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Getting things 'ripe' at EXP Group LLC

By

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[EXP Group LLC](#) is a multinational group of companies specializing in the production, importation and wholesale distribution of tropical fruits and vegetables from Central and South America to the U.S. and global market. From their 35 acre corporate headquarters facility and DC in North Bergen, NJ, EXP Group oversees a vast network of foreign and domestic farms, packing facilities, export and logistical operations that together make them one of the most efficient and streamlined wholesale produce operations in the region.

Meeting the individual needs of customers across a wide spectrum of the retail, wholesale and food service industry while delivering superior quality day in and day out poses a monumental challenge from a quality control standpoint. Few know this better than company President Anthony Serafino, who oversees day-to-day operations of the company started over 40 years ago by his father, EXP Group founder and CEO Emil Serafino.

“At EXP group, quality control is literally baked into everything we do”, said Serafino. “If you want to be cutting edge, if you want to sustain the type of high growth model that we are following, you must be able to deliver what each and every customer needs day in and day out. It’s that simple. So, we specialize in having systems in place that ensure a quality product from farm to market.

“Here in the New York and northeastern region where we started, you’ll find a lot of really good companies competing for the same business,” continued Serafino. “But to be the best you have to go beyond good, you have to be great. We say it every day here at EXP where our goal has always been to deliver quality over price — always. Our customers respect that. They understand that each and every piece of fruit, every vegetable we sell represents who we are as a company and that means superior quality control every step of the way, especially when it comes to bananas and plantains, which is a big part of our business.”

For most fruit, there’s essentially one stage of ripeness but for bananas: a retail grocery chain may need a truckload or two of bananas ripened to a color stage 3 each week while a school system or sports venue needs a color stage 5 that’s ready to eat. Some want green bananas that are just breaking, others a color 6 ready for baking. The same holds true for plantains.

“We sell more plantains than bananas,” said Serafino. “And when you consider we process over 700 pallets, 33,600 cases of bananas every day, well, you can see that adds up. That’s why we decided to have our own ripening rooms installed starting back in 2012. It was substantial investment, but we felt that being able to ripen our own fruit instead of relying on others would give us greater control over our own destiny as a company. That’s why, after an extensive selection process, we chose Thermal Technologies to design and install the rooms because we felt they took the same pride in their work as we do, which is exactly the type of partnerships we look for.

“Having our own rooms has been a game changer,” Serafino continued. “The first 21 rooms we installed basically doubled our business. A dozen years later we now have 35 ripening rooms delivering 50 truckloads of daily capacity with more on the way. What we like most about the rooms is that they provide a consistent platform that allows us to ripen according to our own particular schedule with consistent, uniform results”

Having this kind of flexibility is key, because fruit from Ecuador ripens differently than fruit from Columbia or Costa Rica. “By having a standard ripening platform, we’re able to take in fruit with all these variables and still deliver exactly what our customers need,” said Serafino. “The ROI has been off the charts. In fact, it would be fair to say this entire phase of exponential growth really started with our decision to invest in ripening rooms.

“Today our business has expanded to include the full array of produce from peppers and onions to potatoes, garlic, tomatoes, potatoes and more,” continued Serafino. “We’re growing — constantly investing, constantly expanding with new farms and DC’s in the works, but through it all we never lose sight of the individual needs of each and every one of our customers and never compromise on quality. It’s exciting, and for me and everyone at the company, being able to continue what my father started so many years ago continues to be a truly rewarding experience.”

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