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Kurt Zuhlke plans on making connections at the NEPC Expo

By

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As Kurt Zuhlke prepares for this year's [New England Produce Council Produce, Floral and Foodservice Expo](#), he's planning on meeting with customers and friends in the produce industry. He's also hopeful that attendance is higher than last year's event, which was still affected by COVID-19.

"It's an opportunity to meet with some of the people at retail and let them know what's out there, some of the new packaging that's coming out," said Zuhlke, whose company is headquartered in Easton, PA.

He prepares for the show by reaching out to people, which leads to meetings where they can talk about business. When it comes to packaging, he noted that some options aren't selling as well as they used to.

"There's a lot of negative publicity on Ziploc bag-style packaging, with too much of it finding its way into the water systems in the United States and around the world," he said. "So there's somewhat of a pullback in the bag industry for that."

As a leader in the produce packaging industry, Zuhlke said he's often asked by produce professionals how different products can be packaged, and he expects a lot of that talk at NEPC.

"We give them the information they need," Zuhlke said. "It's really important that if they're trying to downsize and package something, because of the high price of transportation and all that, that they give us a holler. We're happy to send them samples so they can take the items and try them out."

While there has been an increased use of paper products, he said there are problems with it because shoppers can't see the produce they're buying in brown paper packaging.

"People are getting the product home and they're finding out that there's something wrong with it," he said. "The complaints are starting to pile up, and I think that's going to be another issue. Visibility is extremely important when you're paying \$3.99 for a couple of tomatoes. People don't have the extra money so they're going for the bang for the buck."

That lack of extra money for consumers also means retailers, re-packers, farmers and greenhouses have to consider shoppers' needs in this day and age of inflation.

"It's just expensive for them to go out buy these items," Zuhlke said. "They're really cutting back on what they're purchasing, and I think the high-end items are the ones that are going to get affected the most."

He further explained that packaging costs are up, and that a lot of companies are trying to get packaging from China, but issues at ports are leading to problems.

“They wind up calling us up saying, ‘I need 100 of these and 100 of those because my container didn’t come in,’” Zuhlke said. “We want to be loyal to our customers that have been loyal to us, so we don’t necessarily have the extra product right now.”

Despite those challenges, Zuhlke said he still enjoys his work and being part of the produce industry.

“I believe you should work for as long as you can,” he said. “I enjoy the people that I do business with. I enjoy the industry. It’s a great industry to be in. I just like getting up in the morning going to work. It’s just enjoyable. It’s not a job, it’s fun.”

[Keith Loria](#)

About Keith Loria |

A graduate of the University of Miami, Keith Loria is a D.C.-based award-winning journalist who has been writing for major publications for close to 20 years on topics as diverse as real estate, food and sports. He started his career with the Associated Press and has held high editorial positions at magazines aimed at healthcare, sports and technology. When not busy writing, he can be found enjoying time with his wife, Patricia, and two daughters, Jordan and Cassidy.

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