



PRODUCT INFORMATION AND MARKETING

I recently read an editorial from a Purdue University professor about the way the bedding plant industry sells their products.

In the article the author discusses some factors about the marketing of bedding plants that I believe also apply to the marketing of our fruit and vegetable crops here in Lancaster County.

Basically there are two types of products — those that sell themselves and those that need to be sold. Let's look at each of these ideas in relation to our crops.

A good example of a product that sells itself is sweet corn. Many consumers eagerly await the first ears of the season and in some cases will pay a premium price for them. This explains why sweet corn acreage makes up the bulk of the total vegetable acreage in Pennsylvania each year.

As a marketer, you do not need to try to sell people sweet corn but rather you only need to tell them when it is available and they will come to by it.

Many markets use the strong demand for sweet corn to sell other products by placing the corn in the back of the market. Customers will possibly be inspired to purchase other items they see on the way back to the sweet corn and thus the total sale per customer is increased.

One important factor in the customer's desire for a product is quality. Even though there is a strong demand for sweet corn, you will have few return customers if you sell poor quality ears. When in doubt about the quality of your product, perhaps you should consider removing it from the shelves.

Unfortunately, customers will remember one bad batch of corn much longer than they will remember many good ones. With the development of newer corn varieties that hold their quality longer, you should be able to provide the high quality necessary to generate return sales.

If your corn has poor quality then you need to investigate where the quality is being lost. Is it poor handling? Harvesting too early or late? Poor variety selection? Each of these factors can be examined and corrected.

The second type of product — one that needs to be sold — is where I think many markets could increase sales. To continue using corn as an example here would be to try to sell yellow sweet corn in Lancaster County. The conventional thoughts on selling sweet corn here is that a market can only sell white or bicolor corn — people just aren't interested in yellow sweet corn.

However, I know of at least two markets in the county that sell 50 percent or more of their sweet corn as yellow corn. How? By taking

some time to educate their customers. They told their customers about the new variety of yellow corn they were growing. They let them know what other customers have said about it.

One marketer would even put an ear of yellow corn in the bag of white corn customers were buying (at no charge) and tell the customer to try it. Frequently, the customer would purchase yellow corn upon their next visit to the market. The key here is to spend some time and educate your customers about the product.

Many people are curious about new fruits and vegetables but are reluctant to try them because of uncertainty. Humans are creatures of habit and, when in doubt, we tend to stay with what we know

about. As a marketer you need to build upon the curiosity of people about a new variety by providing more information. Make them confident that it is worth the money to try the new product. If necessary, perhaps a small, free sample will be necessary for a short period of time while your customers become familiar with the new product.

With the increasing appearance of variety names in the marketplace, you can educate people to ask for the variety you are growing or are selling.

The increasing use of variety names in the market is, at least to me, going to be good for your marketing efforts. You can educate people about the excellent qualities of a particular variety of

yellow sweet corn rather than just talking about yellow corn. In this way the customer will feel more confident that they will get the same high quality on their next visit to your market because they will know to ask for a specific product.

The key for you, the marketer, is to have a continuous supply of quality produce for the buyer. You also need to be informed about the product you are promoting.

No matter what type of produce you are trying to market, you need to have the highest quality possible. When this high quality is combined with some customer education, I believe you can increase both produce sales and return sales. Ultimately, time spent with your customers is definitely time well spent.

Governor's Conference On Delaware Agriculture Slated For February

NEWARK, Del. — Clear your calendar for Friday, Feb. 28, to attend the third annual Governor's Conference on Delaware Agriculture at the Sheraton Inn in Dover.

Beginning at 7:15 a.m. with the Friends of Agriculture breakfast, the conference will center on the theme "Exploring Linkages in Agriculture, Environment and International Trade."

Speakers at the event, which is organized by the University of Delaware's department of food and resource economics and by Delaware Cooperative Extension, will include Gov. Tom Carper, Lt. Gov. Ruth Ann Miner and Dr. Sherman Robinson, an international trade expert. Robinson is director for trade and macroeconomics at the International Food Research Institute and a former senior economist on the President's Council of Economic Advisors.

"The conference aims to high-

light the economic contributions of the agricultural sector to Delaware's economy, and to examine issues and policies impacting agriculture in Delaware," said Dr. Tom Ilvento, cooperative extension specialist for economic development at the University of Delaware and one of the organizers of the event.

"The agricultural industry in Delaware will face unique challenges in the next century," he said. "On one hand, consumers and community residents are demanding more assurances that our food is safe and the impact of agriculture on the environment is minimal. On the other, competition from foreign producers presents new challenges. With the advent of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), farmers and farm marketers must understand their role

in the global economy."

