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In the Trenches: Make your berry display a signature section

By

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Working in the produce department was one of my favorite experiences when I began my supermarket career. I especially liked helping the produce manager set up colorful displays. I also liked trimming lettuce, celery, cabbage, and other vegetables in the backroom to prepare for the displays, but there was one assignment I was not fond of — when the produce manager would yell to me in the backroom, “Work up 10 more flats of strawberries!”

Back then, strawberries were loose in the flats and working up strawberries meant that we had to carefully go through them and remove any inferior berries. Then we had to stack each berry with the points facing upward in each pint for presentation. Not only was this labor-intensive and time-consuming, but my hands emerged as though they were dyed red regardless of how thoroughly I washed them.

In prior years, strawberries and blueberries made up the majority of the display. Raspberries and blackberries were rarely handled — mainly because of limited supply, high cost and a very short shelf life.

Of course, those days are gone and berries are now a major category. Berry sales continue to rise, bolstered by the growth of global imports. Today, retailers prefer produce items that are available year-round in order to eliminate gaps between seasons and blueberries, raspberries and blackberries from South America have filled winter supplies, which were once left vacant.

The former pint strawberries had to be covered with cellophane and held with a rubber band. That also took time and labor in preparation before going out to the sales floor display. These containers also prevented any kind of stacking as one layer became the standard rule to prevent damaging the berries.

Packaging has made a tremendous difference in berry sales increases. The development of the plastic clamshell allows retailers to have full displays and eliminates the tedious labor of processing pints and quarts. Clamshell product is fast and easy by simply stacking the berries for greater display sales without damaging the strawberries.

Shoppers are usually tired of cold dark winter months and berries have that certain ambiance of spring that captivates customers and encourages sales.

With the Easter holiday ahead, strawberries are always a popular item in the produce department. Large attractive and well-stocked displays are predominant in order to drive sales.

Mike Roberts, director of produce operations for Harp’s Food Stores told me, “I have always said that Easter is just like Christmas with strawberries. A big strawberry display is essential for every

produce department at Easter. We always tie asparagus in with this display. The contrast in colors makes for a great looking display.”

Here are eight basic tips that will help boost berry sales to greater heights:

- **Planning** — Timing is everything. Expand displays during holidays and special occasions. Draw up a plan-o-gram to identify where each berry variety is to be displayed. Order sufficient quantities to maintain fully stocked displays.
- **Location** — Set a permanent display as close as possible to the department entrance. This directs customers to a fixed spot for purchasing berries on each trip. Set some auxiliary displays outside the department like near the bakery and at the front checkout stands for incremental sales.
- **Visual** — Grasp your customer's immediate attention. Make sure your display has attractive eye-appeal to draw shoppers over to it and capture those “impact purchases.” Nearly 80 percent of first impressions are visual.
- **Variety** — Offer customers more choices. Your display should consist of strawberries leading the way, followed by blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries. Add larger packs like two- or three-pound strawberries, two-pound blueberries and 12-ounce raspberries.
- **Consistency** — Have fully stocked displays year-round. Display packages evenly and face all the labels forward towards the customers. Avoid placing packages any which way. Be professional.
- **Promotion** — Advertising is instrumental in moving massive amounts of berries along with smart merchandising. Both generate a healthy increase to sales and growth. The best strategy is promoting a combination of mix and match packages along with multiple sizes.
- **Price** — Berries are known as a superior first-class category. Shoppers generally spend more during Easter. There's no reason to sell them at such low prices that it depreciates their superior quality and value. Avoid evolving them into a low price image.
- **Signage** — Post signs with retails and also with information about the different varieties, taste, nutrition and health benefits. Offer customers different recipes to encourage creative ways to serve berries.

Moving that extra case or two of berries all adds up to putting more dollars into the produce till. Achieving higher sales and profit all depends on the way you present the product.

If you want to beat last year's sales, it's up to you to plan it in advance and make it happen. Merchandising is the key to success.

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