



- Advertisement -

Marketing without the benefit of Fresh Summit

By

Tim Linden

October 25, 2021

For many companies, the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit offers the best opportunity to get in front of their customers and to make new connections. It has now been canceled two years in a row.

To explore strategies that can be employed to make up for this lost marketing connection, *The Produce News* asked several produce industry marketing professionals to share their thoughts about connecting with customers and finding new ones when the industry's biggest show is not an option.

Participating in this discussion were Cindy Jewell, marketing consultant for [Bobalu Berries](#); Mary Coppola Heslep, senior vice president of [Ten Acre Marketing](#); Mackenzie McLeod, account director for [DMA Solutions Inc.](#); Steven Muro, founder and president of [Fusion](#); Nicholas M. Pasculli, president and CEO of [TMD Creative](#); and Tristan Simpson, CEO and founder of [tristan michele marketing](#).

It's been 20 months since your clients have seen many of their customers. Zoom is getting old. What are some innovative ideas to keep that relationship fresh?

Tristan Simpson: How about a good old fashioned phone call? It seems like nowadays I am having to specify with someone that I just want to talk — on a phone. No video, but just a quick chat. We don't have to go overboard just to make a connection.

Nick M. Pasculli: What was old-school is new again. Not only are people getting tired of Zoom, but we are also getting tired of an overabundance of emails and the never-ending amount of email marketing. One thing we have been recommending to our clients for years now is an old-fashioned written note. There is a lot of value in a written note and in today's day and age they are largely unexpected. How about just writing a sincere note to check in, let them know you are thinking about them, not just the business you get from them. Show some concern for their family during these very difficult times. You can always pick up the phone during what you know may be a less hectic time of the day just to say hi. Follow the same suggestions as in the written note. We are so used to transacting business using AI and email, the art of a simple phone call is going by the wayside. Lastly, hit the road. Traveling is safe and if you can and they are comfortable, go see your customers.

Mackenzie McLeod: Fewer in-person events have left our industry with a lack of sensory opportunities — being able to see, smell, touch and taste the product. We asked ourselves, how can brands still get the product in their customers' hands to foster those conversations? We worked to find a solution with several of our clients by offering custom gift packages featuring items and information they normally would've conveyed during a trade show. We send the packages directly to customers to surprise and delight them. Since the start of the pandemic, we've also experienced an increase in engagement with email marketing. If you aren't already collecting your customers'

emails in a database and sending regular newsletters or company updates, now is the time to start. These emails can feature video field tours and crop information to stay on your customers' minds.

Cindy Jewell: We miss having those face-to-face interactions. Personally, I am so done with Zoom. At this point, we prefer to use the old-fashioned telephone to stay connected and we continue to send out weekly e-news to our retail partners full of photos, crop info and any general intel we can share. We are finding that as time goes on, we bring more humor into the weekly e-news content.

Mary Coppola Heslep: First, I would suggest that Zoom isn't getting old if it's delivering real business on the other end. The greater challenge is that we're an industry the loves to be in-person. We thrive in a full room of faces and voices, and no technology can replicate that, so we've been forced to stretch our bounds. We've had a shared experience that continues to challenge our resolve. This winter I anticipate buyer and vendor gifts to be much more thoughtful. Companies that are connecting in meaningful ways and showing their humanity will find strengthened relationships when they're able to reconnect in-person. That starts with communication style. Know the audience you're sending to otherwise your thoughtful gift might miss its intended mark.

Steven Muro: An increasing number of customers are returning to face-to-face meetings. However, they have embraced the ease, efficiency and time savings of digital meetings and communications with their suppliers. Moving forward, we will see a mix of in-person and online meetings. This does create more challenges for the supplier who must now provide compelling content and reasons for the customer to meet. To do this, the supplier can provide key insights and information to assist the customer in growing sales and profits. Plus, it helps to make the process more compelling by interjecting personal and entertaining information.

What do you do to find new customers when roaming the convention floor isn't available?

McLeod: We're big proponents of public relations strategically coupled with trade advertising to ensure your brand is consistently visible in the industry. It is said it can take seven-plus times of seeing a brand name or advertising message for someone to really take notice, so having the right stories placed on a consistent basis combined with advertising can make a difference.

In addition to this, if your company doesn't already have a LinkedIn strategy, this is a great way to reach new audiences. LinkedIn allows you to target specific companies and roles through advertising and you don't need to spend enormous amounts of money to do it.

As marketers, we can attest that once you can get your hands on the email addresses for prospective customers, we can make the magic happen. We recommend sales teams and marketers work together to identify existing and potential customers to collect email addresses and build an outreach list. Once you have them, your marketing team can help create an email strategy to foster engagement.

