

# The California Avocado Commission 40 Years - From the Outside In

By Jan DeLyser  
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**T**om Karst, editor-in-chief of *The Packer* newspaper recently wrote an editorial on the remarkable story of per capita avocado gains noting the per capita use of avocados in the U.S. was 0.8 pounds in 1979, climbing slightly to 1.5 pounds by 1998 and to the latest rate of 7.5 pounds per capita in 2017.

Over the course of that time there have been significant changes in market share for origins supplying the U.S., with California going from a dominant market share to a more niche position. A laser sharp focus on consumer trends driving a strategic approach to market conditions has been key to the California Avocado Commission's (CAC's) success over the past 40 years — details of that approach are chronicled in the anniversary article in this issue. In looking at the 40-year track record of the Commission, it was apparent that one of the constants throughout my career in the produce industry was indeed California avocados.

When I took my first job out of college with the Kansas City-based *The Packer* newspaper in 1976, I had no idea what the future held. The severity of two consecutive winters in Michigan (e.g. a 34-inch snow storm in late January 1978 sealed the deal) paved the way for my openness to the opportunity to be transferred to California. While wrapping up my responsibilities in the North Central region, I distinctly recall one of my last retail store checks in Grand Rapids and looking at the avocado display ... a whopping three avocados in a basket that I could barely reach ... all three were totally firm. I remember thinking that it would not be long until I would have California avocados on a regular basis as well as a plethora of other fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the Golden State.

In mid-September 1978 I arrived in California and began working out of *The Packer* office on the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market. It was about the same time as the California Avocado Advisory Board was transitioning to the California Avocado Commission. As a representative of *The Packer*, I was



*In the early 1980s: Jon Bartelme, CAC; Angie Dickinson, actress and spokesperson; Ralph Pinkerton, CAC, and Doug Giddings, Del Rey Avocado*

invited to cover various trade events hosted by the Commission. Ralph Pinkerton, president/CEO, was a creative marketer and invitations to the events he orchestrated were always in demand. *The Packer* experience, particularly with California avocados, provided insight into the importance of effective trade communications.

In August of 1979 I was hired by the Fresh Produce Council (FPC, now Fresh Produce and Floral Council) to manage their communications and publication (then a tabloid, transitioned to a magazine, now known as *Fresh DIGEST*). Pinkerton had

been one of the founding fathers of the FPC and as a past chair remained actively involved with the organization. He made sure I was included in the assorted CAC promotional events, including a couple of trade dinners with Angie Dickinson, the actress featured in CAC's "Would This Body Lie to You" campaign designed to debunk myths regarding avocado nutrition in the early 1980s. The Commission was always a big sponsor of FPC events, a commitment that continues today. At one of the luncheons in the early 1980s, then-CAC Vice President of Merchandising Ron Hughes arranged for an appearance by the USC Marching Band as part of their luncheon sponsorship... such a memorable event. Not only because of the magnitude of the band playing at Luminaria's Restaurant but also because as the photographer in charge of "capturing" the event with 35 mm film —24 exposures — I was so caught up in the photos that when the pic counter hit 42 I checked to see if I had ever loaded the film. I had not. Some kind of scrambling ensued as I backtracked and retook the priority shots.

As executive director of the FPC, there are vivid memories of working with key staff at the Commission from Pinkerton to George Schulman (the Golden Lion) to a long list of merchandisers who called on our key retail members. There also are some great memories of conventions in the CAC suite featuring Pinkerton on the piano as well as some trade event outings on boats in New Orleans, LA and out of Balboa Bay, CA. The Commission held a leadership position even then with a focus on communicating versatility of usage and accurate avocado nutrition information, a decades-long focus that has paved the way for the super food status of avocados. During that same period, we hired Champ Publishing to manage *Fresh DIGEST* — Tim Linden and Tom Fielding — another connection that continues today as they now work for the Commission on CAC's *From the Grove* magazine. The FPC experience provided invaluable insight into the value of volunteer organizations. It brought to life the opportunities for leadership development while connecting with key customers and giving back to the industry, not to mention an appreciation for innovative consumer marketing.

