

*By Craig Stauffer, CEO of Vanguard International. This article originally appeared in Vanguard's newsletter.*

---

Consumers are shopping more and shopping differently. The good news is that fresh produce aisles have been busier than ever, with “health” absolutely top-of-mind as a further indicator that the transmission of the coronavirus is of utmost concern for the majority.

A sign of increased perception of the sanitary measures needed in the Food sector, retail data is showing a surge in the sale of packaged produce. In a [survey commissioned by The Packer](#), 20% of people said they are buying less fresh produce and more frozen fruits and veggies, with 12% of consumers swapping a fresh item for one that is canned. About 12% of consumers reported buying more packaged fresh produce and less bulk products to ensure that other shoppers had not been touching the product while it was on display.

Sorting through fresh produce to pick “the best bunch” is now seemingly uncomfortable for most consumers. They are concerned with minimizing how many people touch their food purchases before it gets to their kitchen, and seek to preserve it for as long as possible once it gets there. Both of these obstacles can be combatted with a seal of plastic; or, at least, it is perceived to. From a consumer’s perspective, whether groceries are being delivered, picked up curbside, or shopped for, packaged produce provides peace-of-mind that food has not been handled by grocery workers, delivery drivers, or other shoppers.

This is a very different situation from the behaviors we have adopted as businesses and consumers over the past 5 years to improve our environmental footprint. The reduction of plastic waste has been gaining momentum on a personal level for most of us, and for the fresh produce industry as a whole.

In December, I discussed some of this innovation in our blog, [‘Are edible peels the new plastic?’](#) This included efforts to cut food waste by using top seal innovation, led by strong players in the industry like Oleen Smethurst, GMM for Produce at Costco Canada. As well, the work of Apeel Sciences’ edible peels which uses plant-derived materials that exist in natural peels of fruit and vegetables, seeds and pulp, to create packaging solutions that are both edible and protective enough to replace the need for plastic to keep produce fresher longer.

While these industry packaging powerhouses have built some momentum, retailers and consumers have also shown a desire to participate in the reduction of waste. Many grocery

stores and consumers had adopted behaviors such as promoting the use of re-usable bags, even using mesh bags for produce as an alternative to the provided plastic option.

I am not sure about you, but in March when the effects of the coronavirus hit, I felt guilty accepting plastic bags for my grocery items. I felt as though we could potentially be re-winding all the hard work our societies have contributed to accept these small changes needed to put a dent in combatting plastic waste to positively impact our environment.

Has the current climate and its implications forced us to take a step back from environmental efforts? Are we swapping sustainability for safety?

Increased demand for packaged produce can present a dangerous and slippery slope. Retailers can charge more per pound for packaged produce, presenting higher profits. Less produce, more plastic. Retailers are also highly data driven - if consumers are not buying bulk produce, they won't stock it. Plastic also presents a fantastic opportunity for branding, and for increased shelf life. With colorful labels and the convenience of pre-cut veggies, they look and seem easy! With one more reason presenting itself amid a global pandemic, I worry that our foresight on an industry rid of plastic will fall to the wayside. We must not lose our focus on the greater good for the planet and people, and the importance of reducing plastic waste in the long run.

There are so many players in the game of fresh produce that it can be difficult for one group to push the envelope on sustainability. There is a desire to participate from consumers, growers, retailers, and manufacturers alike, but actionable items take strong resolve to implement, and it is often easier to pass the buck to someone else until forced to adopt new practices. The truth is, we all have to play a part.

Roos van Vugt, Sales Manager at NNZ Inc., a packing solutions leader worldwide, [tells Freshplaza](#), "I expect that once the coronavirus is over, the virus will have an influence on the discussion about packaging that we know now. " "For example, hygiene and food safety are becoming a more important theme in this debate. I expect that the number of products that are offered loose in the supermarket will decrease and that the products that are now packaged will remain packaged. The packaging material to be used will play an important role in connection with hygiene and food safety."

She further says, "...we are continuing to develop new, sustainable packaging for the fruit and vegetable sector. An example of this is a project where we develop a PET bucket, for example for berries and snack vegetables, with a 40% reduction of plastic. The demand for such innovations is currently down, due to the coronavirus, but sustainability is high on our

agenda, so we will continue to work on this.”

It is encouraging to hear continued advocacy for the reduction of plastics and the promotion of unique approaches to this global problem. As we continue to grapple with the challenges of this pandemic, food safety, and sustainability matters, it feels to me that it is time to warm up the DeLorean and get back to the future again - we have to stay focused on what is best for the long-term, but at the same time, stay flexible enough during these crazy times to ensure that as an industry we are doing everything in our power to continue to provide safe and great tasting fruits and vegetables every day to the world.