

The “Sell-In”:

An Integral Part of CAC’s Promotional Effort

Each season, before that first California avocado is picked and packed and made ready for sale, the California Avocado Commission’s marketing team has contacted scores of potential buyers explaining CAC’s plans for the year and gauging their interest.

Jan DeLyser, the Commission’s vice president of marketing, revealed that the “sell-in” is the first step, and a very important element, in securing promotional support from the retailers and foodservice operators that are loyal to the California brand.

In fact, DeLyser said there are even several preliminary meetings that take place before the “sell-in” can start. “We kick off the season by meeting with the handlers and talking about our key accounts,” she said.

Those meetings, which took place virtually in January this year, gave the handler sales and marketing teams an all-important feel for the size and timing of the crop, and also provided the CAC staff a handle on which retailers and foodservice operators are most important to the ultimate sellers of the fruit. DeLyser said for the 2022 season those handler meetings proved to be very revealing. “Most of the handlers told us that growers were very interested in moving fruit sooner,” she said. “The market price [in January] was at an all-time high and some growers wanted to take advantage of that.”

And, in fact, California growers did send more fruit to market in January and February than has been the case in many years. DeLyser said the intel about an early start to the season did help the Commission kick-off a few early retail promotions in time for the weekend in which the Big Game was played. But those meetings also confirmed that the bulk – about 80% – of California’s 2022 crop is expected to be sold in the April through July timeframe. This year that crop has been estimated at 306 million pounds, about 15% greater than 2021. Securing retail and foodservice promotional support for the California avocado remains a very important factor in achieving a price premium in the marketplace.

Retail Marketing Director Carolyn Becker, who handles



One of the Big Game-themed California avocados displays at Mollie Stone’s stores in February.

many of the western regional chains that are very loyal to the California brand, said the early start to this year’s crop was a great boost for some retailers. She noted that Bay Area based Mollie Stone’s Markets ran a large Big Game weekend pro-

motion featuring California avocados. The chain has long been a promoter of the state's avocados.

Becker said she begins the promotional push each season with an early email to all her accounts giving them crop information and explaining any new opportunities that will be available this season. "In that email this year, I was able to talk about the exciting weather we have had, including a good amount of rain, which nurtured the trees and improved the size of the fruit," she said. "I also talked about the increase in volume we are anticipating on the GEM variety and the opportunities to promote that variety."

Becker said many retailers are interested in promoting a bit earlier than usual. "We already have many promotions on the books," she said in early February, noting that retailers are getting creative with the early start to promote around St. Patrick's Day and the NCAA basketball finals in March.

Though it has long been backed by tracking studies, Becker said it is always important to remind these regional accounts that consumers continually express their preference for California avocados. "They prefer the quality of our fruit and the fact that it is locally grown."

Becker reported that some retailers are beginning to take in-person meetings in their offices, others are asking for in-person meetings off-site and many who continue to prefer Zoom-type meetings.

Retail Marketing Director David Anderson focuses most of his efforts on national accounts, working with their Western divisions. He has a simple explanation of the work he and the other members of the marketing team do. "The value we add is that we help people sell more California avocados," he said.

Anderson begins his "sell-in" effort three to four months before that first avocado is picked. He said the "early engagement" is an important part of the process as it gives these retailers a sense of the crop and a glimpse at the new promotional program. While the mechanics of his efforts are similar to those of Becker, he explained that national chains are a bit different. They have more stores in each division and require more fruit for successful promotions. While many like getting into the California avocado deal as soon as they can, they typically need to wait until peak-of-the-season volume is being picked, packed and shipped.

"Most of these accounts will get in with promotions when volume reaches 10-12 million pounds per week," he said, noting he has set up several promotions slated to take place when that volume is expected in early to mid-spring.

A key facet of Anderson's "sell-in" approach is to accurately forecast the numbers and make sure there is sufficient volume. "We need to have consistent supplies for their promotions," he said.

Kim Kurata, who leads the foodservice marketing efforts for CAC, noted that this year's "sell-in" included preliminary

contact with 70-80 restaurant chains, including 12 Tier 1 chains that ran promotions in 2021. "These are repeat promoters that have been loyal to the California brand," she said. "We contact each of them to make sure they are going to participate with us again this year."

The foodservice strategy mirrors that employed at retail by focusing on those accounts excited about promoting California avocados. In fact, Kurata said it is even more a geographic play in foodservice as it is the California restaurant locations that get the most traction when pushing the "local" connection California-grown avocados bring to the table.

Over the last two years, the coronavirus has had a well-publicized impact on foodservice operations. As such, CAC's foodservice team has had to alter its strategy a bit. Kurata said promotional activities have been focused digitally rather than utilizing printed, in-store point-of-sale material. She explained that dining in has been in a state of flux since spring of 2020 with many chains relying on internet orders and take-out business. CAC has capitalized on this with online promotions on the restaurant chains' websites to push the sale of menu items featuring California avocados.

Kurata said restaurateurs are pining for the day when they can fully return to in-house dining, but they love the digital support they are getting in the meantime.

She revealed that typically foodservice operators want to plan menu promotions 12-18 months ahead of time. It is always difficult to know the size of the California avocado crop that far in advance. Now with the pandemic it is equally difficult for foodservice operators to know the dining restrictions they may encounter that far down the road, so promotion planning is a challenge.

Kurata said most of the California avocado foodservice promotions will run during the months of April, May and June when California is in the peak of its season. She noted that her foodservice clients are still operating via Zoom and other digital platforms with very few taking in-person meetings.

DeLyser added that while the many connections with the accounts are a very important element of the early work the CAC team does, the effort doesn't stop there. The pandemic has made it difficult to connect at industry events or for the Commission to hold its own season-opening events for the past two years. "But we continue to pivot," she said. "We are inviting key account representatives, in addition to media and influencers, to a virtual cooking class at the end of March and planning to have a grove open house event in mid-May if in-person events are permitted."

The longtime CAC vice president reiterated the comments of Anderson noting that helping sell the California avocado crop at a good price is the main goal of everything the marketing department does. 🥑