



Is NRA Really Serious About Doubling Produce Usage?

When the CEOs of the Produce Marketing Association, the National Restaurant Association and the International Foodservice Distributors Association stood together at PMA's annual Foodservice Conference last year in Monterey, CA, and announced an initiative to double fresh produce use in foodservice over the next ten years, we were enthused but cautious.

The enthusiasm was for "the big, hairy, audacious goal" that potentially could transform the produce industry while helping the health of Americans. The caution was because we doubted that NRA and IFDA would really sustain interest in the initiative. The problem is that the membership of these organizations is fundamentally "product neutral" — if consumers want beef, they will get beef and if consumers want chicken, then chicken it is, and if consumers want salads, then salad offerings are what will be provided.

Yes, of course, a few white tablecloth restaurants may define themselves as presenting the personal selections of a chef and thus educating consumers as to what is good. The vast majority of chains, though, are looking to figure out what consumers like and offer it, not direct consumers as to what they ought to like.

Thus, the interest of NRA and IFDA in the whole initiative really draws from a public relations/government affairs perspective. With obesity as America's premier public health problem, the restaurant operators don't want to be seen as a part of the problem; they want to be seen as part of the solution. Thus the alliance with PMA gives them a powerful club to use when asked by reporters or in Congressional testimony what the foodservice industry is doing about obesity.

Because the goal is not to be reached until 2020, NRA and IFDA have at least kicked the can down the road and, who knows, by then, we may discover that we have a different problem.

We had no doubt that PMA would stay focused on the goal — its membership is solidly supportive. But what we were primarily looking to see at this year's PMA Foodservice Conference, one year out from the announcement, was what NRA and IFDA were doing to show their commitment to this initiative.

Dawn Sweeney, president and CEO of NRA, and Mark Allen, president and CEO of IFDA, were AWOL this year, apparently not thinking that a conclave with the foodservice produce supply base was a productive use of their time.

If you go to the website of NRA, you will notice that there is not one word on the home page about this supposedly important initiative. Same thing with the IFDA. And if you search the two sites, the last mention you find of the whole initiative is the press release

from last year. Except, of course, for speeches. So when Dawn Sweeney addressed the 2010 Nutrition Summit, hosted by the Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Agriculture, she mentioned the initiative.

Of course, that line doesn't show that the partnership is bearing fruit at all. It just shows that NRA sees value in being associated with fresh produce. Yet it seems reasonable to expect a big button on the Web site: Produce 2020 — sign up now! There should be lots of educational programs, care-and-handling and procurement tips and consumer promotion advisories. Why shouldn't restaurants sign up for the initiative and get special window decals to show their consumers that they are committed.

There is a lot that could be done. It is nice to have IFDA on board, but presumably its members will distribute whatever their customers buy. NRA, however, can make a big difference because it has a direct connection with restaurants — but so far, it seems more interested in using the produce industry for political cover than actually doing anything to increase fresh produce usage.

PMA is clearly dedicated. However, there are practical problems that will make the initiative challenging if not resolved. We were hoping to get a one-year-from-launch update on how the initiative was doing, but that didn't happen. Foodservice operators buy direct from growers, through brokers, through distributors, through terminal markets; some buy from warehouse clubs and even fill in from conventional supermarkets. Nobody has a way to tie this together. The closest we came at the conference to quantification was that somebody counts the mentions of avocados on menus and that number, apparently, was up. If we can't get a starting point, how will we know if we meet our goal for doubling foodservice usage of produce by 2020?

There is one other roadblock lying ahead. This is an initiative about fresh, yet probably the easiest way to increase foodservice consumption of fresh produce is to switch those users who now use frozen or canned product to fresh. Get the pizzerias putting canned mushrooms on the pizza or buying frozen broccoli spears to convert to fresh. This is easiest because it requires no change in consumer eating habits, only industry procurement habits. This would help PMA members, but probably wouldn't serve the interests of NRA very much as the nutritional content of restaurant meals would change only slightly.

NRA allowed PMA to present some workshops at NRA's national convention; it issued a joint press release a year ago; but it is going to take a lot more effort to make anything important happen. This is the year to see how serious NRA really is about this initiative. **pb**

This is the year
to see how
serious NRA
really is about
this initiative.