

The Commission's United Fresh 2020 virtual booth allowed visitors to view videos and download product and marketing information, chat with the CAC team or link to the website.

Industry Leaders Explore Challenges and Opportunities at Virtual Trade Shows

As a result of the pandemic, produce suppliers, food-service operators and retailers are facing unprecedented challenges. Normally, in-person trade shows and conventions would be an ideal venue for industry members to get together, share their expertise, brainstorm and collaboratively hash out solutions to systemic challenges. In light of the current pandemic and COVID-19 health regulations and recommendations, in-person events were not an option for most of this year. Instead, industry trade associations hosted online events utilizing the latest technologies to allow their members to exhibit and showcase their brands, engage with attendees and share valuable information.

Recognizing virtual trade shows would present both chal-

lenges and opportunities, the California Avocado Commission embraced the new format in a show of support for the Produce Marketing Association, United Fresh and the industry at large. CAC turned its attention to leveraging the online platforms to showcase the California Avocados brand, pique interest in the Commission's marketing programs and demonstrate leadership on a global stage. CAC virtually attended and sponsored three of the industry's most widely recognized events: United Fresh LIVE, PMA Foodservice: Delivered and PMA Fresh Summit.

Prior to the United Fresh Produce LIVE virtual trade show, which took place from June 15 – 19, the Commission issued a press release inviting industry members to join them for a series of four daily webinars where they could learn more

about the current California avocado crop, marketing support opportunities, research and nutrition information. CAC's bronze-level virtual booth sponsorship included tabs where visitors could view the Commission's latest advertising creative, download sell sheets and other non-confidential program materials, and view chef videos. One such video, featuring Chef Jason Hernandez, demonstrated how to elevate any dish to California cuisine with fresh California avocados. CAC staff also participated in a variety of virtual education sessions and workshops where they engaged with produce industry colleagues. For the Commission, the virtual trade show resulted in 964 unique booth visits during the event, 474 people tab views, 279 document views, 78 downloads of the documents to virtual briefcases and 150 video views. The platform remained online through September 1.

The five-day, late-July PMA Foodservice: Delivered virtual trade show was an opportunity for the Commission to help address the COVID-related challenges the foodservice industry is facing while inspiring them with unique California-avocado centric menu applications. The Commission's sponsor page provided tips on leveraging the benefits of California avocados on the menu and showcased the versatility of the fruit with

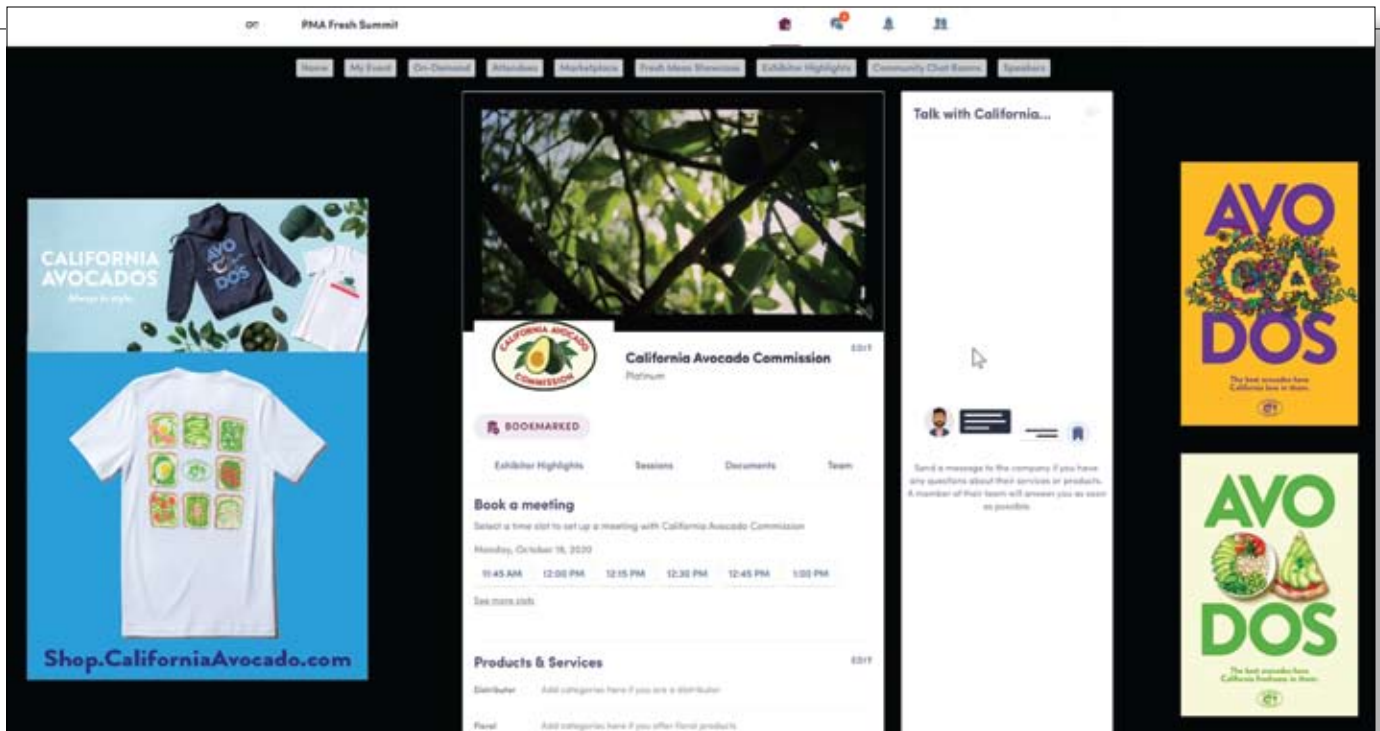
pre-recorded demonstration videos, including Chef Hernandez's presentation. The page also provided links to the CAC foodservice website and information on seasonality, ripening/handling, storing and preparing the fruit. To expand its reach, the Commission sponsored a page under the PMA "Operator Challenges" site that offered best practices for dealing with day-to-day operational challenges. The Commission's page received 2,138 total content interactions with an average visit of 2.34 minutes.

