

Basic requirements of packaging of fresh produce

The use of packaging can be traced back to the earliest times when items were carried in reed baskets. Archeologists have discovered a rich source of information in packaging on how people lived and what they ate. A good example is from the Inca ruins in the Andes, where archeologists have uncovered remnants of potatoes eaten over 8 000 years ago.

We know that fruit and vegetables have been sustaining humankind for thousands of years and in the process have always had to be protected and carried in some way. The basic purpose of packaging has therefore not changed. Within the context of modern fresh produce marketing, packaging plays a crucial role in the overall marketing mix. While the basic functions remain highly relevant, modern packaging has taken on many additional qualities.

1. Today's complex demands

Packaging as part of the marketing mix has become one of the frontline components used to deliver products to customers and to entice them to use these products. Driven by consumer requirements, packaging manufacturers have addressed issues such as product protection, environmentally friendly materials, convenience and shelf life. Since people buy fresh produce mainly by sight, impulse packaging has become highly attractive. Many producers have responded with innovative packaging ideas that meet consumer needs and contribute to the farmer's bottom line. However, to ensure that the consumer receives the products in top condition and in good time, requires four golden rules: protection, managing, transport and promotion.

2. Protection

Most fresh produce is highly perishable and easily damaged if not given the right protection. A container provides essential packaging protection. The cost of the packaging and its functionality is reflected in the price the producer pays for it. The essential function of protection, however, is crucial to the final success. The function of protection may occasionally go wrong when someone puts a sensitive product into inadequate packaging. Loose avocados in a plastic bags is an example. Another is bananas in a carton. Watermelons are still handled individually and are the only fruit sold this way. Some farmers do, however, put their watermelons in bulk bins with a given number of fruit per bin, but large numbers are still sold individually. No matter the product, packaging provides everyone in the supply chain with the convenience to count, stack, pack and control the products involved. Imagine, for example, trying to handle pineapples without packaging!

3. Managing

Concentrating the product into a practical format such as a carton provides a means of managing it. We know that each pack will contain a given number of items or conform to a standard weight. This means the farmer can make several different calculations for that product, which provide essential management information. For example, a potato farmer who lifts and packs 4 500 x 10kg pockets knows that his yield is, say, 4 500t/ha. From this, he can make a number of important management decisions concerning the production of the

crop. Managing also means that we can place a certain number of cartons on a pallet and another number of pallets on a truck and in this way provide important information to the producer and transporter.

4. Transport

Without packaging, it would be impossible for farmers to move their products. Again, think of transporting pineapples and how often packaging comes into the equation. At harvesting, the product goes into a picking bag or container. It is then transferred into a plastic lug or bulk bin. In the packhouse, after the necessary processes have been applied, the product ends up in a carton or pocket, after which it goes onto a pallet. In this case, packaging in different forms has featured four times in helping to transport the product – and it still has not reached its final goal: the consumer! An essential requirement of packaging is protecting it while in transit. Once it is packed, other requirements such as airflow, moisture resistance and stacking strength come into contention.

5. Promotion

The purpose of promotion is to inform and persuade. This is why graphics packaging is so important. The Agricultural Products Standards Act, Act 119 of 1990 requires every container to carry certain information such as name and address of farmer, producer code, variety, grade or class, weight, size or count and the words, ‘Produce of South Africa’. Once a grower has complied with these requirements, he can include his own graphics, including his brand, on the container. With fresh produce marketing being so sophisticated and competition between producers becoming increasingly intense, it is extremely important to make the right decisions on branding and graphics on containers. Some of the larger producers spend hundreds of thousands of rands on investigating and arriving at the right choice of brand. Unfortunately, deciding on a brand name and graphics is no longer done with the family around the kitchen table. Spending money on these things becomes crucial, and requires constant vigilance to control design costs. However, when done properly, it is money well spent.

6. Cost

Packaging has evolved over the past 50 years or more from produce in wooden boxes or hessian bags to a mind-boggling range of options – all with one objective in mind – to satisfy the consumer. Since then, improved protection, good ventilation and stacking strength have been refined and introduced. Corrugated board has been the focus over the last few decades; a wooden container is now a rarity. Corrugated board has many advantages. Depending on how much you are prepared to pay, you can have a container that is extremely strong, yet attractive. The golden rule of packaging is not so much the cost as seen in the budget but what value the producer gets for his money. Furthermore, the cost of packaging must be commensurate with the value of the product. You don't pack six oranges in a high-cost polystyrene tray with modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) film around them while putting expensive blueberries (because they are scarce) loose in a 2kg carton tray. The selling price of oranges in this case cannot carry the added packaging cost, while the blueberries will

sell far better when packed in an attractive plastic container. The price realised can carry the cost of the more expensive packaging.

7. Consumers

These days, everyone agrees that the customer is king. If you are not doing all you can to meet the consumer's needs, you're in danger of being left behind. Years ago, the consumer was not really part of the packaging equation. The objective was simply to get the product to market. Once it was sold, it was up to the retailer to do as he wished with the product. As the packaging industry evolved, producers became more aware of the importance of the consumer. Producers now entice consumers with convenience and added value. A walk through any major retail outlet shows how suppliers have taken on the challenge of meeting consumer requirements. Buying trends have also changed, with consumers doing less monthly shopping and buying smaller quantities more frequently. In this scenario, pre-packs come in handy, and are a trend that is set to continue. As consumers' needs change, so fresh produce packaging will adapt. Producers are the ones who understand this and who will take up the challenges in the years to come.

