Supply and demand meant trading crops with neighbors when Don Harris grew up on a farm in Idaho. His father and grandfather put produce in Harris’ blood from birth. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Business Marketing from the University of Idaho, he traded the field for retail by holding a series of leadership positions with Safeway, where he worked his way to director of corporate produce merchandising and marketing.

This followed a career with natural and organic retailer, Wild Oats, where Harris served as vice president of produce and floral, creating a buying team that supplied more than 100 stores nationwide with organic produce. Then, after five years working on the supply side as director of category development for Estero, FL-based Naturipe Farms, Harris started his own business, Harris Consulting Solutions.

In May of this year, he embarked on another interesting facet in his illustrious produce career by becoming director of produce supply for Feeding America, the Chicago, IL-headquartered nonprofit organization that operates a nationwide network of foodbanks. Over the years, Harris served two terms on the Produce Marketing Association’s Board of Directors. He currently writes a monthly column in PRODUCE BUSINESS magazine.

Where were you in 1985?
I had just moved into Safeway’s corporate offices in Pleasanton, CA, in March of 1985.

What was the produce department like in 1985?
The big deal in the 1980s was the awakening of the importance of produce. It was a time when we at Safeway said, “let’s differentiate ourselves by making produce a star.” We saw concepts like Loblaws in Canada that really focused on fresh, and we took inspiration from what we saw in other concepts across the country from both regionals and smaller independents.

This meant purposeful layouts designed to entice the shopper rather than patchwork displays of produce. In addition, we reset the department with fixtures; for example, orchards and field bins under canopies with track lighting. Imports from South America and convenience products like bagged salads were getting their start at the same time. I remember stapling labels onto the first bags of lettuce. New stores were being built to carry 300 to 400 and even 500 produce SKUs.

How would you characterize the overall retail environment back then?
It was competitive for us. In Northern California, there was Raley’s and Fred Meyer; in Southern California, Vons and Ralphs; Giant in Maryland; Ukrops in Virginia; King Soopers in Denver; Fry’s Food Stores in Phoenix; and Tom Thumb, H-E-B and Randall’s in Texas. Safeway was not in the New York and Chicago markets at the time. No one pushed produce as much as we did. We wanted to be on the front of the wave.

When did the industry start to change, and what were the drivers of change?
FMI Trends surveys in the 1980s showed that while customers didn’t generally like supermarket shopping, they did enjoy the produce department. In fact, the quality of the produce was the primary criteria they used for selecting where to shop. That’s one of the reasons produce was moved to the front of stores. We had floral at our entrances. Sales-wise, floral wasn’t that big a part of department sales, but our boss at the time thought that walking through floral put customers in a good mood to shop. We took this concept from some of the budget shops in San Francisco.

How would you describe the produce department today?
You have some of the best cutting-edge retailers out there and others not worth a darn. Unfortunately, we’ve seen a plateau, a repeat of the same old thing and even sacrificing in presentation and flair due to economic pressures on labor. The creativity we do see is coming from the smaller regional retailers, such as Wegmans that don’t have to answer to Wall Street. Some retailers today forget the rules that the old-timers in the industry taught us. For example: “You can’t save yourself into a profit”; “You don’t take a percentage to the bank, you take dollars.”

What are some of the biggest innovations you’ve seen in the produce industry during the past 30 years?
The explosion of variety is certainly one of them. But it became hard to keep all the prices in your head, and it took too long to keep checking a list for prices. PLU codes
then came to the rescue. At first, we put the PLUs on in the back room and it was a very labor intensive process.

Then, Washington apples and Sunkist citrus were the first to put PLUs on product before shipping it to us. PLUs led to category management. Allocating shelf space was the old way of thinking. Now, we were armed with data that could drive category growth and compare ourselves to others.

The new pre-cut salads were a perfect fit for category management. They were the first product that we eventually put into one section — the singles, the blends, the kits, created destination categories. The magic came in not selling as many categories as you could, but what percent of the market you captured compared to the competition.

What led you to the consultant side of the industry?
I wanted to move into something different since I’d done just about everything on the retail side. As a consultant to the supply side, I was in a position to provide invaluable insight by being about to see both sides of the industry.

What do you think was the greatest lessons you learned about retailing over the past 30 years?
The importance of education and continuing education. If you stop learning, you’re dead.

What do you think will drive the produce industry in the next 10 to 20 years?
There’s a need to learn from the past. What’s old is new again. I see it with chains like Whole Foods Market and Wegmans. They’re putting up bigger displays, at the same time, others are pulling back on big displays due to fear of shrink. On the other hand, we have to look into the future and decide how we fit with non-traditional ways of selling produce, such as online shopping.

What are the challenges holding the industry back?
We as an industry are at the same crossroads we were at 30 years ago. That is, everyone is doing the same thing. We need to analyze our way out of this and look for new and innovative ways to sell produce. The challenge is that innovation means investment, and there is a severe penalty on profitability today for failure.

What are your thoughts on choosing produce as a career today?
Produce is different. It’s for someone who wants a career that is challenging and ever-changing. No two seasons in a row are the same.

What advice would you give young retailers entering the produce industry?
Two things: First, listen to the customer. Don’t do things to please yourself or the sellers because you think the customer wants it. Second, you need to have a great training program. Labor is expensive and controllable. If you invest in training over the long run, then you’ll see a return. After all, it takes a lot of good to make up for a bad experience.

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