



## Consumer

*The purpose of achieving operational excellence within the fresh produce environment is to satisfy the consumer. Period. It is irrelevant how many levels separate an organisation and its ultimate customer. Organisational excellence is unattainable unless a consumer focus is adopted and consumer needs are better understood.*

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No one should be surprised about the fact that consumers get discussed early on in the piece. Anyone who works at any point within the fresh produce supply chain knows that without the consumer deciding to initiate a purchase at the farmers' market, green grocer or supermarket all the effort to get quality produce onto the shelves would ultimately be wasted.

The term 'fresh' and how it presents as a critical constraint to the entire produce supply chain will get discussed in more detail further on. What needs to be mentioned at this point is the perception the consumer has in relation to 'fresh'.

The Compact Oxford English dictionary defines 'fresh' as "(of food) recently made or obtained; not preserved....." It is a safe bet that 99% of consumers have developed their perception about 'fresh' without ever having been near a dictionary.

In fact, most consumers give very little thought to where their fruit and vegetables come from. Sure, some consumers would prefer to purchase organic produce and the concept of food miles is raising its head periodically; but by and large consumers expect their produce to be 'there' when they choose to do their shopping and regardless of where they choose to shop.

Freshness is therefore a concept in the eyes of the beholder. A consumer who turns up at the local farmers' market would expect the lettuces on sale to be have been harvested the day before at the earliest. Preferably, even the same morning at dawn.

'Fresh' lettuce and other green vegetables are characterised by their green and crispy leaves. 'Fresh' tomatoes better not just be red but also ripe. Bananas generally do not come with a 'fresh' tag in the consumers' mind. The colour stage at which they are presented sends a message about the degree of ripeness. Apples these days are anything but fresh - apart from the glorious first few weeks after harvest in late summer and early autumn.

Consumers instinctively know that eating produce is good for them. There are a whole range of additional perceptions related to the concept of eating fresh fruit and vegetables. Older consumers can relate back to the days when tomatoes were something Dad grew in the vegetable garden over summer. Lack of flavour is a common complaint raised when the quality of fresh fruit and vegetables is up for discussions.

"The fruit simply does not taste as good as it used to", is an opinion often voiced in consumer surveys and no produce grower, wholesaler or retailer is keen to hear such a statement.

One of the underlying issues the produce industry as a whole struggles with is the fact that consumers do not value produce in monetary terms. Consumers perceive that growing fruit and vegetables is a low cost affair and therefore the harvest of the nation's fruit growers and market gardeners only deserves low returns in terms of the retail price consumers are prepared to pay.

Where does this view come from and how can it be addressed?

The answer to the first part of the question is relatively simple.

Agriculture and horticulture are alive and well in all first world countries. Farmers and growers may believe otherwise and grizzle periodically, but consumers know that farming is really very simple.

A farmer grows what he feels like, looks after it whilst it grows and then sets about harvesting. The government will subsidise whatever the farmer achieves in prices and the cycle begins again.

Yes, this is a very oversimplified and cynical way of looking at things but it sums it up rather nicely - and it is more or less true, apart from in New Zealand where farmers do not get any subsidies at all. Elsewhere, subsidies are still the norm. Farmers and growers in the developed world operate with a fairly extensive safety net.

Consumers have therefore intuitively developed the notion that as they are as taxpayers already paying to keep the growers in business, any monies demanded for the actual goods during the selling process should consequently be of nominal value only.

Coupled with this misguided slant on economics is the romanticised belief that growing fruit and vegetables is a lot of fun. It must be, because isn't that what Mum or Dad did for a hobby when I was young?

Put bluntly, the average consumer has no idea about the effort it takes to produce fruit and vegetables nor do they understand what is required in order to ensure fresh produce is available on the shelves when she does her shopping.

Should the consumer care? On one hand, the answer is, 'yes, of course'. After all, we are talking about part of our daily sustenance here, and surely we ought to be interested in that. On the other hand, the sad truth is that as a society we are so used to having placed what we need to survive right in front of our nose to ensure an effortless uptake, that the term 'consumer society' and all the negative connotations associated are well deserved.

If we do show an interest, it is typically related to a high impact issue of perceived negative value, such as the marginal availability of organics or the amount of chemicals being used during production or the fact that bananas have to travel long distances to reach their market and shouldn't we therefore stop eating them?

## **Changes in my time**

I arrived in New Zealand in 1981. At that time rural parts of the country still operated their telephones via party lines, no one had a home computer, the fax machine had already been invented but had not made it to New Zealand yet, mobile telephones only existed in movies, the Internet was the domain of Californian researchers and the US Strategic Rocket Command and e-mail and blogging did not even exist in peoples' imagination.

Shops and supermarkets opened Monday to Thursday, typically 9am - 5pm. On Fridays, shopping hours extended to 9pm. The country was shut on Saturday and Sunday.

Milk was brought by the milkman and was not available in supermarkets. When supermarkets were open, they stocked the basics. This did not include beer or wine, which had to be purchased at the off-license.

The cheese range available consisted of Cheddar variations such as Mild, Tasty and Colby. Camembert was an expensive import from France, pasteurised to death with the consistency of chewy wallpaper glue. Bananas, oranges and grapes were subject to retail price controls by the government appointed import monopolist.

As consumers, we were a lot less demanding and accepted most products and services dished up to us with good grace.

Things are a little different now.

Shops are open seven days a week, new malls are springing from the ground at the rate of two a year in Auckland and it is not difficult to find supermarkets that are open around the clock in the metropolitan areas. Milk is no longer just milk. The product range has exploded into full cream, trim, calcium enriched and latte suitable. Milkmen no longer exist and liquor is now the largest supermarket category.

Bananas are at times selling at under \$1 per kilo and anyone can be a fruit importer.

As consumers, we are intimately familiar with and aware of our rights and do not hesitate to insist upon them, justified or otherwise.