

Loving The Local

Much of the world is beginning to fall back in love with the local, independent and often grower-organised-and-supplied green markets

By Kenneth Nisch

Green markets are one part entertainment, another part better value. Be it a lower price, higher quality, or just for pure entertainment, it's something to do on a Saturday, where you take the kids and meet your neighbours. And in many cases it is a return back to what was considered "simpler times," where a more direct connection with food, the producers, and the buzz of the market were part of everyday life. Think of it as a grocery-themed Disneyland.

Marketplaces revitalise communities

If not having disappeared in the US, many of these markets were relegated to urban centres with a wholesale focus; this reintroduction has become a point of pride as a way to revitalise community centres. These successful local and neighbourhood marketplaces have had a spillover effect, ranging from increasing property values of surrounding homes and businesses as part of the reintroduction, to recognising and celebrating the noble role and mission of the farmer to society.

It has become even trendy among well-educated Millennials to take their turn a year or so away from their chosen profession to get closer to the soil and "real work." I speak from my own experiences as my daughter, with a Master's Degree from a prestigious American university, has chosen to take such a year away herself; growing, harvesting, and selling produce in such a way.

However in India, obviously, the tables are quite different. I believe the lessons that the West is just coming to learn is that one way, and only one way, is *never* the best way.

A delicate balance

Inarguably, food is at the heart of life, and, therefore, food retail, whether it is delivered across acres of a hypermarket, or the local neighbourhood perishable stall and everywhere in between will remain with us. As well, the dominance of only one way and



At Whole Foods Detroit, the character of the store creates an instant connection with the shopper in the neighbourhood that represents the past, present and future of urban Detroit

one channel tends to create problems. These problems and the disorganised market can be seen in areas such as waste, spoilage, lack of necessary support; and the business community's need to create a state-of-the-art collection, preservation and distribution infrastructure. And on the other hand, when the path becomes too industrialised and commercial, the social impact, lack of diversity and the separation of society from the land – even if it is only from those who provide stewardship for the land – can result in a wealth of a social and environmental disasters.

A good example of a retailer who balances these challenges well is Whole Foods Market. A progressive grocer, the new Whole Foods "city concept" recently opened in Detroit. Everything from its hiring, construction and shop fitting policies – to most importantly, the development, sourcing and support of local and regional suppliers is an example of not only HOW it can be done, but as well, that it CAN be done.

While the American consumer has come to expect all foods available regardless of local seasonality, this particular retailer emphasises foods that are unique to the area, are particular to a season or time of the year, and how a celebration of what is local and in-season can actually be a route for more diversity and adventure in one's diet and cuisine. In this particular case, it ranges from the regional to the local, with the growth of urban farming redeveloping urban cities in North America.

Creating a sense of "local"

In the case of India, where urban development is often the subject of front page headlines because of its political and social impact; a sustainable policy that allows both development as well as maintenance of prime agricultural (particularly near to town), provides a reasonable realm of interest for the country's leading food supply chain businesses. In looking at all these factors and how they come

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together and influence not only the food and grocery industry, the long and short of the discussion is that increasingly food decisions relate to land management, nutrition, and the role of “local/global” in the supply chain, will become high visibility issues which the grocer will look to address in deciding what and how they intend to appeal and sell to the consumer.

A highly successful grocery client of ours indicated that as markets develop today, retailers should look less at demographic factors (i.e. income, age, class); and look more at attitude and psychographic attributes in deciding where to best position their most successful units in the future.

In his particular case, he looks at the voting records of the consumer in the districts where he is considering locating stores, particularly since his business is focussed on the premium, natural and environmentally-focussed consumer, who sees their purchase patterns (i.e. organic milk versus traditional industrialised milk) as a key factor in deciding which particular real estate to choose. And in many cases it also impacts the price, and in some cases the *premium* price, that consumers are willing to pay for products.

Increasingly, this thorough process across all classes, particularly as a society

moves from needs to wants, will influence a consumer’s purchase decisions. Again, in the case of Whole Foods Market, much of the sensibility of the store is derived from where the store is located, and the elements and icons of the local community, the inclusion of local and regional suppliers, farmers and even products highlighted and featured within the store, drive many of the signage, graphic, décor, and finish and material selections.

The result of this, rather than creating a ubiquitous cookie-cutter chain of stores with industrialised food displayed in a commercial environment, is that the sense of local community, neighbourliness, and even in many cases, the sense of a local market is maintained. This “third way,” between the corner stall and the hypermarket, is where the future “sweet spot” will exist for the successful grocer, appealing to the discerning, selective (both for food as well as policies), and foodie, who is looking beyond purely price per pound.

With all this focus on the market and local, consumers still expect their stores to be contemporary technology. This technology increasingly can be the consumer’s technology, which is directed and prompted through displays and communication within the store. It can offer shoppers advice on

preparation, new ways to consider preparing and serving foods, nutritional information and even “fun facts” about products that they may believe they are familiar with, but where they do not necessarily know its history and origins.

Connecting with consumers through Dynamic Ecosystems

Another grocer client of ours actually created a series of “farm cams” in their perishables area that allowed the store shopper to view a select number of partner farms in real time; operating through the planting, growing and harvesting season. Another large dairy and milk producer created a “cow cam” on the top of their facility that allowed the viewing of rural Amish Country farmland, where most of their partner dairymen maintain their herds and pastures.

This connection helps build a sense of empathy with the consumer and the producer, and likewise, it turns the common and often underappreciated farmer into a virtual “rock star” in the eyes of the buying public.

So thoughts to consider:

- One way alone is not necessarily the best. A dynamic ecosystem of resources and suppliers, points of sale and contacts, whether they are a local stall or a hypermarket, with appreciation and nurturing of this network, will ultimately guarantee the healthiest food environment, not only for the industry, but as well for the consumer.
- As society and consumers become more sophisticated, one type of their sophistication will be paradoxical – with consumers looking to be closer to the source. A deconstruction of the growing, harvesting and processing processes with their enhanced appeal, plus high-tech options will create operating methods that offer a sense of hometown to an experience that is “downtown.”
- Food, and all the associations that come from it – from festival, family and heritage to history and culture, will remain at the center, creating an emotive and tactile part of people’s lives. ■



Whole Foods Market is about local, natural, and socially and environmentally responsible commerce



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