

Great Lakes Forum Hosts Brand Marketing Discussions

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STATE COLLEGE (Centre Co.) — Brand marketing of agricultural products was the focus in a session last week at the Great Lakes Forum on Agriculture hosted by Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and conducted at the Nittany Lion Inn.

Before the brand marketing discussion, Lee Swenson, Farmers Union, addressed agricultural water issues. Following the branding discussion, Claude Lavigne, director, Animal Products, Canada, and Bobby Acord, administrator, USDA-APHIS, gave presentations on animal and plant health topics.

The topic of branding was put forth as forum participants — about 40 attendees from across the Great Lakes region — could weigh the options of using a brand on a regional basis, specifically, branding apples from the Great Lakes region.

John Lord, professor of food marketing at St. Joseph's University, opened the discussion by

presenting his ideas about the value of a brand.

"It's all about communication. A brand means something," he said. "We're not speaking in terms of commodities."

A brand, said Lord, could "define your business as providing a healthful, satisfying eating experience."

A brand is not a label, warned Lord. "A label identifies, but a brand involves values," he said. "A brand is promises we make to the buyer."

"What we really want is customer loyalty. They have an implicit understanding about what they're going to get out of that relationship."

Additionally "there is no point in putting a label on unless you can do something different," he said. "You have to give the consumer a reason to buy the product. A brand is not a panacea. Success requires effective marketing, innovation, quality, and consistency."

A brand for produce, he said, would be a team effort. "If you're going to get that great product in consumers' hands, mouths, and stomachs, it's a team effort from the farm all the way to the table."

Also giving ideas about brand marketing was Jon Wells, owner of Jon Wells Associates, a design, branding, and marketing firm in San Francisco, Calif.

A brand attracts consumers to old favorites but also attracts them to new products. "A brand increases what we're willing to pay for a product we trust," he said. "Shoppers have become brand savvy, brand accepting, and maybe even brand demanding" because the "cornerstone of branding is a promise of quality."

Wells has designed a brand for a vegetable broker, and noted that a brand can promise that the product is "safe, that is supports small farms, that it's fresh and has big taste," as in the case of the brand he designed for the California company.

"What I'm trying to do here is give you a language for what you are already doing," he said.

One example of a brand for produce is the familiar "Chiquita" label, which was introduced

in 1944 and began appearing on stickers on bananas in 1963.

The apple industry, which now has a large variety of apples, had begun to place PLU stickers on the apples to help distinguish the different prices and varieties of apples. With the success of the Chiquita brand on bananas, it wasn't long before logos and brands began appearing on the stickers.

Additionally, the "salad revolution" paved the way for branding produce when mixed lettuce began appearing in bags as a value-added product with splashy graphics.

A brand can help create an emotional bond, he said. "When consumers know a region, they become attached to it and the

people that grow the products in it," he said. Not only does this help create consumer loyalty in purchasing, but they are more willing to "forgive a misstep" in quality control, should the problem arise.

A brand that covers a specific regional area is also beneficial. With the pooling of a larger amount of growers, dollars are more available to promote the brand and get the product on shelves, according to Wells. Also there are less brand choices for consumers.

"However you give up individual identity and individual control," he said. Also individual quality failure impacts the entire group.

"There is an opportunity for

all of you to thrive in an environment of competitive harmony," Wells said.

Following Wells was speaker George Lamont, general manager of a 600-acre fruit farm in Albion, N.Y., and executive director of the New York State Horticultural Society.

Lamont noted the increase of apple production in countries such as China, which produces five times the amount of apples the U.S. produces. With the combination of foreign and domestic challenges to the industry, and the decreasing share of consumer dollars (an apple grower gets 13 percent per dollar of apple product sold), the industry needs to

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John Wells, San Francisco, Calif., was a keynote speaker.



Speakers at the recent Great Lakes Convention included, from left, Don Armock, Michigan; Tom O'Neill, Ontario; John Rice, Adams County; and George Lamont, Albion, New York.

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