

RETROSPECTIVE

DAN SLEEP, CHIEF OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT, MARKETING FOR THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, REVELS IN TODAY'S PRODUCE AND INDUSTRY ADVANCEMENTS

BY JODEAN ROBBINS

Dan Sleep spent more than 10 years in the retail produce business and worked at two major chains, Jewel-Osco and Food Lion. During his tenure at Jewel from 1978 to 1986, he worked in every aspect of the business — from produce clerk to store manager and everything in between. During 1991 to 1993, he was perishable manager at Food Lion before joining the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in 1993.

Where were you in 1985?

In Portage, MI, with Jewel Food Stores [known today as Jewel-Osco].

What was the produce department like in 1985?

We were just beginning to see seasonality diminish somewhat; a few items were beginning to be maintained year-round. We still bought local apples right off the truck, but that was dying out. Kiwi was introduced right about then, as well as cut melons (which we all thought was a flop) and then packaged salads (which we simply threw away every other day). One of our vice presidents told me, "This will be an 8-foot section one day."

How was the overall retail environment then?

We were always watching customers, talking to them, selling, trying to build interesting displays and maintaining perfect looking produce. We began to draw customers away from smaller IGAs.

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

Lighting was one of the first big changes. Better table displays, cold storage and protecting items, like bananas, from open receiving doors during the winter emerged



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as critical factors in avoiding unnecessary shrink. Profit, we were told, was made at the distribution center, we were a loss-prevention center — that didn't go over well. We still thought of ourselves as a sales center.

What have been some of the biggest innovations in the industry over the past 30 years?

Handling procedures, quality and inventory control were central to success. Although many new items were being carried, these first three [categories] never changed as far as how critical they are to success. Enhancements to these continue to play a crucial role.

How would you describe the produce department today?

Amazing! There is rich diversity and quality, international selections, and our ability to be seamless as seasons change. It is rare someone is out of any item. Before, when seasons changed, we were always telling shoppers, "That's it on Idaho potatoes, oranges or berries." Today, that never occurs.

What do you think was the greatest lesson you learned about retailing during the past 30 years?

Take pride in your presentation, and the sales will take care of themselves.

What do you think will drive the industry in the next 10 to 20 years?

Uniform cultivars. We're seeing that now to some degree where customers can purchase strawberries all year long. Soon it'll be one or two cultivars, perhaps even unique to particular chains.

What are the challenges holding us back?

Nothing. I see progress on all fronts. It is truly an awesome sight when you see the industry get better every year in so many areas. I have the great advantage of seeing that progress around the world.

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

Marketing brings me into contact with certain aspects of retail; however, there is nothing better than setting a perfect department, facing the challenges of the day or being able for a few seconds to watch customers buy what you put out.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?

Quality still sells.