



Why Relationships Matter

BY JIM PREVORA, PRESIDENT & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

What have we learned in publishing *PRODUCE BUSINESS* for more than three decades? A bunch ... and especially this: When all is said and done, it is all about people.

It was a quarter-century ago that a woman just out of college, working for her family business, was given the task of promoting a new product innovation. The product was Broccoli Cole Slaw, and Lorri Nucci (now Koster) of Mann Packing had been charged with turning this innovation into a winner. Lorri's brother, Joe Nucci, led the development of the project, originally imagined as a way to take the broccoli spears, which were a byproduct of the company's successful foret business, and turn a cost of disposal into a valuable ingredient.

PRODUCE BUSINESS was one of a very few produce companies to have a booth at FMI — mostly because this columnist had the idea that it would help our brand to wave the flag in front of supermarket CEOs. Lorri was given the job, but not much budget, to unveil the product at FMI. We weren't allowed to share a booth, but there was no rule about what favors we could give away. Some exhibitors gave away pens, squeeze balls, magnets or made luggage tags — we gave away servings of Mann Packing's new Broccoli Cole Slaw!

So Lorri and this columnist worked the show, giving away a lot of magazines and even more of Mann's Broccoli Cole Slaw. The thing about this arrangement was there was no deal, no promise to advertise, no charge for booth sharing. We did it, for the best of all possible reasons: friendship. We wanted Joe and Lorri to succeed, because we were young people, just starting our careers, and we felt we would find success together. Money? We just figured if we did the right things with the right people, it would all work out.

Things don't always work out according to plan. There has been heartache too. Joe Nucci died while he and his family were on vacation with my family at Disney World in Florida. Joe was very successful, and about to become chairman of PMA — but our expectations were thwarted. And that heartbreak stays with us today.

But there has been joy, such as new business ventures and children growing. Lorri was to become Chairman and CEO at Mann Packing Company, and Joe and Lorri's sister, Gina, would run the foodservice end of the business before becoming director of corporate marketing at the company. Their sister, Dee Dee, became a family friend to us. One of Joe's sons interned at *PRODUCE BUSINESS* for a summer. I flew to Salinas when Lorri became chairman of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California to give a speech and share in the celebration of her achievement. We launched a Product Innovation Award in Joe's honor, which we give out each year at The New York Produce Show and Conference. We also have kept track of Lorri's son's baseball accomplishments across many years.

I would be embarrassed to point out the many ways in which the people at Mann Packing Company supported us over the years. Most obviously, they have been on the page opposite this column for decades, but when we launched The New York Produce Show and Conference, they were there with not one, but two booths, showcasing

both the firm's retail and foodservice divisions. Although there are not many vegetables that go to the U.K., when we needed support most in our overseas expansion, Lorri was manning her booth at The London Produce Show and Conference.

Unfortunately, all too many executives in the industry today are focused on immediate returns and *quid pro quos*. The top executives at many companies often leave decisions in the hands of people whose focus is very narrow. For example, a retail executive who disregards relationships for the cheapest price or to push a private label program; a grower/shipper who dumps a wholesaler that sold its product for 100 years. In each case, the company culture is lacking a mechanism to engage on a broader field and to capture the long-term values inherent in a great relationship.

It happens at all levels of decision-making, and top executives would do well to focus on how to structure and incentivize their teams to generate responses that will produce the optimal results for the total organization. Think about retail. Cross-merchandising non-produce items with produce may increase overall sales for the retailer. However, since lemons sold in the seafood department or cheese sold in produce give rings to the departments that are not the one's giving up space, that cross-merchandising won't happen as often as it should — even if it optimizes overall store sales and profits. This is because, to use just one example, a seafood director is neither evaluated nor paid based on overall store sales and profits.

We see a great deal of problematic decision-making in marketing. The person assigned the job of evaluating marketing opportunities often has too narrow a responsibility, and often too narrow a range of experience, to make decisions that will optimize returns to the company. Those with narrow responsibilities make narrow calculations. The challenge for companies is to ensure decisions are not made on such narrow grounds. We need people capable, instructed and incentivized to see the big picture.

In both our business and personal lives, what is the real source of strength? Isn't it having people who you know are always there to back you up? In engaging with a customer or a vendor, the primary interest should be on the value of the relationship. The cost of specific things becomes the ante you pay to have some equity in these relationships.

There are hundreds of things people do for each other in this business: calls made, meetings taken, deals done — and the key to success is rarely transactional. So on this 25th anniversary of the launch of Broccoli Cole Slaw, I'll remember my friend Joe, and I'll remember Lorri, standing next to me engaging at that FMI so long ago. I'll remember how little we 20-somethings expected back then, and (from the sincerity of that desire to help each other) how much has grown.

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