



Roger Pepperl has been a trailblazer in the fresh produce industry since day one

Stemilt

# *True* Bearing

By Jordan Okumura

*We call him  
Papa Pepperl.*

It is our internal (and eternal) name of distinction for the ace, aficionado, and Washington treefruit authority who has constantly kept us on our toes and envisioned the horizon ahead.

Always collected, cool-headed, intuitive, and ever-discerning, Roger Pepperl's keen eye for the rise and fall of the industry tides is what has helped legends such as Stemilt ride out the storms, catch the trade winds, and set course around the most fleeting of trends.

With category captains like Roger at the helm, marketing vision does not inspire

curiosities and gimmicks. It influences new definitions and galvanizes movements.

If you are lucky enough to get pulled under Papa Pepperl's wing, you can be sure your true bearing will never lead you astray, that your intention and vision will align—that your path ahead will be based on more than an inclination of what is set in the stars. It will be at the will of your own hand and those you allow to guide you along the way.

We are speaking of great leaders. And Roger is undeniably one of them. As

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**“Roger has been our captain. He has been in a constant race toward better fruit, better brands, and finding ways to tell the best story to make our company live up to its World Famous promise.”**

*Brianna Shales, Senior Marketing Manager, Stemilt*



we wind down an unmatched year of challenges and opportunities, Roger has found his own due north at 2020's end, and that starts with the next course in an unrivaled legacy and unending journey: retirement.

This is where the bittersweet truly unveils itself, but that is only for us to contemplate. For Roger, he has a legacy in place to keep his impact and advocacy firmly anchored with us.

“Roger has been our captain. He has been in a constant race toward better fruit, better brands, and finding ways to tell the best story to make our company live up to its World Famous promise,” Brianna Shales, Stemilt’s Senior Marketing Manager, expresses, revealing her deep gratitude for all he has done for Stemilt.

Roger’s tenure at Stemilt is chock-full of hallmarks, building consumer brands

like Lil Snappers® while also being the brains and vision behind adding mystique to Stemilt’s late-season, high-altitude cherries through A Half Mile Closer to the Moon™. The tagline and belief, “If you’re not first, you’re last,” guides Stemilt’s marketing team and perfectly describes the journey Roger has taken the company on for the past 20 years.

“Roger is a force of nature and a natural mentor. He built Stemilt’s marketing department from the ground up, as only our lead designer was here before him. So, you can imagine how fast he had to climb that ladder. His early days were spent on the business-to-business side, developing relationships with retailers, building incredible merchandising solutions for our programs, and making sure Stemilt was known for who we are: a place for quality where the customer is an extension of our family,” Brianna tells me. “Once that foundation was

established, Roger, naturally, expanded his merchandising knowledge into developing packaged and branded solutions that would benefit both retailers and the end consumer.”

But, before Roger set his sights on the industry stalwart Stemilt, he, like so many in our industry, had a very telling origin story.

Roger worked in grocery stores in high school as a first step into the fresh produce space. He grew up in St. Joseph, Michigan, and worked at two different stores bagging groceries, stocking shelves, and doing inventory, amongst his many tasks. They took advantage of the energy and strength of a high school kid, and Roger loved it.

As his love for the retail space grew, he took every hour they would give him working holidays, weekends, and evenings. Roger found he had a true



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Left: Stemilt’s Marketing team has included Brianna Shales, Landon Michaelson, Roger Pepperl, and Nick Shamley

Top: Brianna and Roger share their branding vision with *The Snack*

knack for the industry. Here, fruits and vegetables took on new meaning. They developed into commerce and then into a collective medium for health and wellness.

Roger's diligence and passion allowed him to make enough to put himself through college. With fresh produce on the brain and in his sights, Roger studied horticulture at Michigan State University. As he shopped around post-college, the grocery industry continued to call his name with a desire that no other industry could quite satiate. So, the young Roger Pepperl set his sights on Midwestern retail powerhouse Meijer. He spent 21 years in a variety of roles, starting there as an Assistant Produce Manager at one of its busiest stores and quickly moving up to Produce Manager. Within two years, he moved to the buying office, allowing him to experience the unique and delicate dynamic that accompanied supplier relationships, tumultuous markets, and Mother Nature's comfort *and* wrath.

Step down the road two decades, and Roger's years as a Produce Buyer for the major Midwestern chain put him on the radar of the team at Stemilt. Roger bought apples, pears, cherries, and stonefruit—among many other products—and was always angling for quality and a win-win deal. He met Stemilt Founder Tom Mathison through these interactions, and Tom respected him from their very first contact.

“Roger and my grandfather, Tom, were kindred spirits. They both had a tremendous respect for each other, even before Roger joined Stemilt. They both recognized the value of quality and flavor,” President West Mathison expresses.

The two parties revealed they had more and more in common over the years though Roger had no intention of leaving his work as a buyer at first. But, Stemilt's persistence, Roger's respect for the Mathison family, and the idea of building a marketing department from the ground up into the powerhouse it is today really appealed to his creativity and entrepreneurial spirit.

