

FIVE NEW PRIORITIES FOR INCREASED FOODSERVICE SALES

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A half decade ago, the CEOs of the Produce Marketing Association (PMA), the National Restaurant Association (NRA) and the International Foodservice Distributors Association (IFDA) stood together on the stage of PMA's annual Foodservice Conference in Monterey, CA, and announced what consultants might call a big, hairy, audacious goal: to double produce usage in foodservice within 10 years.

In his opening remarks, Bryan Silbermann, PMA's CEO, articulated the five priority areas that a special invitation-only "think tank" had identified as key to achieving this goal:

- Re-imagine the restaurant experience, with produce having a stronger presence and telling its story from field to fork.
- Increase consumer confidence in fresh produce, including product safety, trust and integrity.
- Demonstrate social responsibility, balancing the needs of people, the planet and profitability.
- Foster closer collaboration among the industry sectors, including operators, distributors and grower/shippers.
- Foster closer collaboration with government and other stakeholders.

Now at the five-year mark of the 10-year plan, one might expect a serious report on progress made, identification of the obstacles holding us back, and the plan for the next five years.

Instead the three associations seem to be anxious to forget the whole thing. PMA's Foodservice Conference has not a single workshop or general session scheduled on the initiative. PMA, NRA and IFDA each have great websites, all of which contain nothing but historical references to the initiative. In fact, there really is no initiative anymore.

The reason this topic is so worth exploring is that the situation reveals much about the difficulty of increasing produce consumption through the foodservice channel.

First, a key challenge revealed was a lack of transparency and knowledge. To be honest, nobody — including PMA, NRA and IFDA — had a real handle on what produce usage and consumption was in foodservice back in 2009, and nobody has a good measure right now. The initiative quickly degraded when they started talking about "menu mentions" because they couldn't talk about usage or consumption.

Second, this thing the industry calls "foodservice" — everything from a food cart operator grilling peppers and onions to sell with sausages; to white-tablecloth restaurants; to feeding the army or hospital patients — is too diverse. Any one effort or campaign is bound to be ineffective in many sectors of the industry.

Third, it became clear that the commitment to boost produce consumption is, at best, tepid among those who don't specifically benefit from more produce usage. PMA has always been game. Its big grower/shipper members are highly motivated to boost produce usage

by foodservice operators and consumption by consumers.

NRA, however, never really moved on the initiative — mostly because of a split within the association. The staff executives, such as President and CEO Dawn Sweeney, saw the opportunity to announce this initiative with the produce industry as good political cover in an environment where the *zeitgeist* was moving against restaurants. There was a lot of fear that restaurants might be regulated as contributors to obesity, much as tobacco companies were being regulated as contributors to smoking.

Shrewdly, Sweeney perceived the importance of positioning the restaurant industry on the side of the angels. Unfortunately, the membership of NRA, mostly smaller restaurants and chains, really couldn't care less. If consumers want spaghetti and meatballs, that is what restaurants will sell; if they want Peking Duck, that is what they will sell. Although some chefs, and even some chains, are interested in improving the world and perceive increasing produce usage as a way to do that, for the most part these efforts are at the margin.

As far as the foodservice distributors go, it is really not clear how IFDA was ever going to really impact this initiative. Its members distribute what its customers want — produce, meat, canned goods, etc.

Beyond these specific lessons, looked at with a half-decade

perspective, it seems that the five priority areas were not likely to be the key factors in moving consumption. Here is a suggestion of five to look at in the next half decade:

1) Focus on teaching culinary techniques from protein-poor cultures that had to utilize fruits

and vegetables as meal mainstays, for example the Mediterranean and Asian cuisines.

2) Educate chefs to the diversity of produce available, and encourage them to build meals around this great produce, not make produce secondary to a protein.

3) Help produce growers/shippers and marketers to develop greater culinary competency so they can be more helpful in menu development. Retailers generally sell many different items, but you can't sell arugula to a restaurant unless you can get arugula on the menu.

4) Demonstrate to consumers that a produce-centric meal can be indulgent, seductive and delicious, not just healthy.

5) Promote the desirability of fresh produce over canned and frozen options, and get restaurants to commit to diverse fresh offerings that consumers would be hesitant to stock at home for fear of waste.

They used to say, "The King is dead, long live the King," symbolizing that monarchy endures despite the end of a reign. So the effort to increase produce usage in foodservice must go on. We have 100 years of history showing that the foodservice sector is getting larger. We must position produce to get a larger share of this growing market.

The great initiative of 2009 is dead. The effort to increase produce consumption in foodservice must go on.

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Despite a failed initiative, the effort to increase produce usage in foodservice must go on.