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A united front

By Craig Levitt

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This year's show features learning centers, new products and a European atmosphere.

The Washington D.C.-based United Fresh Produce Association is adding a bit of fun and European flair to its United Fresh 2009 trade show, which takes place at the Sands Expo Center in Las Vegas on April 21 to 24.

"In Europe, people are sometimes partying at the convention center until 10 p.m.," says John Toner, United Fresh's vice president, convention and industry relations. "We are trying to bring a little bit of that feel to the show floor."

Of course the show is more than just fun and games. Toner says for the first time United Fresh offers learning centers that will give vendors the opportunity to inform attendees about new products, services and trends. The learning centers consist of three booths on the show floor with seating for about 75 and will feature 30-minute presentations that are scheduled to run every hour all day.

United Fresh 2009 also features a food safety pavilion, a produce traceability initiative and supply chain sessions. Toner says the supply chain sessions are intended to have a town hall feel as different segments of the supply chain gather in separate rooms to discuss common issues, trends and improvements that can and need to be made.

"After each segment has their meetings they are going to feed that information to the consolidated board of directors in order to help us make better decisions and better programming for our members," says Toner.

In all, United Fresh 2009 is expected to draw more than 5,000 attendees who can visit the 250 or so exhibitors that make up both the United Fresh Marketplace and United Fresh Tech show floor. The following is a preview of what visitors can expect.

Andrew & Williamson Fresh Produce

For the first time, the San Diego-based company is offering organic strawberries. "The United Show really provides us with a good opportunity to get the word out and announce to the industry that we are getting into a year-round berry program," says vice president of marketing, Mark Munger. "Our berries will be ready to ship by the middle of May so there is certainly enough time for us to take orders and express excitement for the organic program." Sizing and packaging will be similar to Andrew & Williamson's conventional offerings, with a primary focus on 1-pound and 4-pound clamshells.

Munger says the company has also made a significant investment in sophisticated packing equipment for its tomato and cucumber programs. Munger calls them retail ready programs, which are primarily bulk items. Traditionally, when retailers have wanted to carry different innovative snack products, says Munger, they have had to rely on regional packers to fill those needs. "Now we have the flexibility to provide just about any pack the retailer wants," he says.

The booth will have displays set up that show the wide flexibility and variety of packages that Andrew & Williamson are able to offer retailers.

Beach Street Farms

According to Stephanie Hilton, marketing manager, this year the United Fresh show comes at a perfect time for the Watsonville, Calif.-based grower. At the time of the show Beach Street Farms will already have production from three of its growing areas, with its largest starting up around show time. Conventional strawberries are available in four different varieties in several packaging options including special packs such as the Big Kahuna, which are extra large berries available in a 9-pint open pack and in a 4-pound clamshell (2 clamshells per box), the Party Pak, available in two 2-pound clamshells or three 1-pound clamshells and Stem strawberries, available in 8-ounce clamshells (8 clamshells per box) or 1-pound clamshells (4 clamshells per box).

“We work very closely with our customers on their specific needs and specific promotional requirements,” says Hilton. In addition to the development of many packaging ideas to meet customer needs, Beach Street Farms has increased its efforts pertaining to its organic berries and worked to develop new strawberry varieties. They also provide a private label offering.

California Giant Berry

Watsonville, Calif.-based California Giant Berry is featuring promotional material for its two national consumer sweepstakes going on this year. The first sweepstakes is a baseball-themed sweepstakes coinciding with the beginning of the Major League Baseball season and began April 1. The direct consumer campaign is being promoted through extensive public relations efforts, on California Giant packaging and via in-store point-of-sale materials. The promotion runs through the end of May and the grand prize is a baseball camp for up to 200 kids run by the MLB alumni association.

On June 1, California Giant once again promotes the strawberry’s connection with Wimbledon. “The person that won last year’s Wimbledon promotion will be doing a daily blog from Wimbledon this year and consumers who enter the sweepstakes can read the daily blog which will talk about the experience,” says Cindy Jewell, director of marketing. The Wimbledon sweepstakes runs through the end of July.

Also highlighted at the booth is the California Giant Berry Academy, a new training program designed to bring California Giant Berry and its customers closer together. “It’s a two day academy that we are inviting customers to participate in,” says Jewell. “We are trying to get a cross section of staff from our customers, from store level all the way up to management. We want to let our customers see what happens at field level and let our field people learn what challenges are at retail in an effort to provide every day quality to consumers.”

