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In the Trenches: Produce training programs should be boots on the ground

By

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Major League Baseball spring training first took place in the 1870s when the Cincinnati Red Stockings and Chicago White Stockings opened up camps in New Orleans. By 1900, spring training became a normal routine among all the teams.

Baseball's spring training is only the beginning of a long season. Players on all teams continue to practice and workout every single day whether there is a game scheduled or not. This is beneficial in maintaining their athletic ability to consistently perform up to standards.

How about you? Were you trained well for your produce position? If you answered yes, are you still being trained today in order to keep pace with new leading-edge methods?

Many people in the produce industry say they were trained. How long ago was it? Twenty years ago? Thirty years ago? What about today? Times have changed and new ways and means are being used. Technology has taken over, especially with the next level of artificial intelligence.

So, has training gone by the wayside? Many CEOs and presidents are less interested in investing the money in training programs. Training fell into the "cut and chop" barrel with the lid put on top. Senior management slashed training in the budget and felt nobody would oppose it. According to surveys, close to 40 percent of employees quit their jobs as a result of no training.

Most companies claim to have some type of employee training program. In reality, too many of them are inadequate programs. They are too short... too complicated... too boring. The majority of in-house training programs are usually one-day, in-and-out, hurry up, slaphappy classroom seminars. This is mainly due to painful cost cutting, which stifles vital training needs. Cutting training can be a tragedy to an organization sooner rather than later.

What do you think would happen if professional baseball owners suddenly cut out spring training and practice? The players would become unskilled and lose an awful lot of ballgames. The same holds true in the produce industry. Without continuous updated training, employees will become weaker and the company will underperform its profit budget.

I contacted some produce individuals to gather information as to what the general consensus is regarding their organizational training program. Most of the responses didn't really surprise me.

- Produce department manager: "No, I never went through any kind of training. They just shoved me over here from the grocery department."
- Another produce manager: "Our produce manager quit, and they promoted me. My produce supervisor handed me a flash drive and told me to watch the video at home. It was mostly

about the company history.”

- Produce director: “Training? What training? I’d love to be able to update our training seminars, but the company won’t pay for it. We had some really outdated produce manuals that I tossed in the rubbish. What produce manager today needs to learn how to trim head lettuce or prepare quarts of strawberries when that product is now prepared from the point of supply?”
- Produce buyer: “I had about two weeks of sitting by another produce buyer’s desk learning what takes place in buying produce. All I heard was a lot of yelling and swearing.”
- Part-time employee: “Produce training? What do you mean? Like a school? I’m already in high school. I’m not staying here too long anyway.”

I discussed this topic with Dan the Produce Man in Alameda, CA, a fully experienced retail professional and produce podcast media host about training programs. Dan said, “The best format for training newcomers in the produce department is to work alongside an experienced produce person. The produce training manuals and online programs that exist are fine if the person using those tools already has hands-on fresh produce experience, as it may help to further enhance their knowledge. If upper management expects someone without in-store training to be able to manage and work in a department by reading it from a manual or watching videos they are delusional. Nothing — absolutely nothing — can replace the hands-on experience better than on-the-job training.”

I certainly am grateful for all the educational training programs my former company offered me. We trained directly in the produce department. We physically touched the product and set up displays. You can’t get that feel by only reading books or watching videos.

How are your employees trained?

As the produce industry gets more and more complicated, you need to strengthen your competitive defenses. Train and keep training your employees, but make sure they are trained with boots on the ground directly in the produce department.

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