

There's Something About Produce...

by Lisa Cork

Have you noticed that there is something about fresh produce that intrigues people?

A recent experience of mine reinforces this point. Recently I attended a "foodies" function. In the course of mixing and mingling, we got to talking about fresh fruits and vegetables and what I call "**the produce shopping experience™**". Suddenly. The conversation became animated as the people recounted their experiences in various produce departments.

Understanding The Produce Shopping Experience™

One woman recalled the frustration she felt recently when she bought some grapes. She said, "For three or four months I have been buying green seedless grapes for the kids and they love them. Last week, I bought some green grapes as per normal only to find they had seeds. I was disappointed because the kids wouldn't eat them. I was frustrated because my retailer didn't tell me to expect any different than what I had been buying."

Another woman recalled a recent experience with bagged apples that had gone floury. She couldn't figure out why a store would continue selling them if they were bad. Her question to me was, "Doesn't anybody try this stuff before they sell it?"

The last participant in the conversation was a gentleman. He just laughed at all us gals talking about fruit, put his hands to his cheeks and said in despair, "The produce department just mystifies me." Enough said.

What is happening among shoppers? What do these conversations reflect? Are they one-off frustrations or is it a sign of a bigger issue? Personally, I think it relates to how we measure a produce department's success.

Measuring A Produce Department's Success – There Is More Than Just Numbers

I have been told by those in the know that there are three ingredients to determine a produce department's success: (1) Percentage of store share, (2) Gross profit; and (3) percent wage cost. While I do not dispute numbers as a measurement tool, I query whether there is more to determining a produce department's success than just the numbers.

What if the store's produce department directly influenced brand value or customer loyalty? What if creating a produce shopping environment that was frustration free and customer health oriented created goodwill? Would we value produce more or treat it differently? I think we would.

Produce is more than just a colorful entry point into a store. But unless you are the primary household shopper, I think it is hard to understand this. For the predominantly

female shopper, the produce department is the enjoyable part of the shopping experience. Why?

Produce Is Exciting. Seasonal. Varietal.

Because produce is exciting. It is seasonal. It is alive. It is varietal. It is full of natural goodness for the family. And it changes constantly. No other department in the grocery store owns these attributes. The key is capitalizing on the opportunity.

For fun, at the mix and mingle I mentioned earlier, I painted the group a 'what if' picture of what produce shopping could be like. It went like this...

Introducing The Produce Manager's Pick Of The Week

"What if you walked into a produce department and the first thing you noticed was the Produce Manager's Pick Of The Week chalkboard?

It announced, 'This week, produce manager Steve recommends: 1) new season California navel oranges. These beauties are seedless and juicy. This is new season fruit and not to be missed. 2) I also recommend California mandarins. While these beauties have seeds, the pips are large and manageable. They are easy-peel and their taste is stunning. A must have this week. 3) Fresh broccoli is this week's anti-cancer vegetable. See the broccoli display for a broccoli pesto recipe that is fast, healthy and delicious. 4) New season tomatoes are back. If you gave up eating tomatoes over winter, come back and join the party because the taste is fantastic. Remember – never store your tomatoes in the fridge.'"

The consensus among the group was that this type of sign would be amazing and all agreed they would likely spend more as a result. They also agreed it creates valuable goodwill for the retailer.

The marketer in me says we can do produce better. The customer in me says we need to do produce better. Produce shopping is frustrating. If we can solve the frustration, we can create more loyalty, more goodwill and ultimately, more sales.

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