Pasculli: Be thoughtful... send something unexpected. A gift card with a note saying have coffee on us, you deserve a break and though we can't be joining you as you know that we are here for you when you are ready. Do something that shows you care about the individual, not just the potential business they will give you. Also, keep an eye on trade publications, if you see your potential customer in the news, clip the article and mail it to them with a congratulatory note. This shows you are paying attention to what is going on in their business and that demonstrates your commitment to learning more about what could help them. There are lots of clues in trade news stories, so take advantage of that.

Simpson: There are many ways to target and capture someone's attention off the show floor. The hunt is now a bit harder as it is up to you to find out where they are and what they need. Some ideas... how about getting into their world a bit and study how their operations have changed and what they are in need of implementing and connect that to the solution you have to offer.

Jewell: We lose that opportunity to see and experience innovative new products, services and tools being launched in the industry. Convention is the best way to get that hands-on experience while sharing ideas with others on the show floor. These connections made cannot be duplicated on the phone or a computer screen.

Coppola Heslep: Digital. Marketing automation tools continue to improve, allowing companies and budgets to build opportunities for new and recurring engagement. Digital opportunities can be more targeted. A little geo-planning on the front end can yield prosperous results that might surprise you. But that's just part of the equation; you need to spend time getting your message just right. As marketers, we need to be confident that the message we're using to attract new clients is relevant to them, but not all clients are the same. A messaging matrix will guide specific messages that are going to resonate with the right target, leading to the desired result: a new customer.

Industry events — lunches, dinners, golf tournaments — typically offer social connections, how valuable are they?

Jewell: We still have constraints with time and budget so we don't plan to do as many of those types of events as part of our agenda in 2022, but things could change. I still think those social gatherings should be more about personal relationships and less about selling. These are great opportunities for some of the newer industry members to meet and build relationships since we have missed so many over the last couple of years. It's those younger industry members getting established I feel bad for those that are missing the chance to meet peers, customers and participate in educational sessions.

Coppola Heslep: These events have always been impactful. Retailers have shown up all year long when they're able to drive to an event rather than fly. If you're looking to get into the retail market in New England, then attending the events hosted by the New England Produce Council should be part of your strategy, and so on.

Muro: Don't double down unless it is warranted. Look at your prior success rate of landing new business through these types of events. If you have had success, then jump in. But if you had little to no luck, then take a more measured approach. Either way, aggressiveness in selling at social or networking events may not provide the intended outcome you planned. At the next event you may find people looking to sit at a different table so they can enjoy the event and camaraderie and bypass your hard-sell. So, enjoy the event and know that the topic of business will be discussed.

Simpson: Be genuine. Not a one-trick pony. Meaning, if you are only looking for potential customers or opportunities but not really engaged in the purpose of the event or activity than it will be vastly apparent. Take a close look at the organizations that host these events and see how/if you can play a bigger role in support of them. Giving back will have its return in the end. I would also caution from aggressive selling at any time, let alone when people are reassimilating back into social situations.

Pasculli: I recommend any opportunity that helps develop relationships in business, even when direct sales opportunities are not the focus. COVID-19 has taught me to slow down and get back to the basics of nurturing solid relationships that are meaningful and that can help achieve business and career goals. I realize that transactions hopefully lead to profit, but we should not shortcut the process. Get to know the person first, take a genuine interest in them.

What is the best out-of-the-box marketing campaign you've seen since COVID-19 began?

Coppola Heslep: I don't believe you can put your sustainable story in a box, so you can't measure it as out-of-the-box thinking. The best — measured campaign that will resonate most with their intended audience — that I've seen are when brands tell an authentic, sometimes vulnerable, story about themselves, their practices, and their people, all of which might fall under the umbrella of sustainability. Storytelling is the secret sauce of brand authenticity.

McLeod: Despite a global pandemic, in 2020 we saw the overall performance of our clients' promotions increase significantly. With people stuck at home, they were spending a great deal of time online and engagement with fresh produce brands' content greatly benefitted from this, especially when the promotion was relevant to what shoppers were experiencing in real time.

In 2021, people are largely back out in the world and living their lives, but the lesson for marketers stands true: if you can be nimble and create promotions and campaigns that align with what your shoppers are currently facing in their lives, you will win.

While the at-home centric content was relevant in 2020, now in 2021 we are seeing shoppers have become more comfortable with purchasing fresh produce online. We're seeing many fresh produce brands focus on campaigns centered around eCommerce and the ability to order their products for delivery — whether directly through the company's website or through sites like Instacart. Campaigns offering shoppers digital coupons that then drive them to a place where they can purchase the branded product online are proving to be successful and help create a sales lift that can be directly attributed to marketing efforts.

Muro: Not so much a campaign but seeing opportunities to satisfy consumer demand during the pandemic were the retailers that ramped up their take-home prepared food offerings. This simplified meal preparation and eliminated the need for consumers to take an additional trip to a take-out restaurant.

Food and beverage companies also utilized the past year to measure true consumer receptivity toward their brands. They realized that brands that did not see an uptick in sales during the pandemic were unlikely to experience a sales increase afterwards. The result — a paring down or elimination of products and brands.

[Print](#)