



- Advertisement -

Ripening for retailers with Gary Campisi

For retailers, nothing is more important than having ripe fruit on display each and every day. But is it enough to justify the investment in ripening rooms? Few know the answer to this question better than Gary Campisi, former head of quality control for produce, floral, meat and seafood at Walmart and Sam's Club.

What's the importance of having ripe bananas on display for retailers?

Gary Campisi: It's pretty simple. Bananas are the most important and profitable item in the produce section and often in the entire store. So having poor or inconsistent bananas on display not only costs you sales and profit of your most profitable item, it reduces sales across the entire department and is proven to be a prime motivator for customers deciding to shop elsewhere.

So for me, being able to control banana quality represents the cornerstone of being successful as a retailer — of being able to control your own destiny as a retailer. And the only way to truly meet that expectation in my opinion is to have your own ripening rooms.

What specific criteria are used to justify the investment in ripening rooms?

Campisi: Every company is different of course, but today, buying green bananas at contract pricing and ripening at 15 to 20 cents per box using your own ripening rooms? That alone is going to justify the investment. Particularly when compared to buying bananas at market price and paying a buck, buck-fifty a box to have them ripened. It adds up quickly.

But again, everyone is different. That model works for plenty of companies and is a great profit center for wholesalers and growers who have made the investment in ripening rooms themselves for that specific purpose. In my experience however, it's a challenge to consistently meet those needs in the same way spot buying from a variety of wholesalers and growers.

What about the cost of operating a successful ripening program?

Campisi: At Walmart, our internal audits consistently showed a cost below 15 cents a box for ripening; that includes labor, energy — everything. The fact that our Thermal Tech rooms all operated exactly the same way also simplified training and allowed us to create successful protocols company-wide.

By the time I left Walmart after more than 25 years in January of 2018, internal studies showed our ripening rooms had an average ROI of under 18 months per room. Over that same period, we went from processing 15,000 cases of bananas per week in one distribution center to over 825,000 cases per week in 40 distribution centers and bananas became the number one dollar sales item at Walmart Supercenters. One percent of total sales and 9 percent of total produce department sales. You can't argue with success.

We expanded to pears in 2001, which increased pear sales by 66 percent and sales of avocados and mangoes skyrocketed after we began ripening them in 2005 and 2012, respectively. Today, there are over 600 ripening rooms in Walmart D.C.'s across the U.S., all designed and installed by Thermal

Technologies.

As a consultant I continue to work closely with Thermal Tech because they are the best at what they do. It's great to be able to work with their clients who are the biggest names in the business and help them achieve the same results we had at Walmart. And I enjoy being associated with an innovative company whose product I firmly believe in. Again, you can't argue with success.

Gary Campisi can be reached at garycampisi@gmail.com

[Print](#)