



Distinguishing Characteristics:

Utilizing the power of produce to stand out from the crowd

BY JAMES MORRELL

Keeping it fresh: a vibrant and fresh produce department is a key part of most natural food cooperatives, and a positive produce experience is the primary reason given by shoppers for their choice of a specific store or location. A healthy produce department offers a great foundation for overall store success and is an effective way for a store to differentiate itself within the natural foods market.

To put it another way—the overwhelming majority of a store's current customers as well as the store's untapped potential customers are using their experience with the produce department as a determining factor in deciding their shopping destination. This illustrates the tremendous opportunity represented by our produce sections for increasing customer traffic and consumer participation.

Culturally and operationally, food cooperatives are uniquely well positioned to leverage the appeal of their fresh produce departments to highlight their store's individuality and drive sales while simultaneously addressing the real food demands of the communities in which they operate.

In the current climate of ever-increasing competition, there are some specific aspects and general approaches that can help to keep your produce department engaging and a positive influence on the bottom line. Presentation, product selection, and customer service are areas of focus that can help distinguish your fresh program and differentiate your store from the rest of the competitive marketplace.



Great first impressions

Welcome customers into your store—create excitement with engaging and dynamic produce displays. The produce section is often placed right at the front of the grocery store, and with good reason. The immediate connection and response elicited from the fresh aromas and vibrant colors of the fruits and vegetables enhance the customer experience and invite them into the store. Making a great first impression is important.

Just as a quality produce department can set an energetic tone for the customer, the department itself can benefit from the positive first impressions provided by an attractive and dynamic “front-of-house” display. This primary merchandising location provides a great opportunity to engage and communicate with all your customers as they enter. We should illustrate the story that we want our guests to see in our selections. Ideally the choices for the front display area will be seasonal, high quality, abundant, reasonably priced, and delicious.

Ever fresh, ever changing

Embrace creativity and change in the landscape. Setting aside an area or two of the produce department, including the front display, where adjustments to the lineup are expected and even encouraged is a great way to keep things interesting.

Reset this display regularly. Set a schedule so that even your most

frequent shoppers will continue to find fresh and new experiences in this familiar location during each visit to your store.

Take full advantage of holidays and seasonal events to create promotional opportunities and themes. Using a variety of appropriate tools, place baskets, produce boxes, or crates at different elevations on your produce tables as an easy way to add more interesting structure and shapes to your presentations.

Promotional opportunities abound in the produce department. By highlighting the seasonal nature and specific varietal qualities of the items on our front display, we can create increased interest right at the start. Be willing to take some chances, and embrace a vibrant and changing produce landscape as a means to invite customer participation.

With a little forethought, planning, and creative energy, this changing display space can be a dramatic way to visually distinguish your operation from other food stores. Fresh, beautiful, high-quality produce items at great prices, right at the front of the store—that’s a winning combination.

Taste of local

Cultivate your fresh department’s identity through a diverse product mix highlighting locally grown and specialty produce. Developing a compelling visual identity and creating excitement through merchandising is a great way to distinguish your operation—and there is no better

place to practice this than in the produce section. Building a strong core set and utilizing specialty produce to generate additional interest can make the department a destination for all types of customers—comparison shoppers, foodies, home cooks, and chefs alike.

The quality of taste is a highly promotable attribute and plays a prominent role in our industry's purchasing and merchandising conversations. Understanding and staying in touch with the spectrum of flavors within your produce department will allow you to highlight seasonal choices and keep your patrons' attention.

Offer an evolving menu of peak season selections. Even if your produce section is small, you can maximize its impact by choosing a few tasty celebrity items to feature each week. Promote their flavor profile, tell their story, and sample them to everyone.

Combine these more subjective approaches with a concrete and sincere effort to support local agriculture. The virtues of locally produced foods are many, and cultivating connections in the community through the development of a local producer program is another specific way to differentiate your store and define its role in the food system. Your local grower is an immediately available resource and an important element in what can be unique and site-specific selections.

Here to serve

Develop a produce team culture where exceptional customer service is the norm. Establishing an expectation of outstanding and sincere customer service is one of the best ways to differentiate your produce department from other stores that happen to sell fruits and vegetables.



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Think of it this way—nothing is more special to your specific location and operation than the people who work there. Use this to your advantage. By hiring well and building a great team of knowledgeable and passionate produce people who are empowered to take ownership of their work, you can create a positive and educational atmosphere where the culture can begin to shine.

Customer experience will continue to be a main ingredient in the creation of a loyal consumer base, so paying close attention to customer comments, requests, and purchases provides great constructive feedback and informs the practicality of your approach. Engage with your community. Consistently great customer service delivered with sincerity will put your operation on a firm footing and set the co-op apart from its competition with its own style and organizational personality.

Keeping track

Set clear and attainable financial goals to focus your work. While it is important to develop your own merchandising style, build nice displays, and “wow” your customers with your fresh produce, it is also vitally important to pay close attention to your financial health in order to remain viable well into the future. Attending to detail supports informed workplace decisions. Working to optimize profit margin and labor percentages as well as productivity indicators helps ensure that your department is on the right track.

The difference between a produce department that simply looks good and a department that continues to drive sales, promote customer engagement, and contribute positively to the bottom line often comes down to how seriously we pay attention to the finances. The aspects of the fresh departments that make them compelling can also take up more time, but these extra steps support the overall success of our the department and ultimately the revenue generated by this important category. The good will elicited by a vibrant fresh produce program should not be underestimated.

Promoting real attributes and celebrating differences

Cooperative grocers will continue to find new ways to reinvest in the transparent approach to fresh food that has helped lead us to our success as merchants. Our commitment to our produce programs will keep bringing people back to our stores for the fresh market shopping experience that we are best equipped to offer.

A co-op operations manager recently summed it up this way: “Often the produce department is the customer's first impression of the store. Having thoughtful, engaging, and bountiful merchandising displays that also meet your strategic goals is key to maximizing revenue and meeting your mission.”

In a world of chain store similarity and marketplace saturation, co-ops should play to their strengths and dare to be different. Trying to differentiate your operation in a highly competitive field can be difficult to accomplish, but it can be done by cultivating a commitment to authenticity in your produce department, your purchasing decisions, and your approach to service.

Developing a signature produce department that is engaging and productive helps your store stand out in the crowd, creating a foundation for operational success. □