

Growing Talent to Help Produce Companies Prosper

By Margi Prueitt

Executive Director, PMA Foundation for Industry Talent

It is hardly a revelation: college students typically don't view the avocado industry as a career opportunity. For avocado-growing families hoping to enlist the next generation, long hours and worries over weather, water and pests could scare off the potential employees. Meanwhile, handlers' ability to contribute to the U.S.'s steady growth of avocado volume largely hinges on their ability to grow a talent base to keep pace with projections.

The truth is that today the avocado industry and produce industry in general offer young people more diverse opportunities and career growth than ever before. Shouting about these possibilities from the treetops is Produce Marketing Association's (PMA) Foundation for Industry Talent, which is on a mission to attract, develop and retain talent for the global produce industry.

PMA Foundation was established by PMA's board of directors as an independent, non-profit organization in 2006. Facing a future of retiring baby boomers and industry growth, the board recognized something needed to be done to attract the best and brightest minds to the produce industry. Today that need is compounded as companies expand their global footprint, become larger through consolidation, and more complex and technical through accelerated use of information systems and speed of commerce.

Human resource needs are changing quickly in this modern global economy. If produce companies aren't paying attention to their talent pipeline, they won't be prepared in the near term, let alone the long term. Since companies often lack strategies when it comes to human resources, cultivating talent gets overlooked in the volume of day-to-day business. That's why PMA Foundation dedicates itself to helping sustain a vibrant global produce industry through its most valuable resource...people. PMA Foundation's "career continuum" offers students and industry members a spectrum of programs, networking and resources designed to support every stage of a produce career — whether that's young people entering the industry, new leaders obtaining skills or senior leaders honing skills.

The Career Pathways Program sits at the beginning of the continuum. Designed around six international, national and regional produce industry events, these programs provide university students and faculty the opportunity to attend and experience the industry first-hand. Students receive one-on-one mentoring with industry leaders serving as "Career Ambassadors," participate in career panel discussions and sometimes even tour produce operations. They

also get to network with industry professionals at workshops, social events and on the exposition floor. To date, 47 percent of the students who have participated in a Career Pathways program and have graduated from college have accepted an internship or employment in the fresh produce industry.

California Avocado Commission employees have clocked many volunteer hours mentoring college students, sharing their experiences and passion for the avocado industry and promoting produce as a choice career. CAC staff has also benefited from participating in PMA Foundation's career continuum programs.

"As a company it's great to have an industry-specific resource for personnel and leadership development," said Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing at CAC and current chair of the PMA Board of Directors. "PMA Foundation programs allow CAC to demonstrate its support of our staff in development and the opportunity to build their network of peers."

DeLyser has a history of volunteering as a Career Ambassador and on PMA Foundation's board and committees. Most recently she attended the Leadership Symposium, an educational seminar for senior executives. The program is designed to strengthen leadership capabilities and stretch



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executive thinking through influential speakers and small-group discussions with industry members from across the supply chain and across business functions. She said the symposium facilitated deeper engagement with industry peers and delivered invaluable insight into approaches to evaluation and problem solving. She also noted CAC Marketing Communications Manager Zac Benedict's experience at PMA Foundation's Emerging Leaders Program last year.

"It was a great opportunity for Zac to build confidence and networks as well as gain skills in preparation for his recent promotion from 'specialist' to 'manager,'" DeLyser said. "Participation in PMA Foundation programs are usually game changers, especially as it relates to the participant's self-confidence and perspective on different approaches to situations."

The Emerging Leaders Program, created in partnership with Thunderbird School of Global Management, prepares high-potential leaders working in the industry for increasing levels of responsibility, challenges and opportunities that will accompany future leadership roles. The program enhances participants' leadership and critical thinking skills in the workplace.

In April, PMA Foundation will debut the Women's Fresh Perspectives Conference. The conference aims to inspire industry newcomers, executives and anyone in between to drive change within their organizations, further their leadership potential and network with peers and business leaders. It's the only industry-specific development program for women, and is being designed in partnership with Simmons School of Management, a widely recognized authority on women, leadership and management. This conference is important because women in leadership measurably help companies succeed. In fact, a study by the research-based non-profit organization Catalyst found return on equity and total return to shareholders was 34 percent higher in companies with the highest numbers of women included in senior positions. That's a competitive advantage produce companies must leverage!

Regardless of the program, "talent solutions" remain the common thread in PMA Foundation's efforts. Whether it's

marketing, food safety, traceability, technology or the global impact of trends, economics and environmental and labor issues — the modern produce industry is increasingly complex. Bright, creative women and men with varied knowledge, expertise and experience will increasingly be the competitive differentiator with the unique solutions they'll be trained to bring to the table.

By making PMA Foundation programs available, all produce companies can educate and develop a workforce with the diverse expertise necessary today. Industry members also can offer development opportunities to attract young people seeking full-time, long-term work in the numbers required to ensure advancement of future industry leaders and sustained business success.

CAC is PMA Foundation's mission in action, demonstrating the produce industry is a great place for an exciting, fulfilling career and that organizational success happens when you invest in the development of your people. At PMA Foundation, we believe by reaching out to universities to showcase produce careers and by providing development resources throughout one's produce career that the California avocado industry and produce businesses of all types and sizes, in all places, and on every level, can prosper generation after generation.



Visit pmafoundation.com for more information on PMA Foundation programs as well as to learn how to show your support through charitable gifts and volunteer opportunities. 🥑

Margi Prueitt joined the Produce Marketing Association Foundation for Industry Talent as the executive director in 2010. She comes to the position after serving as the executive director of an economic development organization and a 35-year career with the American Red Cross. She is a graduate of the University of Kentucky, has a Master's Degree from the University of Louisville and obtained an executive education certificate from Harvard J.F. Kennedy School of Government