“Tom gravitated to the assets that Roger could bring to our Stemilt family. As our Mathison family business evolved from being a grower to a packer and



Left: Joni and Roger Pepperl are diehard Spartans loyalists

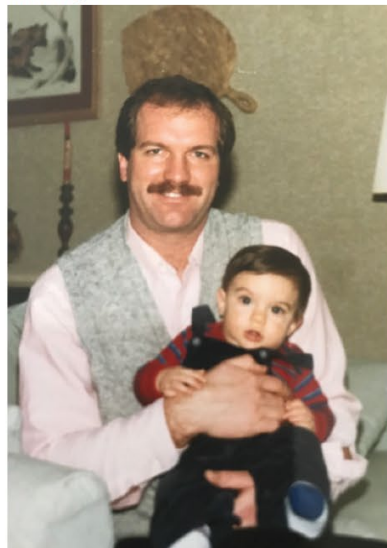
Top: Roger has a passion for animals, especially his produce-inspired Apple

*“Roger is a natural coach and has an uncanny way of getting people to grasp new ideas through his experiences and the stories that go along with them. His biggest asset, though, is his ability to get down to your level.”*

Brianna Shales

Below: Roger with his son, Alex

Right: Joni and Roger on their wedding day in Michigan



*“He knows the ticket to increased produce consumption is not a sea of sameness and has spent the past 20 years making sure Stemilt swims in its own ocean.”*

**West Mathison, President, Stemilt**



Clockwise from left: The Mathison family including West, Kyle, Susan, Tate, and Robin

then to a marketer, Roger helped Stemilt and the family understand the challenges that retailers faced,” West tells me, pointing to an invaluable asset of Roger’s—he was a former retail buyer. “While at Meijer, Roger had introduced the catchweight bags on large cherries. Basically, that meant putting the top grade and largest size into a catchweight bag. Originally, the catchweight was more of a value item. Roger and Tom captured the value and opportunities of quality and convenience.”

For the Mathisons, Roger brought the practical experience of running a store and interacting as a buyer of produce into the Stemilt mindset of problem-solving.

“Roger created a circle of influence where everyone wanted his input, from harvest parameters to packaging ideas and grade—all in addition to his marketing role,” West adds.

But, before this major turning of the tides toward Stemilt, Roger weighed the future as well as he could and decided to make the jump. His wife, Joni, reflected on the decision to move west and join the company—as we see it, it was the prevailing winds.

“Our family of three had just returned to Michigan after a week away in Florida, and I noticed a message on the answering machine. It was from a guy named Kyle Mathison at Stemilt. The

message slipped my mind and I forgot to mention it to Roger,” Joni shares, pausing to recall all the moving parts of the whirlwind time. “Kyle, who is known for his persistence, kept calling back, and that’s when Roger realized it was a call that he should take.”

With so much at play in their life in Michigan, the decision-making process to move was not an easy one. Their son, Alex, was 13 and not thrilled about leaving his friends. Joni had her own writing business and didn’t

want to shake things up. But, the bottom line was they didn’t want to deny Roger a great opportunity with Stemilt.

“We chose chaos over guilt, and it worked out very well,” Joni says, followed by a laugh. “It has been such an amazing journey for us all since then.”

Over the course of his tenure, more than just Roger’s personal and family life has evolved and thrived. So have those lives of his professional family at Stemilt and beyond—all due to the immeasurable and limitless impact that Roger has had on those around him.

“Roger is a natural coach and has an uncanny way of getting people to grasp

new ideas through his experiences and the stories that go along with them. His biggest asset, though, is his ability to get down to your level,” Brianna says, taking her time to get the words just right. “He has never been one to boast about his own accomplishments, but always takes the time to teach. His infamous ‘Monday morning quarterback’ lessons and reminders to ‘be first or be last’ will stick with me forever.”

One of the many beautiful aspects of Roger’s journey is that it has allowed him to be a passionate advocate for the industry as he understands it, and he can speak skillfully to the two audiences Stemilt touches the most: the grower and the end consumer.

“Roger can see the frontlines of the supply chain when he innovates an idea. He can envision it and he cares about the impact on the teams in the field, the person packing the fruit, the merchandiser, the parents, the produce clerk, and minds of the consumers,” West

says. Another rare element of our Papa Pepperl.

Roger understands that the two groups—and all those in between—are interconnected, even though it may not seem that way to many.


“Building value for the grower ultimately benefits the consumer. A cornerstone of building value has been Roger’s focus on building successful brands. Roger really inspired and created traction around high-graphic pouch bags and the creation of the Lil Snappers brand. His early adoption went to scale rapidly and Lil Snappers became so popular that we started to sub-license with other producers,” West notes. “He knows the ticket to increased produce consumption is not a sea of sameness and has spent the past 20 years making sure Stemilt swims in its own ocean.”

With so much covered and so much sea yet to explore, Roger is far from halting his ongoing exploration. Now, he is

simply changing the terms of navigation ahead.

Playing with his new granddaughter, Madison, as well as exploring, hiking, gardening, and creating—always creating—these are the terms of the new deal and the course of the map ahead. Plus, as those closest to the competitive marketing and sales maven share, there will certainly be lots of Michigan State football and basketball games enjoyed. And treefruit, still and always—all the apples, cherries, pears, peaches, and nectarines that one man can fathom.

For an individual who is always continuing to learn new things, it would be impossible to imagine a dull moment in this industry veteran’s life, charted or left to the winds. As the tides change and we navigate through unknown waters here in the fresh produce industry, Roger is gifting us a legacy and a path to follow.

He is, after all, like the comfort of the North Star—and our compass rose. 



Clockwise from left: The Sales and Marketing team with Nick, Landon, Roger, Katie Harmon, and Brianna