



Cooperative Grocer

From #88,
May-June 2000

Collaborating on Perishables

The prepared foods team needs to enjoy and to make the most of its responsibility for organizing cross-merchandising of the store's perishables.

By Allen Seidner

You don't have to be an industry insider to spot the difference between a grocery store with perishables teams that are sharp with creative cross-merchandising and one with its perishables teams just going through the motions. You can see the difference even before you walk in, as sharp produce departments move colorful bounty onto store entryways.

In some stores, creative produce and deli teams will collaborate to more fully feature the best of what the season has to offer. In summer, their shoppers will be treated to a melon display in produce that offers little samples, wrapped half-melon portions, and a special price, while the deli will have a colorful new "Multi-Melon Salsa" with a sample bowl of it surrounded by chips and snappy signage.

How is it that perishables teams in some stores know how to make the most of the seasons, while some teams just can't get a grip on it? For starters, it has to do with vision and commitment. But successful collaborative work also depends on planning, communications, and support.

Begin with the understanding that no one's best ideas for collaborating and making the most of the seasons will go anywhere without the support of the prepared foods manager or some other department envoy. As the primary department producing from raw ingredients, the prepared foods team needs to enjoy and make the most of its responsibility for organizing cross-merchandising plans for the store's perishables. Of course, participation by meat and seafood, bakery, and cheese departments will be needed to round out membership on this committee.

Start by committing yourselves to covering all the key elements that go into a well-coordinated cross-merchandising plan: purchasing, recipe development, sale pricing, merchandising, signage, and sampling. Explore ideas as a group, and agree to execute several promotions per season. The perishables merchandising committee should meet formally twice a season -- about once every six weeks. Focus your meetings on successes and missteps you experienced in your recent cross-merchandising collaborations, progress on existing and upcoming programs, and new ideas for future seasons.

Some ideas might flow from considering approaching holidays. Put out the invitation for ideas in advance of the seasons and major holidays to your entire departments to

maximize staff participation. And remember that you can create unique events and promotions -- and often gain marketing and labor support to boot -- by relating promotions to an event being organized by or benefiting a local nonprofit or civic group.

Other ideas might originate from what local organic farmers are likely to have in the greatest abundance over the coming months. By maintaining active relationships with local growers and produce vendors, you should be able to know in April what you will have in mid-June.

Let's say you've gone through some brainstorming and agreed to take advantage of an upcoming plethora of local organic tomatoes, early luscious peaches and organic corn. With some advance planning, here's what a committee of perishables team leaders might do to implement a cross-merchandising program that will boost sales and spirits:

- * Produce could feature the three items on sale at an attractive price point in store signage and in the store's newsletter and sales flyer. The department's best merchandising locations might be scheduled for these items, with a commitment to cut up peaches and tomatoes for sampling on a continual basis. Working with the store's marketing team, produce could also create relevant flyers.

- * The deli could cost out and perfect at least two recipes that feature corn, peaches, and tomatoes: peach smoothies, "Multi-Melon Salsa," corn chowder, corn salsa, green bean salad with fresh tomatoes vinaigrette. By including the pastry or bakery team you might also bring about a fresh peach tart or scone or fresh corn muffins. The seafood department could promote the deli's melon salsa as a relish to a featured fresh fish special.

- * To market these creations and ensure that these efforts bring success, the deli should collaborate with the marketing team to have its special items featured in the store sale flyer -- and not necessarily at a substandard margin. Remember that the deli is one of the few areas of your store where your work can create signature flavors and products.

- * To wrap some excitement around your focused products, have a contest where customers turn in or produce their favorite peach-based recipes; customers could enter to win a peach smoothie or even a crate of fresh peaches. You could even have customers bring children to enjoy peach crisp while listening to a reading of Roald Dahl's great children's story, "James and the Giant Peach."

By now, I hope, your ideas abound. Here are a few pointers: Expect to make a few mistakes and to learn a lot from your earliest endeavors. Think "baby steps," but choose goals for your collaborative efforts that sufficiently challenge each department. Start well enough in advance that you can hit all the key timelines. Share responsibilities as widely as possible among responsible people to continually develop skills in others. Keep notes for future years regarding dates; volumes bought, produced, and sold; costs paid and retail prices; recipes and cost outs, etc.

Creating a cross-merchandising program is an easy way to have fun with your work; to involve and develop staff; and to keep the look, feel, and spirit of your store one which continually changes -- in perfect harmony with the seasons and the other perishables teams!

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