

RETROSPECTIVE

RETAILER-TURNED-SUPPLIER

STEVE WILLIAMS TALKS ABOUT HIS 30-PLUS YEAR PRODUCE CAREER

BY CAROL BAREUTHER

There were few multi-deck cases in the produce department, free-standing refrigerated tables were considered too expensive to operate, and exotic tropical and tomato carts were a merchandising tool of the future when Steve Williams was promoted to produce merchandiser at Kash n' Karry Supermarkets, a Tampa, FL-based grocery chain with 84 stores back in 1985.

Eight years earlier, a teenage Williams started his retail career as a bagger at the same chain. He moved up to produce clerk the next year, produce manager two years later, and produce merchandiser five years after that — a position he held for 17 years. In 2003, Williams became director of produce and floral and shortly after helped to open the produce departments in Kash n' Karry's then-new concept, Sweetbay Supermarket. A decade later, he transitioned to the supply side, and today is manager of new business development for Raleigh, NC-based L&M Companies, Inc.

Where were you in 1985?

I was produce merchandiser at Kash n' Karry Supermarkets overseeing the produce operations of 25 stores.

What was the produce department like in 1985?

Compared to today's produce department standards, we would consider 1985 produce operations prehistoric. We were just starting to understand the importance of locating the produce department up front to showcase its importance and build customer confidence in our fresh departments. There were still gaps in product availability. But that was cool, because when an item came back into season, you could really have a promotion that got customers excited to buy. One of the biggest areas of change is around food safety. I remember merchandising cut watermelon on an unrefrigerated endcap. Could you imagine

doing that today?

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?

Without question, we thought it was very competitive as all retailers were fighting to earn and maintain market share. It was conventional supermarkets that were alike competing against each other for the business. Unlike today, there was not much pressure from the big box stores, well run health and natural food stores, and smaller drugstores that continue to increase food offerings. Technology compared to today was nonexistent. For example, now we have the systems in place to pinpoint shrink down to the item level on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Thirty years ago, we would figure our shrink from the trim/waste barrels going out the back door until the inventory was taken at the end of each month, and actual results were posted.

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

In the early 1980s, when a produce operation that was strictly packaged and located in the rear of the store transitioned to one that aggressively merchandised 80 percent of its product bulk and was located upfront. I saw the future coming to life. It was at this time that much more attention was being placed on signage to help increase impulse purchases. This included item-level signing, which was essentially a picture or art and some nutritional information. Category signing helped customers navigate through the department along with the

over-branding signage of the entire produce department.

What led you to the supply side of the industry? What insights did you gain on the supply side that you wish you had or knew if you continued as a retailer?

I always enjoyed learning how products are grown, harvested, packed and shipped. With this in mind, I approached one of my preferred suppliers to see if they could provide me with what I was looking for. It's been a very educational trip so far. I remember planning promotions on cherries when on the retail side. I thought we had it tough. Cherries are one of the hardest items in terms of scheduling promotional dates, being priced right, and getting quality orders delivered properly to the DC's. I gained a new perspective on what it takes to work cherries on the supplier side. The pace that people move to secure product, line up orders, secure transportation, and achieve customer satisfaction was something I never saw before.



