

Kash n' Karry Becomes Sweetbay

Florida supermarket chain changes its identity and reinvigorates the marketplace.

BY JAN FIALKOW

When you walk through the front doors of a Sweetbay Supermarket, you walk directly into the produce department, a vast, well-lit, inviting expanse of color, variety, textures and freshness. A large Sweetbay Magnolia tree anchors the space, serving as a visual reminder of the chain's commitment to its geographical and inspirational roots.

The Tampa, FL, company's Website describes the tree this way: "With its fragrant white blossoms and brilliant red berries, the beautiful Sweetbay vividly reflects our passion for delicious food. Common to West Central Florida, the Sweetbay grows tall and strong, echoing the strength of our stores and associates."

The ambitious plan to convert some 100 Kash n' Karry stores and construct new stores as needed began in November 2004, when the first Sweetbay store, a ground-up construction, opened its doors in Seminole, FL. Kash n' Karry is a subsidiary of Delhaize America, the U.S. division of the Brussels, Belgium-based Delhaize Group. The four-year plan of renovation and construction is proceeding on schedule. By the end of 2006, all the conversions should be done and then the expansion will continue apace.

According to Andy Tudor, director of sales, L&M Northwest, Selah, WA, "Sweetbay has defined their direction and niche for their region. The difference is total buy in. From the top of the organization to store level, they have fully committed to doing what it takes to get where they want to go. They listen to ideas, are quick to implement, and execute very well. Sweetbay's speed and accuracy are among the highest in the industry."

In February, PRODUCE BUSINESS visited



Large, inviting, well-signed displays greet produce shoppers at Sweetbay.

one of the new ground-up stores in Ft. Myers, FL.

After passing through the entryway, where a greeter welcomes customers and hands out flyers of the week's specials, shoppers are virtually enveloped by the produce department. It totally surrounds customers, bathing them in natural light from the skylights, which will be part of the design in all of the new stores. The wooden fixtures that line the walls, the produce carts that fill the floors, and the vast displays of bulk merchandise enhance the sense of being in an outdoor market.

Steve Williams, director of produce, says Sweetbay is primarily a bulk operation and "We boast about it." However, the store does have an extensive fresh-cut section and a pre-pack area for those customers looking

for convenience. He is also proud of the company's support of the *Fresh from Florida* program, noting that the tomatoes and strawberries currently in store are from local Florida growers.

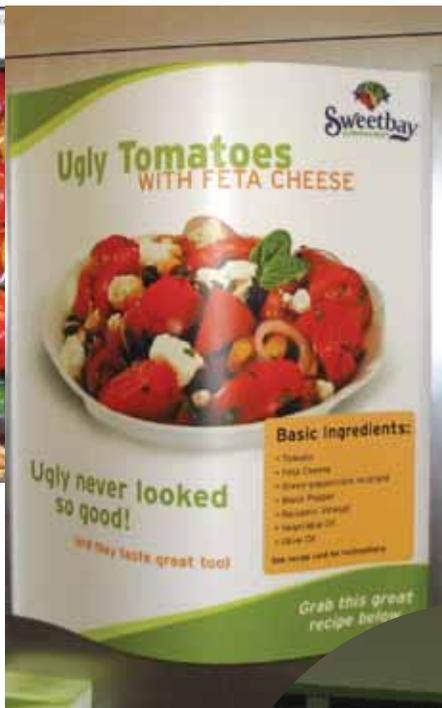
"We are all about value," Williams explains. "We don't want to be just cheap. We want our customers to have a great eating experience." To support this commitment, each store gets six produce deliveries a week and employs a staff of 10 associates. "We're going to deliver a shopping experience that exceeds expectations," he maintains. Each store orders individually from a distribution center in Plant City, FL.

CONSUMER-FRIENDLY SIGNAGE

Standing at the front of the department,



Displays emphasize depth and breadth of selection (above); informational kiosk (right); director of produce Steve Williams (bottom right)



Williams points out Sweetbay's extensive signature signage, designed to be the epitome of consumer-friendliness. "We've taken signage to the nth degree," he asserts. "The signs tell consumers how to use the products and explain the flavor profiles."

This is especially helpful within Sweetbay's five major categories — mushrooms, peppers, fresh and potted herbs, tomatoes

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**— Steve Williams
Director of Produce**

and tropicals — because of the breadth of the selections. In fact, the store professes to carry 20 different varieties of tomatoes and dozens of different peppers, mushrooms, herbs and tropicals.

Freestanding kiosks highlight specific produce items and dispense recipes. *Dr. Richter's Fresh Produce Guide* is also prominently displayed for consumers who desire even more in-depth information.

Different color signage in this store distinguishes the organic produce. "We're testing organics in seven stores. In this one, we've integrated it with the conventional produce. In Seminole, it's separate. The results are not in, but I think integrated — with the different signage — is the way to

go," notes Williams.

On this particular day, Mitch Blumenthal, owner of Global Organics, Sarasota, FL, is in the store surveying the organic displays and is very happy to see the integrated merchandise. He believes consumers who have the opportunity to compare prices of organic versus conventional in one area are likely to buy organic — as long as prices are competitive. "We currently have 25 SKUs with Sweetbay. They do a terrific job," he notes. In the packaged salad display, Blumenthal is happy to see the organics grouped together because this type of display is a draw for the organic customer.

CONSUMERS COME FIRST

According to Williams, "You build your best freshness perception off the wet rack. All items are taken off every night, recrisped and put back out in the morning. All lettuce is rebutted. The misters are on a timer and we can adjust where the water mists.

"Consumers are looking for fresh and enticing, and we deliver. They're returning to the kitchen and looking for new and exciting items, especially if they've seen them on the cooking shows or tried them on vacation. We're trying to capitalize on that with our Flavors of the World and Tropical Fruits areas," he explains.

Both of these displays are filled with items that may still be exotic to local shoppers but are familiar to the cultures from which they come. Sweetbay is becoming the destination for out-of-the-ordinary ethnic merchandise from baby bok choy to baby corn, gooseberries to tamarind.

"We want you to try before you buy," says Williams, "so we encourage all associates to let customers taste anything they want. We put our people through training to teach them this." As if to prove the point, a few minutes later a produce associate who noticed a shopper trying to decide between items offered to let her sample each so that the decision would be easier.

L&M's Tudor notes, "Steve Williams has assembled one of the most impressive produce and merchandising teams I have ever met. They're knowledgeable, driven and focused on achieving their goals. Sales in the Sweetbay roll-outs reflect their execution."



Williams explains that most fresh-cut is done in-house. "That way, we can pick the best fruit. I look at this category as being where packaged salads were five years ago."

Sweetbay supplements this area with Del Monte pineapple. "The display is upfront because it builds a quality, value and freshness perception. When you can control the quality, you get return sales," Williams says.

A side stack program that uses original shipping boxes for ambience creates "a display within a display and gives a new twist to the end-cap concept," he notes. "The table layouts are part of a weekly plan-o-gram. The front table and the interior tables are changed every week."

At the back of the department is floral. "We're not trying to be a full-line floral center, but we do offer high quality and variety. We carry fresh, potted and silk, and we have a mix-and-match program. Floral has the same standards for signage and quality as the rest of the produce department."

Williams concludes, "We can be creative with all the color, the department changes all the time — we're lucky to work in produce." And Sweetbay's customers are lucky he does.