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In the Trenches: Prepare for a different consumer holiday shopping season

By

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It's hard to believe, but the holiday season is right around the corner, and it will be somewhat different this time around. Are you prepared for a better shopping event than predicted?

The end of last year's holiday season saw fewer large gatherings. Traveling was minimal. Let's face it, the 2020 holidays were a bit dismal, caused by the restrictions and fear of COVID-19.

As a result, grocery shopping was not as robust as prior holidays. Consumers also avoided going to stores by switching to online shopping for their food. That extremely changed the holiday shopping practices in a huge way.

The pandemic changed the way consumers shopped and retailers were thrown off guard by it. The shopping behavior became different overnight. Now, more than 40 percent of consumers admit to having changed the way they are shopping these days.

There are yet many unknowns about the shopping environment this year. The grey area has consumers concerned over the delta variant, which is more contagious. A number of states and local government districts have set mask wearing mandates in retail outlets among other restrictions.

One shining light this year is that the COVID-19 vaccine puts a new outlook on the upcoming holidays. With shoppers heading back in-store, this could be a far better approach to spending. Retail sales are anticipated to increase 7 percent for the holiday.

These are no longer "business as usual" operating times. With the conniving delta variant currently very active, customers will be more cautious in their holiday shopping practice.

It's really unclear as to how this holiday shopping season will turn out. It is essential that retailers prepare early enough to make sure all areas are covered from product procurement to fully stocked displays.

Here are six basic planning reminders for a different peak holiday sales season:

- **Product** — Plan your buying needs early with suppliers and get deals locked up. Growers, shippers, and retailers were hit hard and unexpectedly during the pandemic panic shopping blitz that we all experienced. There are trucking shortages and rising transportation rates. Move quickly with your suppliers to avoid being out-of-stock on holiday inventory.
- **Labor** — Who will do all the tasks? Most grocers are in a struggle to find workers. Not only are they competing with other grocers for customers, but also a workforce. Despite incentives, benefits and

other perks, it is still a challenge. Get your share of workers hired early or suffer the consequences come the holidays.

- **Marketing** — With inflationary food prices on the rise, the best approach is to focus on value. We generally concentrate on a high gross profit during the holiday season, but consumers are more aware of soaring food prices. Promote several low-priced seasonal produce items to draw them to your department. Plan those ad items now, not the last minute.
- **Merchandising** — This is where your skills come in and how you manage each major display. Shoppers only spend seconds observing displays. The strategies you put in place will make the difference in persuading them to make substantial purchases. Just dumping product on displays won't be impressive. Good artisanship is most essential.
- **Premium** — Holidays are timely for adding exquisite produce. Larger sizes of fruit like apples, pears, oranges, and an exceptional variety of vegetables will make up the impressive difference between you and your competition. Stick with premium labeled product of superior quality.
- **Convenience** — With the delta variant on the loose, customers want to do their shopping in a hurry and get out of the store fast. Consumers at this point will prefer more convenient items. That means more grab-and-go packaged produce will be in demand. Latching on to a package or bag of produce is easier for those moving quickly through the store. Online shopping will see increased activity, especially if the delta variant spreads.

The success of the forthcoming holiday season for your produce operation will not only depend on early planning, but how you will be different based on a changed consumer lifestyle engendered by COVID-19. Shoppers will seek more value, convenience, packaged produce and food safety and will go where those ingredients can be found.

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