Colorful Harvest

Salinas, Calif.-based Colorful Harvest is a nationally branded grower, shipper, and marketer of unique and colorful fresh fruits and vegetables for the Colorful Harvest and Green Giant Fresh brands. According to COO and managing partner Doug Ranno, the company is introducing its new rainbow crunch carrot seeds and is showing new packaging options that feature five colors of carrots in a single bag. They have also expanded the growing region for its red corn and are promoting the fact that a larger supply is available.

“A lot of consumers have never seen rainbow carrots or one of our dark red-all-the-way-through strawberries,” says Ranno. “So we provide retailers information on how to sell rainbow carrots, red corn, etc. One of the reasons we are so successful is because we have invested a lot of time helping retailers sell these products.”

Some of the materials available to retailers include what Colorful Harvest calls point-of-difference romance cards, basically photographs and information on products as well as a best practices chart, a step-by-step chart on how to successfully sell product.

Crunch Pak

The Cashmere, Wash.-based company is featuring its organic sliced apple program for the coming year. The highlight of the program is the institution of a year-round level-pricing policy. Tony Freytag, director of marketing, believes that a level-pricing policy will be advantageous to retailers. He cites that often suppliers run out of product in late spring and retailers either have to switch to imported apples at a much higher price for summer or cease offering product completely. “Of course, with value-added, when you lose shelf space and frontage it’s hard for retailers, as well as suppliers, to get that space back. You certainly lose momentum through those summer months.” Crunch Pak level-pricing includes its family pack, which is a 12-ounce bag with a zip lock closure as well as its snack packs, which are five 2.8-ounce bags in a clamshell.

“Organic sliced apples have not been offered nationally on a year-round basis until now,” says Freytag. “By doing this what we have done is really created, in the organic sliced apple market, the same thing that has been done with salads and other products, where there is a high quality product at a reasonable price point year-round.”

Del Monte

The Coral Gables, Fla.-based company is currently working on its spring and summer promotions which will center on Del Monte’s ongoing “Eat Healthy. Live Healthy” healthy lifestyle campaign. According to Dionysios Christou, vice president, marketing, the campaign encourages consumers to incorporate more fresh fruits and vegetables into their everyday lives. “We hope that this promotion, along with other marketing efforts will help retailers increase traffic and sales in their produce departments,” says Christou.

Christou also says that Del Monte is continuously introducing innovative products improved packaging solutions and new marketing support tools that allow them to keep up with changing consumer demands and preferences. He adds that in order to maximize produce departments and avoid shrink and unnecessary cost, retailers should take advantage of Del Monte’s category management support.

“This has become a vital asset in every category in the produce department and it can be especially useful in today’s economy.”

DNE World Fruit Sales

In order to meet retailer demand, the Fort Pierce, Fla.-based company offers citrus year-round and is highlighting its summer imports from Chile, South Africa, Peru and Australia. The company is also working with retailers to promote smaller packs and bags in an attempt to lessen the “sticker shock” consumers may feel during these rough economic times.

“Instead of letting shoppers leave the citrus category, we feel if we downsize some of our packs we can keep them in,” says Mark Hanks, vice president of sales and marketing, North America. “Retailers can also maximize their produce department by promoting citrus regularly and there are enough citrus varieties to feature in weekly ads.”

Hanks adds that in-store sampling during peak flavor season is often a successful way retailers can boost citrus sales. DNE also helps by offering its customers merchandising opportunities to help promote the citrus category via in-store demonstrations, seasonal cross merchandising opportunities and promotional programs.

Driscoll’s

Watsonville, Calif.-based Driscoll’s is showing and sampling all of its berries at United Fresh along with some of its specialty berries such as its golden raspberries and long stemmed strawberries. According to company officials, Driscoll’s is also rolling out its clamshell traceability in which consumers will have the ability to check a clamshell ID, go to the Driscoll’s website and see exactly

where those berries were grown. Officials add that because all of Driscoll's growers are independent farmers there is a transition and education process that must happen before the system covers all growing regions.

Beyond traceability, Driscoll's supports retailers with a great deal of point-of-sale material and in-store signage designed to grow the berry category. Officials say a strong partnership with retailers and the growth of the berry category not only benefits Driscoll's but retailers as well.

FreshSense

Three brands fall under the FreshSense banner—Ripe 'n Ready, Zeal and Treehouse Kids—and although the show falls too early to feature fruit at the show, all three will be equally promoted. In addition to the three brands the Parlier, Calif.-based company is proud that 60% of its orchards are grown under the Protected Harvest certification program—a set of stringent growing standards and farming practices. This past year the citrus products under the Zeal brand were included and company officials are pleased with the reaction from both retailers and consumers. Officials add that FreshSense is still the only option for certified sustainably grown citrus and stone fruit and the company is in the process of trying to get the table grapes standards created as soon as possible.

