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Use social media to directly reach consumers.

BY CAROL M. BAREUTHER, RD

Social media is a powerful marketing tool in today's produce world. It connects a product or brand directly with consumers and influences buying decisions. Witness the explosive effect of a recipe called *uunifetapasta*, or 'oven-baked feta pasta,' shared by Finnish food blogger Jenni Häyriinen in January 2021 on the social media platform, TikTok. A key ingredient, cherry tomatoes, soared about 29% in sales the week the recipe

went viral, according to International Fresh Produce Association data. It's no wonder. Each recipe, enough to feed 4 to 6 people, called for two pints of cherry tomatoes. As of December 2022, the hashtag #bakedfeta has 129 million views and counting.

Social media is a crucial component of the digital marketing strategy for retailers and produce brands, says Amy Petersen, MS, RD, LD, social media strategist and registered dietitian for Coborn's Inc., a St. Cloud,

MN-headquartered retailer with 59 stores across Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

"Consumers crave connection, and social media is one of the best ways for retailers and brands to tell their stories," Peterson stresses. "Social media also provides retailers and produce brands an opportunity to engage with their consumers. Whether it's videos, reels, static posts, TikTok's, LIVE videos, or another content style, social media is a link



between retailers and/or produce brands and inspiring consumer behavior.”

MAKE THE FRESH CONNECTION

Just how important is social media? First, there are nearly 4.6 billion social media users globally, each using social media an average of 147 minutes a day, and that number is forecast to be almost 6 billion users by 2027, according to the Hamburg, Germany-headquartered data company, Statista Inc.

Second, based on *Stats That Prove, 10 Stats that Justify Your Social Media Strategy & Spend* released by Dallas, TX-based DMA Solutions in 2019, 86% of women look on social media before making a purchase, and women tend to be the gender that does most of the grocery shopping and meal prepping.

Third, reported in a survey by San Francisco-based Traackr, *2022 Influencer Marketing Impact Report*, 51% of consumers said they would follow a brand's social media profiles for product recommendations and deals.

The highly visual aspect of social media, especially photo and video content, makes it a perfect marketing medium for fresh produce.

“By featuring our colorful, delicious offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables in social posts and inviting our community to engage through likes and comments, we can expand the audience we would normally reach through traditional media efforts,” says Amy McClellan, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for SpartanNash.

“These posts are also instrumental in telling stories and providing solutions to our shoppers, including recipe recommendations, health and wellness tips, seasonal trends, local sourcing and farmer stories.”

SpartanNash is a Grand Rapids, MI-based

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— Amy Petersen, Coborn's Inc.

distributor, wholesaler and retailer, with 147 company-owned supermarkets under the banners Family Fare, Martin's Super Markets and D&W Fresh Market.

FOLLOW A 1-2-3 STRATEGY

To be most effective in engaging with consumers and influencing their buying behaviors with social media, first identify target consumers. Second, determine the availability of resources a produce brand or retailer can devote to social media and the expected ROI. Third, strategically pick the platform or platforms that best target this 1:1 connection.

You need to know the demographics of your target consumers when choosing which types of social media to use.

“The basic data of age, gender and location are helpful, but digging even deeper to what are their interests and where they spend most of their time-consuming information is key. Once you know your target consumers, you can then cross-reference that with what messaging your brand/business is a priority and where that messaging would fit in best

on the different social media platforms,” says Emily Holdorf, MS, RDN, and social media community manager for the Brentwood, MO-based Produce for Better Health Foundation (PBH).

Social media is often cheaper than most marketing tactics, adds Shelby Babcock, marketing and sales specialist for Applewood Fresh Growers LLC, in Sparta, MI. “Nowadays, anyone can be viral when it comes to social media. It has allowed those smaller companies to become players in the game of advertising.”

Big produce companies benefit, too.

“Across social media channels, we often see lower CPM (cost per thousand) impressions than other industries because of our visually appealing assets, which typically showcase fresh fruits and vegetables, recipes and engaging content,” says Bil Goldfield, director of corporate communications for the Dole Food Company, in Charlotte, NC. “The lower CPM allows us to reach more people at a lower cost, which increases web traffic. For example, in 2022, we saw an 80% increase in site traffic from social media efforts alone.”

While it can be low-cost to start a social presence, maintaining that presence requires a budget for paid support to be put behind individual posts and ad campaigns, according to PBH's Holdorf. “This paid support can help more of your content be seen, and to continue to learn more about your target audience and their behaviors, which will further the reach of your content.”

