

RETROSPECTIVE

RETAILER **RANDY SCOTT** TALKS CHANGE, INNOVATION AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

BY CAROL BAREUTHER

Limited SKUs, little variety and a location in a small corner of the supermarket characterized produce departments when Randy Scott started his career with Affiliated Foods in Keller, TX in 1983. After working a year as a distribution consultant for OMI International, Scott joined Food Lion in 1991. He served as procurement manager, produce buyer and category manager for the Salisbury, NC-headquartered Delhaize America subsidiary, until this past summer. In July, Scott assumed the position of senior manager of produce procurement position for Sprouts Farmers Market, a 212-store chain based in Phoenix. Over the past six years Scott has made a name for himself in the produce industry by taking on leadership roles as co-chairman of the United Fresh Convention in 2009, member of United Fresh's board of directors in 2010, and most recently chairman of United's Retail-Foodservice Board.

Where were you in 1985?

I was into my second year of learning about inspecting produce while working as a produce receiver for Affiliated Foods.

What was the produce department like in 1985?

The number of SKUs back then was relatively low and variety was limited. The core items such as iceberg lettuce, bananas, apples, etc., carried much of the weight in the department. Just thinking of apples, we only had a few varieties to choose from, with Red Delicious, Granny Smith, and Golden Delicious as the predominant varieties. Most fruit categories were seasonal. Grapes, berries and other commodities would have a fairly large gap between seasons.

I don't remember the first fresh-cut produce until well into the 1990s, outside of what we cut in-store such as melons and pineapple. The first packaged salads to arrive were in



Randy Scott

sealed bags that we called 'bricks,' because of how tightly they were vacuum-sealed. Even then, the variety was limited to just a few SKUs.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

In 1985, the independent, small grocery stores had a large presence. We had more than 900 stores in our co-op and many were family owned stores. Produce departments were in a small corner of those stores, although they were very important to customers. It seemed as if you always knew your local produce manager by name and it was easy to develop a family-type relationship with them. They remembered all of their regular customers.

We did not have the ancillary items in the produce departments at that time. Refrigerated dressings, croutons, dried fruit ... all of those did not arrive until several years later.

Floral was only brought in as seasonal situations demanded. We would bring in poinsettias, lilies and a couple of fresh-cuts for holidays. Bedding plants would be available each spring for a short period of time.

When did things start to change and what were the drivers of this change?

Many things contributed to change, but I would say the packaged salad arrival was one of the biggest drivers. Customers began to see the benefit of convenience and they jumped on that trend quickly. At that same time, other commodities were showing up in different package options. Grapes were starting to be sold in bags. Strawberries in clamshell containers began to replace the plastic pint containers that required us to cap them in-store.

What are some of the biggest innovations you've seen in the produce industry over the past 30 years?

A couple of things stand out to me when I think of innovation. The ability to purchase almost all commodities throughout the entire year is a big one. We can import from all over the world to fill whatever gaps we may have, specifically on fruits, but on vegetables as well. The other big one is the fresh-cut and packaged salad innovations. There is no limit to the number of options for different salad varieties and the quality is outstanding.

How would you describe the produce department today?

There are so many adjectives that would fit today. Produce has become perhaps the most important department in the store. Customers expect fresh, quality produce every time they

