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PMA's Fresh Summit gets good marks

By

Tim Linden

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A quick survey of a dozen attendees to the Produce Marketing Association's virtual Fresh Summit revealed a solid score for effort, execution and education, but the in-person experience was sorely missed.

"PMA did a wonderful job pivoting to a virtual Fresh Summit expo," observed Rachelle Schulken, marketing event manager for the Renaissance Food Group. "Between the networking opportunities, industry panels, and Cathy Burns' State of the Industry speech, I left the show feeling inspired and fulfilled. The Fresh Ideas Showcase and exhibitor Marketplaces served as proof that even in the era of COVID-19, the produce industry is determined to innovate and work together to continue driving produce consumption and keep shelves stocked. The evening receptions brought me to my feet at home in front of the computer!"

Despite COVID-19 and the distancing it requires, Schulken said the industry's determination to "come together to address important issues and have real conversations with the same passion and vigor as if in-person was inspiring and one of my favorite experiences from Fresh Summit. From rapidly flowing dialogue in the General Session chat box to honest and difficult conversations in breakout sessions to connecting via video chat on the platform, I left feeling our industry is ready to tackle tough topics and excited for a fresh future all the same."

Nonetheless, she noted that attending a trade show virtually just can't measure up to an in-person event. In the first place, you can't separate from your daily routine as you do when you head to another city for an event.

"Email and outside distractions do not slow down," she said. "The world continues to turn, dinner must be cooked, laundry needs to be done, and our everyday work tasks continue to call our attention away from networking and looking around the Marketplace for the latest and greatest."

Angela Fraser, director of trade affairs for the California Avocado Commission and the co-chair of the 2020 Fresh Summit Committee, called it "a great show and an outstanding experience." She praised the overall program and its coverage of timely topics, and found an advantage to a virtual show. "The bonus as an exhibitor is that I was able to participate in all of the educational sessions, which is a challenge during an in-person show."

Fraser said the commission received good traffic at its booth and she met new people as well as reacquainting with old friends. "I connected with people I am confident I would not have met at an in-person format," she added.

When asked about her favorite Fresh Summit experience, Fraser pointed to both her volunteer service and one of the entertainment events. "For me, it was two-fold with the first being co-chair of the Fresh Summit Committee and the second was I really enjoyed the Global Street Festival Reception featuring QuestLove. It was fun listening to the great music from all around the world, learning about the produce products of the place where the music came from, seeing pictures of past Fresh Summit events and connecting with other attendees via the chat feature. It almost felt like we were all together."

Marty Craner, CEO of B&C Fresh Sales, also gave the virtual Fresh Summit high marks saying her overall impression was "very good" as she had good opportunities to connect with others and thought the educational sessions were worthwhile. She added that the ability to use the platform for another month is another positive.

Kevin Brooks, chief marketing officer for Procurant, saw challenges with the virtual format, but had an overall positive review. "While most of us at Procurant have been attending and exhibiting at Fresh Summit for years, this was only Procurant's second year as a sponsor. The change in format definitely required adjustments in both expectations and overall strategy. The PMA team did a good job promoting the event and creating high-quality content, but the limitations of a virtual format are difficult to overcome in an industry that values face-to-face discussions and literal hands-on evaluations. Our demo sessions focused on our traceability solution and we had some good interactions there, but overall engagement was in line with other virtual conferences we have sponsored and attended this year -- light. Let's hope we get back to a true PMA Fresh Summit experience in 2021!"

Claudia Pizarro-Villalobos, who handles marketing and communications for D'Arrigo California, was another attendee who took advantage of the circumstances presented by this year's event but missed the excitement of an in-person show.

"The pivot to a virtual show gave us an opportunity to educate and engage with a broader audience to promote our brand, products and services," she said. "I really miss walking the show floor to see 'what's new' and interacting with attendees. The energy that the show floor generates is invigorating, whereas the online experience can be a bit dull at times."

D'Arrigo California was an exhibitor and Pizarro-Villalobos reported a steady number of daily visitors and expects those numbers to increase as the platform remains live until mid-November. She was particularly complimentary of the Marketplace platform. "I have found that the online platform serves as a data machine for gathering key intel and connecting with customers and prospects."

On the other hand, the D'Arrigo representative encountered some issues with the video session freezing up and too much lag time with pages and chat messages uploading.

Answering for the entire team, Pear Bureau Northwest Marketing Communications Director Kathy Stephenson said the experience was much different than usual, the sessions were good, but the booth traffic was a bit disappointing.

"What a switch," she said. "No blisters this year, and attendees were able to pinpoint exactly the person at the organization that they wanted to engage. The sessions were fascinating and informative. Following the chat room while listening helped in a new way to see what was resonating with listeners."