CONSIDER THE TIME FACTOR

And you'll need to consider the time factor.

“If you want consumers to buy corn, it will take one level of effort. If you want them to

buy a particular brand of corn, that will take greater time and effort for a more repetitive push so they will remember the brand,” says Ben Campbell, associate professor, and extension specialist in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at the University of Georgia, in Athens.

The key is determining ROI, says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal and founder of 210 Analytics LLC, based in San Antonio, TX. “For example, is someone watching your YouTube enough to translate into a sale?”

Selecting the right-fit social media platforms is no longer a question of when, but where, says Campbell. “In the early days of TV, if you wanted to target kids, you made sure your commercial ran on Saturday mornings when kids were watching cartoons. Social media is 24/7, so it’s choosing what platform to reach specific consumers.”

Most Americans use social media. However, the generational aspect by platform is tremendous, explains Roerink. “Facebook has been taken over by Boomers, whereas TikTok is the place to be for Gen Z. TikTok trends that go viral can prompt tremendous spikes in sales, but they are often short-lived. Investments in YouTube, Pinterest or Instagram live longer and can support meal planning for everyday and special occasions.”

Not all brands/businesses are meant to have a presence on every single platform, says PBH’s Holdorf. “Consider where your time and money are best spent.”

In general, Holdorf adds, recipes and cooking tips as well as general product facts, tips and ag stories lend themselves to short-form videos on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok.

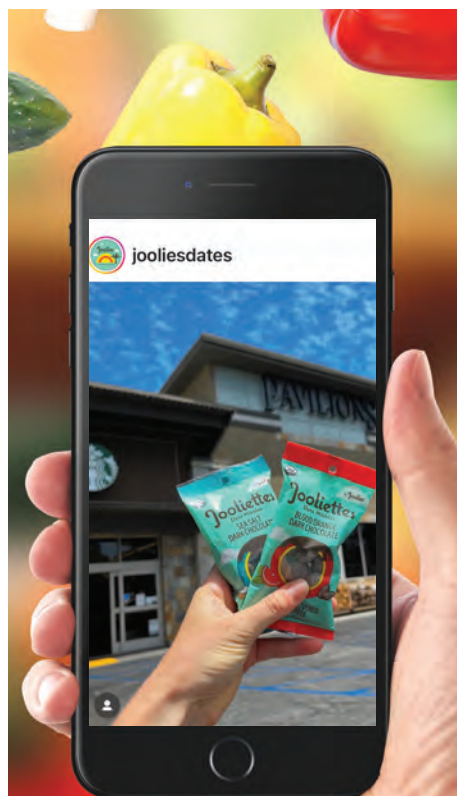
Health/wellness facts and tips do well as infographics on Instagram. A quick fact or humorous meme related to your brand/business is ideal for Twitter, while Twitter and LinkedIn are best for B2B marketing.

“Ultimately, it’s not the number of likes or followers, but the level of engagement with consumers that is the ticket to success. Like word of mouth, engagement helps to increase

brand awareness,” says Tara Murray, vice president of marketing for Rhome, TX-based Fresh Innovations LLC, makers of Yo Quiero brands of guacamole, salsa, and dips.

SUCCESS ON SOCIAL

Letting customers know what’s fresh in-store is how Harps Food Stores, a 114-store chain headquartered in Springdale, AR, connects directly with its customers on Facebook. An example is a seasonal post such as ‘Lori Anne Peaches are available now! Come by and taste the difference!’, touting premium fruit grown by Titan Farms, in South Carolina.



Several posts from Joolies show its turquoise pack with storefronts of major retailers in the background.

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Melissa's created an entire month of Freaky Fruit social media content, touting such produce as Buddha's Hand, dragon fruit, horned melons, rambutans and other unique-looking fruits during October.

"I started our first Facebook page for the produce department 12 years ago," says Mike Roberts, vice president of produce operations. "Now, we're on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, and we have hired a social media director. One of our recent hits on TikTok was showing how many rubber bands it took to split a watermelon. We've done 'guess the weight of pumpkin' contests with customers, too."

Facebook Live is a platform the Chilean Fresh Fruit Association, based in Santa Rosa, CA, has successfully employed, says Menuka Shrestha, marketing coordinator. "We have worked with a few retailers over the years where the retail dietitian will go live on Facebook to promote Chilean fruit. They mention Chile's counter-seasonality, the great growing climate in Chile, health benefits and share easy recipes. We also run Facebook giveaways in which winners would get grocery gift cards."

