

Brand Knew

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In the produce aisle, recognizable names translate into sales.

A bushel of canned goods and frozen aisle brand names—Birds Eye, Green Giant, Dole, just to name a few—are increasingly finding a home in the fresh produce aisle, alongside new and established produce-specific monikers, driving up sales, margins and customer loyalty in the process.

“Birds Eye looks at the Birds Eye Fresh brand as a brand equity enhancer,” says Rhett Smith, director Birds Eye Fresh/procurement manager, at Birds Eye Foods, based in Rochester, N.Y. “Brand presence is brand presence,” he says. “The way most stores are designed nowadays, the front door dumps you right into the fresh produce aisle.” And even if a customer doesn’t select a Birds Eye Fresh item, hopefully a subliminal seed will be planted in their mind to remind them to buy Birds Eye vegetables when they are in the frozen aisle.

Birds Eye has partnered with Fresh Kist to supply Birds Eye Fresh brand lettuce, cauliflower, broccoli, celery and strawberries; and Wilcox Marketing Group for potatoes and onions.

“Clarence Birdseye was the father of frozen foods, and I think the consumer brand awareness from just that alone is phenomenal,” says Jason Lathos, sales and marketing manager, Birds Eye Fresh Kist Produce, based in Salinas, Calif. “We’ve done a really good job on keeping the integrity of the label and the brand where it should be. Something that we work really hard on is quality.”

Linking with the Birds Eye brand name bolsters relations with both retailers and consumers. “A lot of times you’re trying to create relationships with the actual buyers at these companies, and in that business scope those relationships are very important in getting your product moved,” Lathos says. “With Birds Eye, it’s like we are almost marketing to the consumer also. That gives us a little bit of a leg up on our competitors here who may not have a national label.”

A similar story is unfolding at The Sholl Group II, the Eden Prairie, Minn.-based firm that licenses the Green Giant Fresh name from General Mills. “The Green Giant was rated the number three icon of the 20th century, and 96% of consumers know and recognize the brand and associate it with consistent quality,” says Sarah Wangler, marketing manager.

The Sholl Group markets 43 different commodities under Green Giant Fresh, working with 23 different packers and licensees in the process. “Some of our new items are California and Florida citrus and we also added a vegetable tray partner—S&S Produce,” Wangler says.

In existence since 1901, the Dole brand has steadily increased its presence in the produce case. Its latest offering is a line of packaged salad kits that offer consumers extremely convenient, yet healthy, side dish and main meal options that include gourmet toppings, proprietary dressings and unique flavor combinations.

“The Brand Institute places Dole in a group of 20 food companies with the

highest (unaided) consumer awareness in North America,” says Bil Goldfield, communications manager of the fresh fruit and vegetables division of Dole Food Co., based in Westlake Village, Calif.

Dole’s potatoes and onions are packed by Idaho Falls, Idaho-based Wada Farms. “For a retailer who is maybe not promoting his own label, but is looking for something to indicate to his constituents that his store carries value and quality, Dole definitely brings that to the table for them,” says Kevin Stanger, vice president, sales and marketing. “I believe that national brands, and Dole specifically, has a very good presence and recognition amongst consumers for value and quality. A lot of retailers want and respect that.”

While there is concern that a tightening economy will cause some consumers to spurn premium-priced branded produce, Dole doesn’t see that as a problem. “Regardless of the economic cycle, consumers demand high quality fresh produce that looks and tastes great,” Goldfield says. “In more difficult economic periods, consumers will become even pickier about quality to ensure the maximum value is derived from their fresh produce purchases. If the consumer does not find a fruit or vegetable item visually appealing, that item will remain on the shelf and may never be purchased.”

MICKEY MOUSE IN THE PRODUCE AISLE

That’s never the case with Disney-themed produce; with hot properties such as Mickey Mouse, Cars, Winnie the Pooh and Hannah Montana, retailers find them hard to keep on the shelves. Through its Indianapolis-based Imagination Farms subsidiary, Disney markets over 300 SKUs of commodity and value added products provided by more than 20 suppliers.

“Disney is the No. 1 family brand in the world and parents consider the Disney brand to be wholesome and trustworthy,” says Melinda Goodman, director of marketing at Imagination Farms.

The company’s target audience is children, ages 3-12. “However, the beauty of the Disney brand is the universal generational appeal of Disney to all ages and demographics,” Goodman says. “Because the Disney brand reach extends to TV, theatre, radio, theme parks and more, Disney has done the work of broadening the appeal of the brand.”

Sales have doubled in the three years since Russet Potato Exchange, Bancroft, Wis., began Disney Garden potatoes as an Imagination Farms partner, according to marketing manager Rachel Leach. “We are looking to hit 5 million cases this year. There’s a lot to be said for that in terms of branding.”