This learning-filled virtual foodservice event attracted just under 3,000 registered attendees — a substantial 66% increase above the average registrations secured by the traditional in-person conference held in Monterey, CA. Of this year's attendees, 113 were identified as qualified U.S.-based foodservice operators from high-volume independents (i.e., colleges/universities or hospitals) and chains. Because the virtual event provided complete contact information for the attendees, the Commission was able to promptly follow up with the 44 western-region representatives and provide them with menu promotion and ideation opportunities for 2021.

Prior to the October PMA Fresh Summit — which included a preview week for buyers, a preview week for attendees and

The screenshot shows a virtual event page for the California Avocado Commission. The page has a green header with "Solutions Sampling" and a "Live Stream" button. A left-hand navigation menu includes options like Home, Schedule, On-Demand, Solutions (highlighted), Networking, Chat, Event Help, Sponsors, Speakers, Session Surveys, and Notes. The main content area features the California Avocado Commission logo, a video player showing a sliced avocado, and a yellow button that says "Click Here to Join Our Virtual Meeting Room". Below the video, there is text describing the CAC's mission and its role in the industry. At the bottom, there are four yellow buttons: "Seasonality", "Ripening", "Size-Yield", and "Tips Videos". A chat window in the bottom right corner displays a welcome message and a "Write a reply" field.

The Produce Marketing Association's virtual foodservice event allowed for visitors of CAC's solutions page to download information relevant to foodservice operators and the foodservice industry.



Visitors to the California Avocado Commission Marketplace viewed advertising and merchandise examples, could download helpful documents, watch videos and book meetings with the Commission team.

then the main three-day virtual event — the Commission promoted its participation via a trade press release that garnered more than a half million impressions, as well as LinkedIn posts and personal outreach. The event featured 31 speakers and 21 hours of educational content. Nearly 2,000 live viewers tuned in for the State of the Industry presentation by PMA CEO Cathy Burns.

The Commission achieved a high profile at the event. CAC Director Trade Affairs Angela Fraser served as co-chair of the Fresh Summit committee, greeting attendees at live online sessions and entertaining attendees with a vocal performance during a virtual reception. Jan DeLyser, CAC vice president marketing, spoke about both the 2020 and upcoming 2021 California avocado seasons during a Zoom-based presentation. In addition, CAC retail marketing directors Carolyn Becker and Dave Anderson hosted an “Evolving Opportunities with Avocado Promotions” presentation. CAC staff also held 13 virtual meetings with select customers, trade media and potential marketing partners. The California Avocado Commission “marketplace”, which was like a virtual trade show booth, was visited by important customers including Albertsons/Safeway, Costco, Gelson’s, Hannaford, Lunds & Byerlys, PF Chang’s China Bistro, Sysco, Topco, Tops and Walmart. The event secured 821 views of CAC’s profile and 661 Sponsored Product Demo Views, including by major retailers. As a sponsor, the Commission secured prominent listings on PMA advertising for the event and showcased a California Avocado-branded video during the general session.

Overall, PMA Fresh Summit garnered nearly 60,000 visits

to its virtual marketplace, nearly 18,000 visits to the Fresh Ideas Showcase and more than 61,000 video views. Nearly 6,800 participants took part in live and on-demand sessions and more than 80,000 messages and 40,000 connection requests were sent throughout the virtual event, which remained live through November 13.

Admittedly, in-person trade shows provide more planned and impromptu opportunities to interact with contacts. One-on-one engagement at all three virtual trade shows did present its own challenges, as participation in live meeting platforms was low. However, the Commission was able to leverage available opportunities at these virtual events to secure new contacts and reconnect with valued partners. In addition, CAC’s participation demonstrated strong support for the industry during a particularly challenging time and kept the brand front-and-center for a global audience of retailers and foodservice operators, distributors, produce and floral industry exhibitors, handlers, media, dietitians, educators, students and chefs. By maintaining its commitment to the industry, the Commission also ensured it retained its earned-point status for future PMA in-person trade shows, thereby retaining prominent placement and considerations in the years to come. “Participating in virtual produce trade shows in 2020 doesn’t compare to the engagement with customers and industry colleagues in person at live events, but they provided opportunities for visibility, reminders of in-season California avocado availability, interaction and learning for our team at relatively low cost,” concludes DeLyser. 🥑