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When it comes to produce, the retail shopping experience is not clear. Unlike the jammed packaged food aisles, produce labelling practices are inconsistent, and many times, brands are not prominent or recognizable except for the carton box they come in. The question is, how do customers select which fresh fruits and vegetables to put in their shopping carts? Do brands play a role? This has long been a discussion for many in the produce industry, but with the changing consumer behaviors coming out of the pandemic, produce brands might be finally ready for their spotlight.

In September 2021, Provoke Insights, a market research and brand consultancy firm, set out to explore this as was reported in Produce Business Magazine. Provoke Insights conducted a 15-minute survey among 1,500 USA consumers. The results showed that when it comes to gaining brand familiarity and loyalty among shoppers, brand name is not the largest influencer for produce selection. Almost half of grocery purchasers (44%) cannot conjure up a brand name when prompted. Instead, the survey results showed that the selection process among consumers was more rooted in freshness and visual appeal of produce over brands.

But this is almost 2023, and one thing we know from the pandemic is things are a lot different now. The surge in online shopping remains strong, even as restrictions in most parts of the globe are being removed for in-store shopping. Consumers online cannot see, touch, and smell what they are buying online and need to rely instead on other criteria of quality and dependability that successful brands can deliver.

Certain brands have relied on this for years, such as the old standbys like branded packaged salads, which have dominated their categories for a long time. But we are seeing more branded players find success behind their produce brands, such as the easy-peel citrus category, better known as "Cuties," or Pom Wonderful pomegranates. If consumers know they are receiving quality with that brand, it is much easier to click add to cart with consumer confidence.

As we are witnessing the current economic downturn, grocers are pushing harder than ever towards their private labels. And there has always been a push to put produce in private labels. Private label works quite effectively in consumer-packaged goods. Savings are realized and those are passed to consumer. It's not the same in fresh produce. You don't save on the product, you just lose your opportunity to brand your quality, without saving on the actual cost of that bag of potatoes or apples.

If we are to assume the trend toward convenience and online shopping will continue, as all signs point to that being the case, this paired with rising food costs means shoppers will be more discerning on fresh produce purchases. If they know a brand of grapes offers a consistently crunchy, sweet, high-quality eating experience, they will go back to their order next week looking for that same brand.

If they have the opposite experience, with unbranded grapes, chances are they aren't adding any grapes to their cart during their next visit to that retailer.

Branding produce is a fascinating piece of our industry right now. As you may have seen already this year, we launched a retailer kit for our grape season. This well-rounded kit full of high-resolution material arms our clients with point of sales and digital assets to support consumer shopping. We are keenly watching the results and continue to work with our retail partners as our brand evolves into a trusted and recognizable name delivering a consistently high-quality product.