

Promoting the Promised Fruit

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“Oguacate” was the word used by the Aztec people of Central America to describe the fruit we now call avocado. The earliest advertising of these fruits can be traced to picture writings in this region dating back to 300BC.

Over time the fruit spread to the Indian territories of the now USA where the name “Alligator pear” was used to describe the pear shaped fruit with a hard rough skin like that of an alligator. Somehow the name avocado became the common name.

After the Spanish invaded the region in 1519, they discovered this sensational fruit that had similar qualities to the oily foods of their Mediterranean diets and so the avocado spread to Europe through Spain and was steadily accepted.

Of course we have much to thank the Central American region for apart from avocados. The tomato, capsicum, pumpkin, passionfruit, and pineapple to name a few came from Central America.

One of the first people to introduce avocados to Australia was a Carlos Zalapa who came here from Mexico in 1928. He was one of the first to introduce Mexican style foods to Australia. He organised cooking demonstrations at agricultural shows and gave Australians their first taste of Mexican foods including Guacamole. Acclaimed food writer of the early 50’s Ted Maloney introduced Carlos Zapala’s recipes to the masses through his Good Living column and cook books.

In 1978 the Woman’s Weekly cookbook listed avocados as “some variety of avocado is available, although not always in great quantity, from March to December.” Just about every cookbook had a recipe for avocado dip (Guacamole) and a prawn and avocado cocktail. Interestingly their presentation was mainly seen as dinner party use, driven by their limited availability and high cost.

By the 1970’s avocados were appearing widely in cookbooks as people got to know them, whilst of course industry pioneers such as Alex Kidd and John Anderson were establishing avocado plantations and encouraging the development of a new horticultural industry.

Promotions were not widely conducted, partly due to resources and also the inclusion in the food writings generated sufficient interest that demand exceeded supply for most of the time and kept prices high. This caught the attention of Departments of Agriculture to look at avocados and encourage growers to plant avocados in suitable areas in place of less profitable crops.

The 80's saw significant growth in the industry and by the early 1990 the Australian avocado industry was producing 10,000 tonnes. Industry promotions were conducted as part of the QFVG campaigns raising further awareness of avocados.

Campaigns in the late 80's were focussed on educating consumers as to what avocados were, the different varieties and how to tell when avocados were ripe. They were still new to most people and people often had bad experiences due to not understanding enough about them. A major initiative during this period was the launch of the AVOCADO cookbook that demonstrated the versatility of avocados.

Unfortunately avocados were caught up in the "fat is bad" trend of the 80's and this was a potential major setback for the industry until a breakthrough led by the margarine companies. Suddenly monounsaturated fats were the good fats and only saturated fats were bad. Avocado oils contained 74% monounsaturates which really helped place avocados on a health platform.

The avocado industry commissioned research to demonstrate the health benefits of avocados based on the knowledge that they contained the necessary ingredients. Dr David Colquhoun of the Wesley Hospital in Brisbane conducted a program to measure the cholesterol changes of patients with an avocado-enriched diet compared to those with a low fat diet.

In brief, the outcomes of this work showing patients with an avocado enriched diet had an average 8% low cholesterol after 4 weeks than the other patients changed the way nutritionists and the public thought about avocados. Avocados were promoted on a health platform and gained the national heart foundation tick of approval.

In-store demonstrations and public relations were two key elements of the promotion mix in the early 90's. Every press release issued contained either a new recipe suggestion or a health message. In-store demonstrations reached many people who had never tasted an avocado and indeed research at that time showed that less than 20% of Australians had tasted an avocado in 1995.

As demand and supply grew, so did the implications of supplying fruit to meet consumer expectations. To take the guess work out of choosing avocados, a major move led by Woolworths changed the way consumers bought avocados from hard green to a ripe ready to eat product. This had a significant impact on demand, though also pushing avocados to their use-by limit also introduced quality issues that the industry continues to address in parallel to promotions.

By 1997 we had introduced magazine advertising, again pushing the health benefit, though also to present avocados in a lifestyle situation and break the exclusive high image dinner party scene. There were far too many avocados being produced to rely on this market alone. Magazines had the ability to reach many more people with a message

than the same value of in-store demonstrations although many of these continued on a co-operative basis where possible.

The avocado crop has now topped 30,000 tonnes p.a. and there are still significant plantings, particularly in the Bundaberg region and in Western Australia that could add a further 10 – 15,000 tonnes to this over the next 3 years. Avocados are now an established mainstream product that is reaching at least 45% of all homes each year and over 20% on a regular basis.

