



RETAIL VIEW

- Advertisement -

In the Trenches: Produce department conditions are always noticed by customers

By

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Why is it that supermarket produce departments look so great at 2 p.m. and slip into an unfortunate collapse by 6 p.m.?

A shopper enters a produce department and picks up a few yellow and red peppers then suddenly places them back on the display. That same customer then handles several bunches of broccoli and puts them back. She now wants some Romaine lettuce, but the display is empty and messy. Then that shopper finally leaves without buying anything.

The customer didn't go into the store just to browse and handle items, then walk out the door without buying anything. So, what went wrong?



Heavy consumer traffic usually occurs between 5 and 7 p.m., when shoppers are most active after work and are in a hurry. They grab product off the produce displays and speed through the department in a flash. The more popular display sections are hit the hardest such as bananas, lettuce, berries and especially the packaged salad case. Any remaining product is strewn all over from shopper handling. These sections are shopped down to a point where many vacant areas are quite noticeable. The sad part is that the restocking of product and straightening up the department at those hours is most difficult without the workers to accomplish it.

Picture this: There are ad flyers in a rack near the entrance door. One of the items on ad in the produce section is colored peppers. The description below the picture of peppers states, fresh, crisp

red, yellow or orange Bell peppers, \$1.49 each. The only problem is that the peppers are not “fresh and crisp” on the display.

Supermarkets are spending phenomenal amounts of money to market food products hoping it will fly off the displays, but if the customers are not buying the product something must be amiss. We need to recognize those reasons.

Retailers mostly admire the sales they generate. However, they need to consider all the areas that force customers into not making purchases of produce. Every purchase that is passed up by a customer is a lost sale and all non-purchased produce is added to the shrink.

Here are six basic reasons why customers don't buy some produce items:

- It's not fresh — When advertising statements say, Fresh Sweet Corn, Fresh Peppers, Fresh Leaf Lettuce, Fresh Peaches they must be fresh. Customers do not want wilted lettuce, shriveled apples, yellowed celery or slimy melons. If it's not fresh, they don't make a purchase.
- The product is unavailable — Shoppers were asked in a recent survey, why did you not buy produce items you intended to buy? Forty percent said it wasn't available on the display. If an item is out-of-stock, customers cannot make purchases.
- Poor service — Many customers want to ask employees for help in purchasing certain items, but if nobody is available on the sales floor they walk away. If customers cannot be waited on, they do not make purchases.
- Weak merchandising — Product that is displayed in a conservative or slipshod manner will not attract shoppers to the section. Customers will not buy anything from mediocre displays.
- Inadequate labor — Not having sufficient labor scheduled in the evening hours allows the department to become disheveled and full of out-of-stocks. Customers will not make purchases from a messy, run-down department.
- High prices — The easiest way to bring sales to a screeching halt is to have the highest retails in town. Customers will not make purchases due to sky-high prices.

Let's face the fact, this syndrome is mainly a labor problem. Adequate personnel in the evening hours should solve this critical situation.

Dan Avakian, better known as Dan the Produce Man, a professional experienced produce trainer and coach, said, “It's no secret that produce departments are struggling. I believe that real hands-on training is needed by working directly with the produce managers and staff on all shifts on a regular basis.

“As far as keeping staff? That's a tough one,” he continued. “They will always come and go. The days of career service clerks are long gone. Challenging them to strive for personal excellence will be one way to weed out mediocre and reluctant employees. The committed employees will stay but will either move up or move on eventually. Without a solid training program, it will always be a labor challenge for the retail produce operations at the store

level.”

Produce executives will not be able to get the “after 5 p.m. syndrome” fixed if they continue to have blurry vision. They all know it realistically exists but stubbornly bypass it.

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