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Fresh produce sales still strong

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C O P I N G *with* C O V I D - 1 9

By Craig Levitt

Fresh produce sales for grocery retailers in the time of COVID-19 returned to more moderate dollar growth, compared to the first two weeks of social distancing. For the week ended March 29, fresh produce increased 8.1 percent compared to the same week in 2019, according to IRI.

Fresh vegetables were up 15.2 percent while fresh fruit increased just 1.5 percent. Vegetables were paced by potatoes, up 65 percent in dollars and 58 percent in volume, and onions, up 31 percent and 44 percent, respectively.

Potatoes are in such demand that suppliers are trying to figure out new and innovative ways to get them in the hands of consumers.

The Idaho Potato Commission, for example, recently offered suggestions to retailers on “how to best merchandise the product they can get, when what they want (bags) is limited,” said Seth Pemsler, vice president of retail/international for the IPC. “The goal is to help them sell bulk. We will continue to work with retailers and wholesalers to optimally merchandise cartons since that is what our industry will need to provide them for the foreseeable future.”

Suggestions include waterfaling potatoes to help displays last longer and displaying bulk product in their boxes in order to save time and labor.

On the fruit side, oranges and lemons were the top dollar gainers, up 43 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

Generally, fresh produce categories with longer shelf-life that cook well or are easy to snack on have grown in demand over the past few weeks. Hampering fresh sales is the fact that frozen is up 41 percent and shelf-stable is up 51 percent compared to the same week last year.

“We see fundamentally different consumer engagement with produce amid COVID-19 and week three continued to show a three-way split of the produce dollar between fresh, frozen and shelf-stable,” said Joe Watson, vice president of membership and engagement for the Produce Marketing Association. “This is why fresh produce never saw the kind of surge in sales that we’ve seen in fresh meat or other perimeter departments. At this point, many shoppers are looking to minimize trips. It’s important to encourage fresh produce consumption by providing tips about items for now and items with longer shelf-life to have ample fresh fruit and vegetables for the entire week.”

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