



Solving The Right Problems

BY JIM PREVOR, PRESIDENT & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

One of the most difficult challenges in life and in business is choosing to work on the right problem. In the produce industry, we are constantly confronting issues about industry efforts to boost consumption.

The great industry effort, supported by almost everyone, has been United Fresh's salad bar program. The goal: Put a salad bar in every school. The effort hits so many industry hot spots. It influences children — who are the consumers of tomorrow; salad bars offer a wide range of produce, so they appeal to the whole industry — as opposed to a snack-fruit program that might only impact consumption of a few items.

Simply from a business perspective, it is not hard to see why salad bars would be a universally popular industry promotion. Take a school, which last week bought very little produce, add a salad bar, and the next day purchase orders are coming in for an assortment of produce. The result is immediate, tangible and wide-spread.

But is offering salad bars a path that leads to increased long-term consumption of fresh produce? The honest answer is we don't know, but there are some indications that salad bars — which, by definition, leave assortment to the customer — may not be the optimal tool to increase produce consumption.

Recently, PRODUCE BUSINESS curated a series of foodservice case studies for presentation at a special symposium of the Culinary Institute of America. Several studies focused on salad bars, and they raised questions regarding the actual impact of salad bars on consumption; for example:

Rafi Taherian, executive director at Yale University Dining, is charged with serving 14,000 meals a day to 5,200 graduate and undergraduate students on the University's meal plan. There are 29 foodservice operations at Yale, including 13 residential dining halls, along with convenience stores, cafés, and catering and banquet centers. ...

Taherian, a chef himself, has been friends with Chef Joyce Goldstein (the former chef and owner of the Mediterranean restaurant, Square One, in San Francisco, CA) for many years. He invited Goldstein, now a consultant in menu design, to Yale to help create recipes for plant-based food. The two decided to eat a light dinner from the salad bar in one of the dining halls. Goldstein came back to the table with what Taherian describes as the perfect Greek salad. He looked at his plate, which was, in his words, "a complete hodge-podge."

"I was so embarrassed," Taherian says. "I wondered, where the heck did she get that beautiful salad?" ...

He began to question the whole existing salad bar concept ...

"There are people," Taherian explains as an example, "who put shredded cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli — all raw — on their plate.

When they eat that mixture, they are going to have problems with digestion," he says. "Then the people who ate it think that 'salad' is making them uncomfortable, when in reality, these are vegetables that should not be eaten together."

Does it really make sense to think that children are better able to put together combinations that will be delicious and easy to digest than chefs? Maybe composed salads would actually build demand better. They have done so at Yale.

In other words, if the issue is how do we get children exposed to lots of random produce items, maybe salad bars are the optimal choice. If, however, the problem is getting children to enjoy produce by exposing them to composed salads and dishes using culinary technique, maybe those salad bars are not helping.

Similarly, the Produce Marketing Association recently unveiled its support for a major new marketing campaign for the industry — contributing \$1 million to kick it off. The campaign is being led by the Partnership for a Healthier America and is basically a marketing campaign to promote fruit and vegetable consumption. There are many things to be said about these efforts, but one of the more

interesting questions is to assess whether the problem holding back consumption is inadequate marketing.

Of course it is well known that Coca-Cola outspends the entire produce industry on marketing — many times over. And it is easy to focus on this fact.

In fact, many in the produce industry like to focus on this fact because it implies that they are doing everything well and the problem is beyond their control. "If the industry had access to the Coca-Cola marketing budget, then consumption would boom."

Well, we bow before no man in our respect for the power of proper marketing, and individual companies can certainly differentiate themselves through marketing efforts. But whether the industry's issue is really a lack of marketing is most uncertain.

Many a peach sold is virtually inedible. Children love blueberries, but the sweetness is irregular, and even the same brand of "easy peel" citrus peels inconsistently through the year.

In other words, produce is very unpredictable. Today, marketing an individual company's produce under a brand umbrella might make sense. Love Beets can be consistently delicious; POM juices never vary. Branded items can consign lower quality to a different label. But the industry as a whole can't distinguish — it markets lousy produce along with good. It has no mechanism for excluding anyone or anything.

Is the trade's problem really a lack of marketing? Or is it inconsistent product that often disappoints the promise any marketing effort would make to consumers?

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