The health message is getting through loud and clear. Most people young and old know the difference between good and bad fats and that avocados contain the good ones.

There is no doubt that avocados have an acquired taste, however once converted people “go bananas” over them more than almost any other fruit. The “creamy texture” is what people are buying, and the health benefits are an added bonus.

Last year we ran a billboard to introduce avocados as an everyday item and to suggest using it as an alternative to butter. We knew that people liked the “creamy texture” and that this made an ideal spread. We also discovered that some people were already using avocados as butter so it was time to really make this message work.

The timing also coincided with increasing promotion of plant sterols as a natural cholesterol lowering ingredient used in special margarines – pro active and logical. The avocado benefit is that they are also a good source of plant sterols, yet a natural product.

In magazines we went hard on the “spread on toast” message linked to the health message. Health focussed magazines and baby care magazines did not miss out either on messages relevant to their readers.

From being introduced as guacamole in the 1950’s, promoted as the “must have” avocado and prawn cocktail at dinner parties of the 70’s, avocados are now widely used in the food service industry from fine dining to sandwich shops as well as at home. They are used for feeding babies, and used by the elderly as a nutrient dense food that is easy to digest. They are used spread on toast at breakfast, tossed in a salad, or eaten on their own straight from the skin.

So where to now.

Our goal is to turn the 45% who are buying avocados at least once a year into the 20% or so buying regularly. When we have 45% of consumers buying every month the demand will easily take care of the increased supply capabilities of this industry. However to achieve this we need to create a much higher impact campaign that we have seen. Avocados are no longer a new product, rather we need to give consumers permission to use them much more often.

In 5 years time this industry is not going to be viable if constantly reducing prices is the only method used to increase demand. Consumers have far wider choice and less time to prepare meals. They have a hunger for more knowledge and the communications revolution is certainly driving this.

This is where TV comes to play.

TV advertising is an expensive medium and often avoided because of its cost. However it is the most powerful medium to develop an image and generate results providing the right creative strategy is used. Lets face it major advertisers – McDonalds, Coca Cola, Toyota, NRMA, Westpac, Qantas and many more use TV as a major part of their promotion strategy and have spent many millions on it to develop a brand image. Like it or not, the image created on the TV using sound and pictures does much more to develop our image of the company than any other association.

Within horticulture the Banana campaign has generated huge recall and has helped lift demand for bananas. Several years ago the Mushroom industry launched the Meat for Vegetarian TV campaign and successfully turned a declining market into a growth market. In 1999 the stone fruit industry developed a TV campaign and the consumption levels measurably increased in the Adelaide and Brisbane markets where the campaign ran. And this year the Apple industry launched “Its Crunch Time” as a TV campaign

With avocado production steadily increasing the industry has reached a stage that TV advertising, as a major part of the promotion mix is now both possible and desirable.

We briefed our advertising agency to develop a TV campaign. For the advertising to work well we needed:

- Avocados to be the hero
- A modern and catchy jingle
- To show versatility of avocados
- To show a variety of people and lifestyles enjoying avocados
- Keep a healthy product image

The agency responded with a TV campaign that we believe will be effective in strengthening the consumer demand for avocados at the critical volume periods, mainly July – September.

TV is flexible in that it can be increased or decreased by region and run at different times by state. Unlike magazines, TV advertising can be beefed up or cut back at short notice depending on market conditions. Importantly it has a huge reach that no other medium can offer.

At this stage it is planned to launch the schedule in Brisbane from 17 July, Sydney and Melbourne from 8 August and in Adelaide and Perth from early October. Each “flight” will run for about 6 weeks in key programs to reach the main target consumers.

The TV campaign will be supported by in store promotion material that links the TV theme to point of purchase and by magazine activity will run at some other times. (See chart)

Building on the TV campaign we are also opening a new world in the internet as a further step. Recipe suggestions, selection information and nutrition details will be available soon on the internet at **avocados.org** to further meet consumer need for information.

In closing, this campaign must now “work its butt off” to generate the demand for avocados that will help sustain viable prices, reduce the over supplies that cause price crashes, and also reduce some of the long storage times that are a factor in quality deterioration. It must work together with the supply chain to ensure that the fruit that we “promise” to consumers is what they expect and is what they get. And will be a “WIN WIN” for consumers and industry.

This campaign represents an investment in the development of the avocado industry as your own investments in your orchards are. Let’s make it happen !!!