agronomically to specific South African growing regions.

Synergies created by integrating the value chain are vitally important for growth. The challenges in the immediate future are capturing the coastal animal feed market and increased local human consumption, opportunities that leave space for considerable growth and a prosperous short to medium term future.