



Save Mart's Ed Corvelo Shares Views Of 40-Year Produce Career

Long before the days of baby carrots and bagged salad, Ed Corvelo started his career in retail. After 26 years at store level for Save Mart, he became a produce buyer working in a buying office for five years, then took an opportunity as a floral buyer for three years for the Modesto, CA-based chain of more than 180 stores. Today Corvelo is senior manager of Fresh Procurement.

BY E. SHAUNN ALDERMAN

What was the grocery industry like when you started your career?

My career began in 1975, when SKUs were limited to the seasonality and sourcing availability; imported produce was limited. Southern Hemisphere fruit and vegetables were unheard of. There was a true gap in asparagus, stone fruit, citrus, grapes and melons. Organic was just a word. There was very little discussion on this topic. Fresh-cut or packaged items had just started to become available.

When did you begin to see things change?

We broke through a barrier when bag salad and spinach became available, and we

PRODUCE SHRINK ▶

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began selling mushrooms in a Styrofoam tray. Cello-wrapped lettuce was a premium item wrapped in a facility — not in the fields like it is now. Asparagus was in wooden crates that needed to be banded to create a consumer package. Strawberries were in pint containers. They were hand-wrapped or capped by hand with a clear dome. No baby carrots were available for sale. Technology was just starting. PLUs for the cashiers to use at the check-out helped ensure proper sales per item, manage retails and track movement.

PRODUCE BUSINESS is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Can you share with our readers what the retail environment was like in 1985, when the magazine was founded?

As a customer, you knew your produce guy. Local produce was sourced sometime off

the back of a farmer's truck. Today this practice is not feasible for so many reasons — food safety, liability, cold chain, traceability, financial transaction issues, to name a few.

Total SKU count was less than 300 items. Now there is more than that just in ancillary produce items like dry seasoning packets, refrigerated dressings, croutons, packaged nuts and dried fruit.

Floral departments were feeling their way with selection. Standard green plants were sold in 3-inch, 4-inch and 6-inch pots. Mums, begonias, violets were the core. Some hard-line items were for sale to complement the department. Hoses, lawn sprinklers, potting soils, assorted fertilizers, and mousetraps and pest sprays had a small section.

Seasonal items such as Easter Lilies and Poinsettias took center stage when appropriate. We always did a great job with bedding plants in the spring. Everyday fresh-cut flower selection was limited, but for Memorial Day weekend, fresh-cut flowers were really big for us. Stock, Statice, Gladiolus, Gypsophyllia, leather fern came to us dry packed. Cutting stems and rehydrating was time-consuming. We would rearrange the walk-in box and erect temporary shelves to accommodate the buckets of flowers.

TRACEABILITY ▶

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What did you learn along the way?

After 26 years at store level, I became a produce buyer. This was a dream come true. I was able to relate back to the stores. What I did as a buyer directly affected the stores. The floral buyer position became open after the Albertsons acquisition. I left the produce buying office for a new chapter as the floral buyer.

I related my experience in produce at store level to help me in the floral buying arena. The similarities being that both are highly perishable. They must be quickly moved through the supply chain. Not all stories have happy endings, and knowing when to reduce the retail on an item to move it through the system is something I learned from my produce roots.

Floral growers are farmers on a different scale. The lead-time and forward planning is crucial to success. I always say it takes 48 weeks to grow a hydrangea; so if you want to sell them for Mother's Day, you need to plan ahead.

With that said, growers during this time period always had a 'little extra' product available. They would grow a small percentage on speculation. With the economy beginning to take a downturn in 2007 to 2008, customers began to look at floral purchases differently.

Floral items started backing up. Retail chains' programs were scaled back. Chains began giving growers back their commitments of plants they had agreed to buy. This became a serious issue for most potted growers. They needed to sell what they had on hand and rethink the market going forward. The speculation growing stopped. It became evident that the grower and retailer need to be connected. This is where relationships really

ON-LINE SHOPPING ►

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began to solidify for me as a buyer. Our vendor relationships are very important. Quality is always first, then price.

With PLUs and UPCs being used on produce and floral items at the point of purchase, the retailer began to have visibility to categories. This led to managing categories, tracking or drilling down to a single item became standard practice. Decisions are now based on this task.

Could you share your views on the topic of food safety?

Food safety is always in the headlines. I was in a produce buying office at 6 a.m. when the first phone call came in from a store asking a question regarding a possible issue with tainted spinach. A customer had seen something on the Internet and was questioning the produce manager. I was actually on the value-added buying desk at the time of the spinach recall.

Produce traceability has become a hot topic. In my opinion, if we all pay it forward, we need to do the work up front with documentation from the source at the grower end running all the way through the supply chain. When an issue does occur, it will speed up the process — and in this area, speed is important. During the spinach recall in 2006, the entire spinach crop was pulled from retailers' shelves. This sent shock waves through the leafy greens community. The

financial loss was staggering. With accurate documentation, only the suspect item would be removed from the system. This could limit a total market disruption.

How do you see the position of importation compared to 1985?

International or global trade has become the norm. Customers are looking for a year-round eating experience. Years ago, there was truly seasonality of items. The anticipation of a California or domestic piece of fruit is gone. Sourcing from the Southern Hemisphere changed that. Related to floral, using Valentine's Day as an example, if we didn't import fresh roses from Ecuador and Colombia, the cost for a dozen roses would be staggering and unobtainable for most customers.

What do you see for the future of retail?

In my opinion, web-based retailing will continue to grow. The Millennials that want instant gratification will make sure of that. The interesting part will be when they settle down and become busier with family life and careers. Will the allure continue, or will they want to break away from the norm and get back to shopping at local establishments?

As a Baby Boomer, I think it's cool that I can use my computer on Monday and have what I want delivered to my doorstep by Wednesday. As these companies continue to develop quicker and less-expensive logistics, the issue of quality still needs to be addressed. And what this means for produce will always be a challenge. How do they get that fresh lime to land at my door to look just like the high-graphic picture I clicked on two days earlier?

What are your thoughts on choosing retail/produce as a career today?

For anyone new to the industry, I would suggest they find a mentor; someone with experience to collaborate with. Sharing the lessons from the past brings two people together, and it helps preserve traditions and core values. The core values instilled in me 40 years ago are still evident today in my thinking and go-to business strategies. **PB**

MENTORSHIP ►

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