



Elizabeth J. Mitcham

Postharvest

Flavor Is The Key To Increased Consumption

THE produce industry must feel very fortunate that they have such a great product to sell. Everywhere you turn these days, you hear recommendations to consumers to increase their intake of fruits and vegetables. What other product has so great a reputation and gets so much free publicity? The benefit of a diet rich in a variety of fruits and vegetables has been clearly demonstrated in study after study, and the U.S. population has become increasingly health conscious.

Why has consumption of produce in the U.S. remained below the USDA recommended five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, even when you include fried potatoes as a serving? In 2003, only 23% of consumers nationwide reported eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day, and 40% reported no more than two servings.

One could argue that lack of convenience (or time) and the cost of produce in the retail market are contributing factors. Studies by USDA have demonstrated that cost need not be a significant barrier to consumption of the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. More than half of all fruits and vegetables were estimated to cost no more than 25¢ per serving in 1999, according to USDA. Value-added

products and snack-sized packages provide consumers with convenient preparation and take-out options.

Another important and overlooked reason for lagging increases in consumption of fruits and vegeta-

fruits and vegetables and to increase the nutritional value of some crops. However, without an increase in consumption, the benefits of these nutrients will not be realized. We need to develop strategies to assure the availability of fruits and vegetables of consistently high flavor quality within the framework of the produce industry.



Commit to Quality

Research Strategies to Cut Costs

Organize for Market Strength

Promote Environmental Stewardship

bles is the industry's failure to provide products with consistently high flavor quality. This is a problem for fruit that is frequently plagued by lack of sweetness, poor texture, or lack of flavor. For this reason, consumers are often disappointed in the eating experience with produce. Processed products, by their nature, are generally very consistent in quality and eating experience.

Considerable resources have been expended to increase our understanding of the nutritional value of

Catch Them Early

Many have recognized that we can most effectively increase produce consumption in this country by targeting the youngest consumers in our population, to guide them in developing the habit of eating a diversity of fruits and vegetables every day. However, many children taste a particular food once or twice, and if disappointed, will not try it again for some time. We need to increase the odds that these children will have a good eating experience every time.

The reasons for inferior flavor quality are many, but generally stem from the fact that, unlike yield, disease resistance, and appearance, taste has not been a priority in variety selection or production methods. With increased competition and overproduction of many crops worldwide, the emphasis needs to shift to remain competitive.

The produce industry should focus on increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables in this country to a level more on par with that in Europe, through continued consumer education and promotion, but also by ensuring the highest flavor quality in the produce sold. If successful, this would have benefits for our nation in improved health of the population and reduced medical costs and would benefit the produce industry by increasing demand for its products. ●

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