In the early '90s, I took a merchandiser position that later led to a marketing director position with Sun World International and once again avocados were a part of the story. At the time, Sun World handled the Irvine Ranch sales, including



*From the early to mid-1980s: Harland Heath, Heath and Lejeune; Ralph Pinkerton, CAC; Charles Gilb, Charles E. Gilb Company; Jan DeLyser, Fresh Produce Council, and Rod Jenkins, Certified Grocers*

avocados. We had some outstanding promotions with retailers featuring California avocados. A number of the retailers in my territory were managing their own ripening and, though avocados were popular, they have come a very long way since then. It was a time when supply could outpace demand as with the 1992-93 California crop at 569.8 million pounds. There was an ad with a major Southern California retailer featuring avocados 10 for a \$1.00. A successful promotion in moving volume but difficult to be proud of based on the abysmal grower returns. The Sun World experience validated the importance of industry support of organizations that our customers participated in while providing the opportunity to get in the trenches with promotion to support the demand pull for fresh fruits and vegetables.

The mid-'90s led to Westlake Distributors, a produce broker distributor in Los Angeles who hired me with an eye to marketing and sales responsibility for avocados, grapes and kiwifruit. Learning the ins and outs of the buy-sell of produce and managing inventory provided an invaluable experience. It was during my time with Westlake, while at a City of Hope fundraising event, that Robert Verloop, then CAC vice president of merchandising, approached me about a position they were creating —Southwest Merchandiser. While at Westlake I realized my passion was for marketing, so the opportunity to join the Commission in October of 1998 was one I could not pass up; it provided the chance to go from the outside in with the Commission.

At that time Chilean avocados were a fairly new origin ship-



*The CAC/HAB Retail Merchandising Team circa 2006*

ping avocados to the U.S., and Mexico had recently gained access to the 19 northeastern states. The Commission's senior management and Board were involved in creating the Federal Promotion Order that led to the creation of the Hass Avocado Board in the early 2000s. In 2000, I became CAC's vice president of merchandising and we hired a team of produce merchandisers located around the U.S. with responsibility for representing the California avocado marketing program as well as the U.S. marketing programs for the Chilean Avocado Import Association and the Hass Avocado Board. It was a busy time and provided an excellent opportunity to work with the origins shipping to the United States.

At the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Commission had an opportunity to differentiate California avocados within the greater avocado category, and in 2003 I transitioned into the role of vice president of marketing for CAC. In 2007, we put our sole focus on marketing California avocados and launched the California Grower Campaign with the Hand Grown in California thematic. This campaign put the face and the place on who and where our avocados are grown and was well timed with consumer interest in knowing more about the food they eat.

Fast forward to 2015 and the Commission rolled out the Made of California Campaign with California by Nature thematic designed to integrate across the evolving media platforms from traditional to digital to social.

The 40-year history of the California Avocado Commission is testimony to the commitment of volunteer leaders on the Board from the grower and handler communities, staff and agencies to maintain a focus on programs that provide value throughout the marketing channels, especially grower value. There is great pride on the part of all in the role the Commission has played in the meteoric rise of popularity of avocados ... those grown in California, as well as the overall category. There is little doubt that year-round availability, accurate nutrition information, consistent availability of ripe avocados, bagged programs supporting secondary displays and, of course, effective marketing programs have been key to the growth from a little known "specialty" item to a top performer in the produce department.

It has been a true pleasure for this native Kansan (and adopted Californian) to work on behalf of California's avocado growers with such qualified staff and agency teams during these past 20 years and there is every indication that the future is bright for avocado consumption. 🥑



*Connie Stukenberg, CAC; Ed Odron, Produce Marketing and Consulting; Ed McFadden III, Rancho Simpatica; Michael Schutt, Raley's, and Jan DeLyser, VP Marketing CAC at a 2017 produce industry event*