Stephenson said the booth traffic tended to peak when the general sessions were being held but dropped off after those sessions were over. "We had about the number of visitors we had expected, though our expectations were pretty low," she said.

What the Pear Bureau folks liked most about the Fresh Summit platform was the ability to peruse the attendees list and connect with the right person, and Stephenson said they did make a few great connections. "However, the response rate on those messages was less than one would hope. We feel the participation and engagement by the industry was not what we had hoped for."

Sarah Deaton, Zespri Kiwifruit's shopper marketing manager for U.S./Canada, applauded PMA for its efforts. "I think PMA has done a great job of making lemonade out of lemons, so to speak. Or should I say a kiwi smoothie out of kiwis! The event has been very impressive. We love the 'celebrity' tie ins and the very informative sessions that our whole team can enjoy. We have also made great connections as well."

Zespri did exhibit and Deaton said booth traffic was good. "The best part are the insights PMA is able to provide so you can really see who is coming to your site and what content are they downloading and viewing."

She was sympathetic to PMA's plight in designing this year's event but is anxious to get back to an in-person experience. "There is no substitute for face-to-face interaction, but there really isn't a solution for that in these times. We do miss the deeper engagement and chance encounters you get at Fresh Summit."

Karin Gardner, executive director of marketing for Oppy, also reported a very positive Fresh Summit experience. "The Oppy team enjoyed the adventure that was Fresh Summit 2020. PMA promised connectivity and they delivered. We appreciated the opportunity to have valuable conversations on and off the platform and experience the marketplace and education sessions."

She added that for Oppy, the timing was great as the company was able to announce its new partnership with Eco Farms and bring its new avocado offering to the trade.

Gardner also noted that Fresh Summit offered a welcome relief to what has become the norm. "It

was refreshing and energizing to spend a couple of days in interesting and more colorful contrast to what has become the typical work week during the pandemic. I admit I didn't get to attend everything I'd hoped to, so am appreciative that PMA is keeping the show open through mid-November and we can circle back through the marketplace and watch the sessions that we missed."

Another attendee who weighed in on her observations was Megan Gorgisheli, director of communications, for Giumarra Cos., which exhibited via a Marketplace page in the Produce section. "We received a wide variety of visitors to our page that included retailers, growers, and other industry members throughout the duration of Fresh Summit and even the weeks prior when PMA hosted its 'buyer preview'," she said.

Giumarra was pleased with the virtual platform and the number of attendees from both the United States and across the globe. "We were able to connect with people we have never met in person at an industry event, as well as old friends and existing customers. It was convenient to have the Marketplace, which I used to peruse companies' pages at my leisure to learn more about their products and services. It was also helpful to have a messaging system that encompassed all attendees, with photos and profiles."

Gorgishell was also able to improve her own culinary skills. "As a produce consumer, I enjoyed the product demos from fellow grower shippers. Fresh Summit is where I get some of my best new ideas for the kitchen, and this year was no different. Although, I wish I could have tasted everything in person!"

She added that it has been very helpful to have the sessions available on-demand. "Knowing that the platform will be available through mid-November, I have more time to watch sessions and make additional contacts."

Brianna Shales, senior marketing manager for Stemilt, praised PMA for creating an all-new way for the global industry to connect. "While it was drastically different than in-person, it was fun to share the education sessions among our team and I personally loved the Global Retail Tour and seeing how retail across the world has navigated the pandemic, while ensuring people have access to fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers," she said.

She was particularly complimentary of Burns State of the Industry address. "Her emotional approach was exactly what the industry should hear and rally around right now," Shales said. "I had colleagues that loved CGT Women's event too!"

On the negative side of the ledger was a reality that could not be cured. Shales said: "Time zones are always so tricky to navigate around with a virtual event...so that was a bit limiting for me as a West Coaster."

Another West Coast-based company offering an opinion on the event was The Wonderful Company. Senior Vice President of Marketing Adam Cooper said his team approached the trade show just as they would any other. "We always love exhibiting at the PMA Fresh Summit because it's a great show and it's also timed to the start of both our fresh pomegranate and Wonderful Halos seasons, which begin in early November. With the show going virtual this year, even though there's no travel involved, our preparation is similar to other years and includes determining the most important news to share with our industry partners and designing a way to showcase our brands to convey those messages. From a technical standpoint, the preparation was different, but we still built a booth; it was simply a virtual layout."

He said the company enjoyed “a significant and steady flow of virtual visitors to our booth...We connected with a mix of people, including many new faces.”

Cooper added that no different than with an in-person show connecting with industry partners and sharing all of the new Wonderful Company news was the main goal for us, and it was accomplished. “Overall, we were pleased with the show and how it was executed. Of course, we can’t wait to get together in person with everyone again when possible.”

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