The conference will explore these issues with emphasis on the Delmarva poultry industry. A panel of experts will speak on future trends, exports, and environmental and labor issues. Other topics will range from farmers' attitudes toward land-use proposals to the impact of free trade agreements on agriculture. Time will be allotted for questions and discussions during each session.

Each year the conference has increased in size and scope. This year organizers are reaching out to more agricultural groups and encouraging producer participation.

Registration information will be mailed out in early January. If you have questions or are interested in having a display at the conference, contact Dr. Bobby Gempesaw at (302) 831-1315 or Dr. Tom Ilvento at (302) 831-6773.

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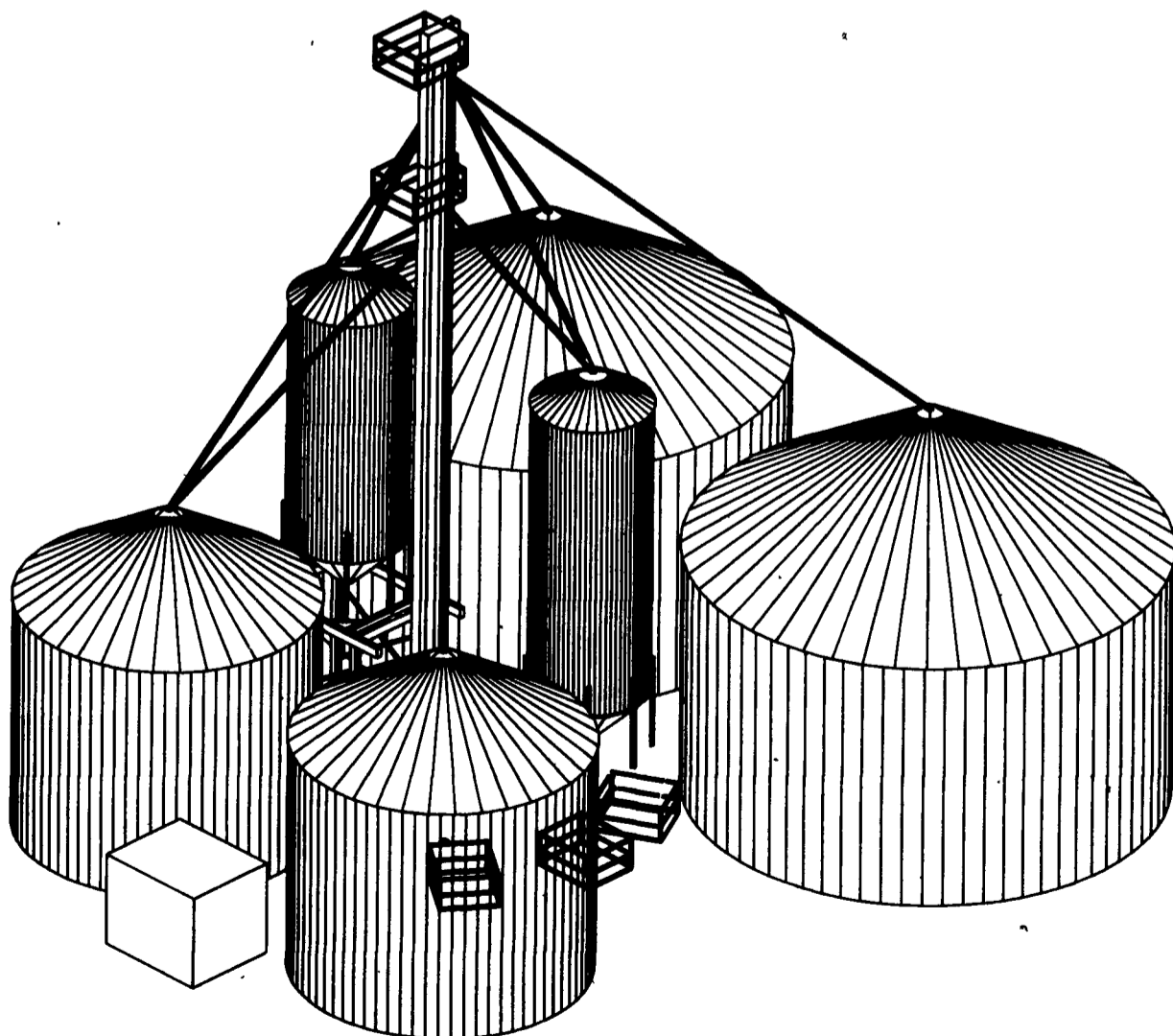
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