



Courting Consumer-Affairs Advisors

As a public relations/marketing communications professional working in the produce industry, I consider myself quite fortunate to have developed meaningful relationships with supermarket-chain consumer-affairs professionals over the years.

It all started with a crisis. More than a decade ago, I flew to Virginia for a meeting of Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) Consumer Affairs Committee to discuss a labor crisis facing California's strawberry industry. As we worked together on mitigating the crisis (and others since including food safety), I better recognized the important and valuable role consumer-affairs professionals play in communicating directly with the consumer.

Giant Food's Ester Peterson pioneered the world of retail chain consumer affairs. A former special assistant for consumer affairs to President Lyndon Johnson, in 1971 the late Peterson helped Giant become the first U.S. retailer to roll out nutritional labeling. Her strong consumer advocacy helped supermarkets develop a framework for building trust with consumers. Consumers trust retailers if they know their supermarket chain truly cares about them and their families.

Over the years, many retail consumer-affairs advisors have told me they love the produce industry because it gives supermarkets a platform to communicate positive health messages to their consumers through their newsletters, Web sites and other direct-to-consumer vehicles. Retailers want to partner with produce suppliers in building consumer demand.

That's where we come in. In addition to working with our friends in produce departments, I strongly suggest produce suppliers and commodity boards seek to partner with retail consumer-affairs advisors, registered dietitians and community-relations, marketing and communications/public affairs/public relations professionals.

Here's a great way to start. Attend — and perhaps sponsor — FMI's annual Consumer Affairs, Communications and Community Relations Seminar. It's a great way to learn about the opportunities supermarket chains face every day. Dagmar Farr, FMI's group vice president of legislative and consumer affairs, leads this group. Next year's conference will be in October (after PMA's Fresh Summit) but the location and dates will not be determined until early 2009.

During this year's FMI conference in October in Boston, I had the privilege of speaking to retailers about one of my favorite topics — Produce for Kids (PFK), which promotes the benefits of healthful eating and supports worthy causes for children.

Many retailers support PFK because it is a great cause-marketing program they can customize and integrate into their existing corporate initiatives. Thanks to PFK partner retailers and sponsors, the produce industry has raised more than \$2 million for the Children's Miracle Network and PBS Kids since 2002.

At the conference, many presenters shared new information regarding health and product usage. Author/registered dietitian David Grotto talked about the nutritional benefits of Chilean Hass avocados. Trained by Second City in Chicago, Grotto uses humor to communicate health messages to consumers. His *101 Foods That Could Save Your Life* is a must-read for everyone in the industry.

As a former American Dietetic Association media spokesperson, Grotto really connects with retailers. During the seminar, attendees

learned about using a plastic storage bag to create a Chilean Hass avocado spread that can replace butter or mayonnaise.

You can sponsor a reception as did the Georgia Pecan Commission. Retailers learned pecans contain more antioxidants than any other nut. Attendees also learned important facts about Vidalia onions through the Vidalia Onion Committee's in-conference trivia contest.

These gatherings are a big reason why communicating with retail consumer-affairs professionals is important — they are great messengers for the produce industry.

Whether you start with the annual October conference or approach each chain directly, you should consider partnering with retail consumer-affairs advisors in future marketing and communications endeavors. If you have a new

consumer-friendly product, they are a crucial asset.

Retailers are typically open to new research findings and exciting recipes they can utilize in their consumer communications vehicles. Obviously, it is easier to integrate your messages with a chain if you already have a planned promotion with the retailer's produce department.

Will it cost you money? It depends on the retailer. It never hurts to ask retailers to become partners with us. At the end of the day, supermarket chains and produce suppliers are ultimately after the same thing — increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Retailers have a strong commitment to offering produce because they understand its profitability, but they are also keenly aware produce plays an integral part in the daily lives of consumers.

Consumers trust retail consumer-affairs advisors and I trust them, too. They are great allies for the produce industry and I wholeheartedly embrace what they do.

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