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UNFI reshapes its produce sourcing strategy

Consistent with its commitment to deliver the highest quality produce, United Natural Foods Inc. has implemented new technologies and processes to enable the company to shorten certain delivery times by over a day and harness the full potential of UNFI data points to deliver fresher produce to its customers. These efforts have proven successful as UNFI has grown its produce sales ahead of industry growth even as retail produce industry numbers move with inflation.

To help UNFI deliver the freshest product to its customers, the company redesigned its produce sourcing strategy by consolidating its purchasing efforts and procuring many items directly from major Mexican suppliers. Product is then transported from those farms directly to UNFI distribution centers via a McAllen, TX, cross docking facility, a produce best-in-class practice. UNFI has also implemented commodity specific thresholds to accelerate the movement of product through its distribution centers and to retailers. The new sourcing model and supply chain processes have improved inventory turnover, reduced inventory shrink, and most importantly, has allowed UNFI to remove an average of over a day from its supply chain during the past year.

“We know quality is the No. 1 driver for produce purchases, which is why we are fanatical about freshness at UNFI Produce,” said Dorn Wenninger, senior vice president of produce at UNFI. “In line with UNFI’s overall strategy to harness technology and data to serve our customers better, these initiatives allow us to remove over a day from our supply chain and provide a fresher product to our customers and their shoppers. Our team is already seeing the positive results of our efforts to deliver the freshest produce to our customers and I’m looking forward to continuing to evolve UNFI as a best-in-class produce organization.”

UNFI recently implemented Share-ify, a real-time, cloud-based, tablet-enabled quality control program that allows the company to synthesize tens of thousands of data points to remove variability and help ensure its growers and suppliers are providing the freshest produce possible. The technology is currently in use at half of UNFI’s produce distribution centers and will roll out to the remainder by this September. To help manage the rollout, UNFI recently recruited industry veteran Susan Akin to serve as director of quality assurance, overseeing quality control programs.

“The power of the data we now have in our hands is immense,” said Wenninger. “Our new technology updates provide greater transparency in our supply chain, better protecting our customers and helping us to provide them with the freshest, highest-quality produce available. But we’re not just investing in technology. With the addition of Susan and several other leaders to the team, we’re assuring that we have the expertise, focus, and leadership to excel in unleashing the power of data for our customers.”

UNFI is also leveraging its deep expertise to provide a broad catalog of organic produce in an easily recognized and trusted brand, Wild Harvest. The bold purple branding makes it easier for both shoppers and store associates to recognize which products are organic, while offering the trust of the Wild Harvest label. The newly launched Wild Harvest organic bananas have performed well, and dozens of additional key items will be introduced throughout the remainder of 2022. Wild Harvest produce is already available in hundreds of retailers across the country.

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