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The Branding Conundrum



It is very apparent that branding is broadly accepted as an essential ingredient in the marketing mix of consumer products. Consumers lean towards branded products due to a host of reasons - quality consistency, trust, image etc., so why then is the fresh produce industry so devoid of successful brands?

A brand can be defined as,

“A recognisable identity that embodies implied values and attributes of a product”



A brand makes an emphatic statement, an implied promise, on behalf of a product in the mind of the consumer. Commonly a graphic in the form of a trade mark, a logo or simply the stylised title name of an offering, it communicates without further narrative.

A brand,

- aids immediate recognition of a product
- arouses interest in a product
- fosters trust and loyalty
- distinguishes one product from another within a category.

And perhaps more notably,

- branding leverages the sell price, often helping to support a price premium.

The value of the intellectual property in some global brands and trade marks is such that its worth is accounted for in company balance sheets ... such is the importance of branding in the corporate world. The commercial value a company derives from a product with a brand name, when compared to a generic equivalent, is referred to as brand equity.

So back to the fresh produce industry and our question, “why is the fresh produce industry so devoid of the concept?”

Why is it that our fresh produce is allowed to be commodified, failing to set price, falling short of achieving full sales potential, missing opportunities to command consumer loyalty?

Simply put, our fresh produce is being denied the benefits of branding typically embraced by the marketers of other consumer goods.

We should not confuse *variety* with *brand*. There are many examples of variety tags being used as product names that help to identify and distinguish an item within a category, e.g., Lady Finger Bananas, Lisbon Lemons, Bartlett Pears, however in essence, unless it is distinguishable in terms of quality consistency and with promotable attributes the product does not qualify as a brand and is nothing more than a varietal name.

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We can example some excellent fresh produce brands that are enjoying enormous success, not only in terms of their attributes and profile but also the retail shelf space, premium sell price and buyer preference they command.

Perhaps more than any other fresh produce product, Pink Lady® exemplifies the trend towards branding in the fresh produce sector.



Pink Lady® is one of the only apples to be marketed under a specific brand name rather than by its varietal name, “Cripps Pink”.

Cripps Pink is grown under licence, but due to quality controls to ensure consistency in taste, texture and appearance, only 50% meet strict brand standards to be marketed as Pink Lady.

The brand is sold through licensed distributors to retailers. This tight control of distribution accompanied by strong promotional support has contributed to the success of the brand.

By heavily promoting the 'Pink' element along with claimed eating attributes, and through the acclaimed support of the PINK campaign, it is perceived to embrace certain values that strengthen its qualification as a brand.

Other varieties pursuing brand status in the category, such as Jazz and Envy, are trying to emulate Pink Lady's success, but in market positioning terms, first to occupy #1 spot in consumers' minds, has a flying start on the competition and often tough to dislodge.



In the Mango category, the Calypso variety is another case in point, beginning to firm its brand status.

With a broad mix of visually appealing media and point-of-sale promotion highlighting its points of difference, Calypso has raised its profile and is successfully distinguished itself in the minds of consumers.

Again, the quality standards and marketing are tightly controlled. However, the variety has yet to command a price premium over the long time favourite, 'Kensington Pride', but then brands also need time to influence consumer perceptions.

The mango category in the Australian domestic market is hotly contested within a relatively narrow seasonal supply window. Could this window be expanded by licensing Calypso growers and packers in the USA and SE Asia for domestic supply, thus keeping the brand alive in the minds of the local consumer?

Other examples of brand marketing in the fresh produce sector include Zespri Kiwi Fruit, Broccolini®, Grape Kumato® Tomatoes etc.

An incidental benefit from branding a product is the residual value it imparts to its category. Media and in-store promotional activity for a known brand attracts consumer attention and interest to the category, that often prompts increased turnover of all varieties.

Summarising, the key essentials of branding are,

- Brand registration
- Differentiation in terms of attributes
- Control mechanisms to ensure quality consistencies
- Single desk marketing

In a fragmented supply framework, who is best positioned to take ownership of a brand in our industry? Who has best access to the scale and clout necessary to steward the development of a brand in the fresh produce industry?

Arguably, this role would best be performed by the peak industry body of any sector, which could become the catalyst for the sustainable growth in sales volumes and margins of the entire category. A strategic marketing tactic.

Something to chew on!