The Garlic Co.

The Bakersfield, Calif.-based company is featuring its VakPak Peeled Garlic, which John Duffus, sales and marketing manager, says is a unique garlic idea. The VakPak is individual fresh peeled garlic cloves (3 to 4 cloves) vacuum packed in a recipe-portioned pouch. Duffus says the VakPak is sold in a 3-pouch or 6-pouch package and that each pouch is specifically designed to “breathe” allowing the optimum atmosphere to enhance the products freshness and shelf life. Along with the product, also featured at the show is a VakPak display box that retailers can use to promote consumer trial.

“In the retail market, the convenience of peeled garlic is just beginning to take hold with consumers,” says Duffus. “Sales have increased each year as consumers discover the value and ease of this product. We are excited because we think we can offer the VakPak to retailers and ultimately to consumers at a price point that makes it very attractive. Most garlic items like this, value-added items, are around \$2 to \$4 per item. The VakPak will certainly be less than \$2.”

Naturipe Farms

According to Robert Verloop, vice president of marketing, by late April Naturipe's domestic sources are in full development of both strawberries and blueberries. “We are the largest blueberry marketer in the U.S.,” says Verloop. “We are owned by the growers themselves and the timing of the show is perfect to remind people about our domestic product base.”

Verloop says the Naples, Fla.-based company likes to use the show as an opportunity to introduce new packaging options to its customers. This year Naturipe is encouraging retailers to feature larger clamshells. He notes that particularly with blueberries, this year's large crop provides a good value for retailers to focus on offering pints, 18-ounce and in some cases 2-pound packaging options.

“We are also one of the largest importers of blackberries,” says Verloop. “With some of the varieties we have we will be sampling and reminding retailers how cross-promoting between the different varieties is a good merchandising technique.”

Potandon Produce

Although Potandon is the exclusive marketer of Green Giant brand potatoes and onions, the Idaho Falls, Idaho-based company also offers other brands, as well as private label potato and onion options. According to COO Steve Ottum, the company is constantly pushing the envelope when it comes to potato innovation.

“It actually takes quite a bit to be innovative and to try to do something new,” says Ottum. “We've have moved down the path of new varieties and we have searched the world for new varieties. We do a lot of research and development and we get access to exclusive varieties that only we can grow in the U.S. We continue to work down the value chain, offering what consumers want.”

Potandon is featuring a 24-ounce mesh bag of baby potatoes that come in several varieties including yellow with yellow flesh, red with yellow flesh and purple with yellow flesh. There is a medley bag available that contains all varieties as well. Ottum says the products are an attempt to meet consumer demand.

“In a way we are following the food service trends over years with the use of colored potatoes or baby potatoes as part of the presentation on the plate as well as serving a good product,” says Ottum. “More consumers are also looking for something easy to prepare and are offering something different for them versus the big brown potato.”

Sunkist Growers

Celebrity chef Jill Davie is once again on call at the Sherman Oaks, Calif.-based Sunkist booth. Though company officials say the final menu has yet to be determined, each day at the show chef Davie will create a different citrus-based dish for hungry show-goers. Sunkist will also offer booth visitors recipe cards for the dishes that chef Davie creates. In addition to creative cuisine, officials add that a wide selection of Sunkist licensees will be featured at the booth providing samples as well.

As part of its joint venture with Taylor Farms, (Sunkist Taylor), Sunkist Fun Fruit will also be featured prominently. Sunkist Fun Fruit is a line of fresh cut, all natural, single serve fruits and vegetables in convenient bags. According spokesperson Claire Smith, the line includes pineapples, grapes, oranges, apples and carrots and has been popular in school feeding programs for years.

“Fun Fruits are kids-sized and we are expanding them into retail. We have samples and displays of this product line as well,” says Smith.

Well-Pict Berries

Headquartered in Watsonville, Calif., Well-Pict has growing regions up and down the California coast, including Baja California. Last year Well-Pict added even more acreage, particularly organic acreage, which has allowed the grower to offer year-round organic availability.

“We are continually pushing that we have year-round availability for our conventional strawberries and raspberries as well as our organic strawberries and raspberries,” says Julie Lucido, marketing manager. “We are still trying to educate people that these items are available.”

At the show Well-Pict will be sampling its strawberry and raspberry offerings. In addition to its berry products, Well-Pict's booth features marketing materials including a new company brochure that highlights its new packaging.

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