

Marketing in a Time of Upheaval

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When I think back to the February 2020 California Avocado Commission (CAC) Board meeting, I remember the excitement the marketing team felt in presenting our new advertising campaign, media plan and a stepped-up involvement in events. And when I consider all that has happened beginning just weeks after that in-person gathering, I feel an odd mix of nostalgia and regret for plans that couldn't be executed, joined with pride for what has been accomplished and enthusiasm for the future. Starting in March, the Commission, the industry and the world were hit with unprecedented challenges. Foodservice stopped on a dime. The supply chain had to become extremely nimble to meet fluctuating demand and customer needs. Our marketing plans had to be rewired with changes to, or cancellation of, programs, and above all — it was imperative that we listened to our customers and consumers.

COVID-19 came first, then social unrest kicked into high gear after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The Blacks Lives Matter movement, which originated in 2013, suddenly resonated with exponentially more people, and an estimated 15 to 26 million of them participated in protests throughout the country. What an organization said and didn't say, and where they advertised or engaged on social media, became especially sensitive. The CAC team listened and learned, quickly realizing that certain social media platforms were temporarily not the best places for California avocados, and pivoted to other platforms that offered the comfort of recipes and softer content that were a better fit. The boycott of Facebook by major brands and hacks of prominent Twitter accounts have further complicated the situation and make social listening an ongoing mandate for the brand. (See the article on page 30 for an update on the social media activities this season to date.)

Being a supportive partner to retail and foodservice cus-



Albertsons Companies Network Dietitian Amrita Jayagopal showcased California avocados in a Facebook Live event.

tomers has been critical. In the beginning, we needed to stand down and stay out of the way as they navigated logistical and supply issues. Then as panic-buying moderated and customers saw a clearer path, our team — working closely with their teams — quickly adopted new virtual meeting technologies to maintain contact when in-person meetings were not possible. An old-fashioned technology, the telephone, continues to be a key tool for the Commission's retail marketing directors, foodservice team and the rest of the organization, as does email, but it's clear based on what we are hearing from customers that the use of video calls is going to increase even after we navigate through these challenging times. The ability to connect remotely or virtually has actually been one of the nice surprises to come out of this situation.

Communications and the sharing of creative ideas between our team, targeted customers and handlers is resulting in a full slate of innovative marketing programs supporting the

California avocado crop this season. (See the articles on pages 18 and 26 for a summary of the retail and foodservice promotions so far.) Most importantly, for California avocado growers demand has continued to be good for their fruit. Even during these difficult times with the reduction in foodservice demand, safer-at-home rules spurring retail sales and a positive brand story have resulted in prices for California avocados that continue to outpace the price for imported avocados. This demonstrates the value of continually building brand equity and customer relations.

Years from now I think we will look back on this year as an achievement. Few could have predicted the magnitude of the



Flame Broiler included the California Avocados brand logo on its website's pop-up message alerting diners that they are open and ready for business...and serving fresh California avocados.



Here I am participating in a produce industry socially distanced walk.

challenges the world has faced. Few could have foreseen all the changes that would be needed to keep workers and customers safe, the education that would be required to dispel myths about food safety, and the pivots required just to stay in business. But the challenge is being met.

We couldn't salvage everything from our plans, and for that I'm disappointed. Though a tough pill to swallow, it absolutely was the correct decision to cancel innovative ways to connect with California avocado fans in person, including the sponsorship of the Pebble Beach Food and Wine Festival and EEEEEATSCON as well as some outdoor advertising and other activities. That said, we were able to adjust plans to bring more digitally streamed ads to consumers in their homes, create a virtual grove tour and develop many other innovative programs that helped us connect with customers and consumers during the most challenging of times. A bigger disappointment for me is not being able to meet with our industry colleagues in person. I applaud industry associations for going virtual with trade shows and helping to maintain connections and learning, but I yearn for a time when we can be face-to-face again. Let's all wear those masks, keep our distance, wash our hands and get vaccinated when the time comes so we can pass safely beyond all this upheaval and move forward to a better time. 🥑