Russet Potato Exchange is launching a Disney Cars potato single, an individually-wrapped potato that is a smaller size than traditional individually-wrapped potatoes for children and other small appetites. “Most wrapped potatoes are a 70 or 80 count (per 50-pound box), while this is a 110-count, so it is more portion controlled,” she says.

Not all branded produce is linked to marquee center store names or Hollywood blockbusters. For example, Russet Potato Exchange markets several other brand name potatoes, including Biggins, Naturally Nutritious and Mr. Tasty.

“Mr. Tasty is our everyday line,” Leach says. “Mr. Tasty has been around for a

long time. He's retro. He's cool. I'm amazed at how many phone calls we get when a retailer switches to a brand other than Mr. Tasty," she says.

Officials at Ready Pac Foods say there is a loyal following in the packaged salads category as well. "Ready Pac is the nation's leading single-serve entrée salad brand and, in fact, created the category in 2003," says Ali León, director of fruits, vegetables and complete meals for Ready Pac, based in Irwindale, Calif. "Ready Pac single-serve entrée salads drive fresh-cut salad category sales with 23% of the total category growth dollars and we outsell the competition three-to-one in velocity."

That's because when a consumer buys Ready Pac they know they are getting consistent quality. "Branded items offer consumers the peace of mind that what they are expecting in taste, freshness and quality will be there each and every time they purchase that product," León says.

ONE-OF-A-KIND CROPS

Some brands have made a name for themselves because of the uniqueness of their products. Take Dulcinea Farms. The Ladera Ranch, Calif.-based grower markets items such as Pure Heart Mini Seedless Watermelons, Tuscan-style cantaloupes and Rosso Bruno tomatoes.

"We develop exclusive proprietary seeds," says Keith Kato, senior vice president, sales and marketing. "We don't just look for what is already out there on the market. It has to be better than and it really has to meet the needs of consumers."

Proprietary varieties are what set cartons of Well-Pict strawberries, blackberries and raspberries apart from the rest. "Our first and foremost characteristic that we look for is the flavor profile," says Dan Crowley, sales manager for Watsonville, Calif.-based Well-Pict Berries. "In addition we always look for an appearance factor, aroma factor and yield factor."

Because of food safety issues, like the recent salmonella scare, look for branding to become more popular in largely commodity items, like tomatoes. "The importance of brands can't be understated," says Mark Munger, vice president, marketing, Andrew & Williamson Fresh Produce, a Watsonville, Calif.-based grower of cucumbers and tomatoes, including the Limited Edition brand. "When consumers are making choices, I think brands really help with that choice, but in produce the challenge to brands is that most retailers are stocking a commodity," he says. "They are stocking a peach, pear or strawberry," he says. "Generally when a consumer walks into a store they are not being given the opportunity of having the choice of buying three different brands of grapes."

Euro Fresh Farms is a firm believer in branded produce. "We feel that branding in produce has become important and will only become more important to consumers going forward," says Dwight Ferguson, CEO. Based in Willcox, Ariz., Euro Fresh Farms is the largest grower of TOV (tomatoes on the vine), growing them hydroponically in 318 acres of greenhouses in Arizona.

Branded produce improves the look of the department, says Scott Seden, marketing manager and advertising specialist at Pero Vegetable Co., LLC, a Delray Beach, Fla.-based grower of organic and traditional varieties of peppers, cucumbers, squash and green beans. "Having the produce wrapped and branded keeps the department a lot neater, and helps with the shelf life, shrinkage and the

food safety from the standpoint of everybody coming by and breathing on it, touching it, looking at it and squeezing it,” Seden says.

But consumers longing for that farmers’ market experience of being able to touch their produce shouldn’t wilt branded sales, Selden says. “Nowadays with a lot of the ways the bags are being done, and with us in particular, we leave a lot of open area for the consumer to view the product,” he says. “We don’t label the whole bag up and leave it so that you can see both sides. Food safety is more of a concern and you’re going to see the consumers realize that this is probably not that bad of a deal.”

SEAL OF APPROVAL

Even states are now positioning themselves as brands. One of the largest and most famous is the Jersey Fresh program, which will be celebrating its 25th anniversary next year. “We still have about 9,100 farms throughout the state, covering about 800,000 acres, but could you imagine if each one of them had their own brand?” asks Al Murray, assistant secretary of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which administers the program.

Jersey is to tomatoes as Idaho is to potatoes. “In the potato category there’s really only one brand,” says Seth Pemsler, vice president, retail/international, at the Idaho Potato Commission in Eagle, Idaho. “There’s potatoes and then there’s the Idaho potato.”

Although many varieties of potatoes are grown in the state, the cornerstone is the Russet Burbank. “In the consumer’s mind there’s a premium potato and there’s all the rest. We spend many, many millions of dollars supporting the Idaho brand,” Pemsler says. “Premium products can command a premium, and if a retailer carries an Idaho potato he has the opportunity to charge more.” In these penny-pinching times that can be a brand new concept.

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