Likewise, the digital team at the Healthy Family Project, which was founded two decades ago at Produce for Kids, started hosting Facebook Live sessions in 2020 to highlight its sponsors, demo recipes, and share what retail partners were doing in the community. In 2022, the Project hosted 14 Facebook Lives, plus a Live Zoom Cooking Class exclusively for military families, supporting its campaign with Military Produce Group Commissaries. The most recent Facebook Live, "Festive Flavors with Harps," featured fresh produce items such as Taylor Farms Chopped Southwest Salad, SugarBee Apples, Shuman Farms Sweet Onions, POM Wonderful Pomegranate Juice and Peelz Mandarins.

Instagram is the main social media space

Dole uses to speak with shoppers, says Goldfield. "People first eat with their eyes, and given our highly visual products and recipe-heavy content, we dove deep into experimenting with this channel, and it's paid off. In 2022, we've seen significant organic growth, which is very hard to obtain in today's pay-to-play arena."

The graphic appeal of Instagram led Joolies, a Los Angeles, CA-headquartered company with a 1,000-acre farm in the Coachella Valley growing fresh organic Medjool dates, to design its packaging, especially for eye-catching appeal on Instagram. Several posts show the turquoise pack with storefronts of major retailers in the background.

"We call Instagram millennial catnip, and we use our packaging as the star in posts," says Amanda Sains, director of marketing.

Similarly, photos on Instagram are a big part of social media marketing by Alexandra Rae Molumby, director of marketing at Country Sweet Produce, in Bakersfield, CA. The photos span from field to fork, plus in-store at retail partners. An example of the latter showed two team members giving out samples of the company's organic sweet potato singles during a grand opening of a Pavilions store in Pasadena.

"Photos are a good way for growers to help provide content to retailers. For example, last fall we worked with Safeway North California to promote our new display bins of organic sweet potatoes for Thanksgiving and Christmas. They used my picture and recipe and shared it through their Instagram account," says Molumby.

Coborn's Petersen uses Instagram or

"One of our recent hits on TikTok was showing how many rubber bands it took to split a watermelon."

— Mike Roberts, Harps Food Stores

Pinterest to inspire shoppers to buy more produce and makes it convenient, too. "For example, a social post might be stop-motion video of how to make a chicken and vegetable sheet pan dinner. The graphics are important, but to drive the consumer to purchase the fresh produce and other ingredients, retailers can create a destination URL in the post that directs their guests to their eComm page to shop the ingredients online."

THE POWER OF TIKTOK

The light, fun, genuine vibe of TikTok lends itself to recipes. Joolies joined with Los Angeles-based retailer Erewhon to market the company's Dancing Date Shake, with the dates as ingredients in-store and premade shakes available at the retailer's smoothie bar.

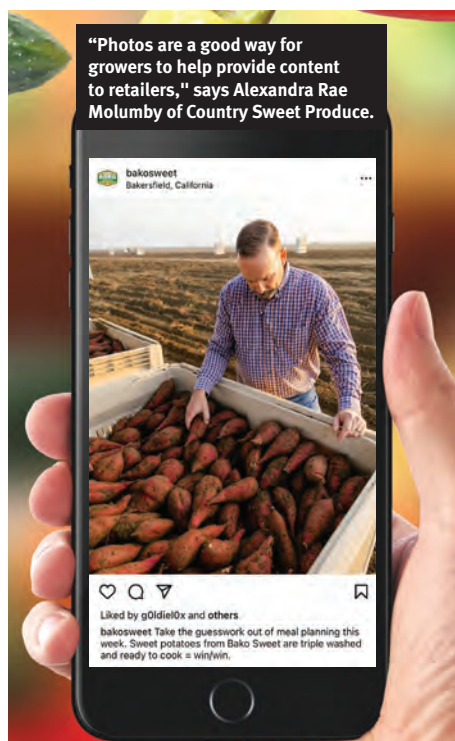
The Los Angeles, CA-headquartered Wonderful Company has invested in three TikTok channels to promote each of its main brands: citrus, pomegranates and pistachios.

"We've partnered with five epicurean influencers to showcase how to use and enjoy pomegranates and pomegranate juice, including how to open a fresh pomegranate without breaking any seeds, as well as the use of pomegranates on charcuterie platters," says Stacey Anker, director of marketing for POM Wonderful.

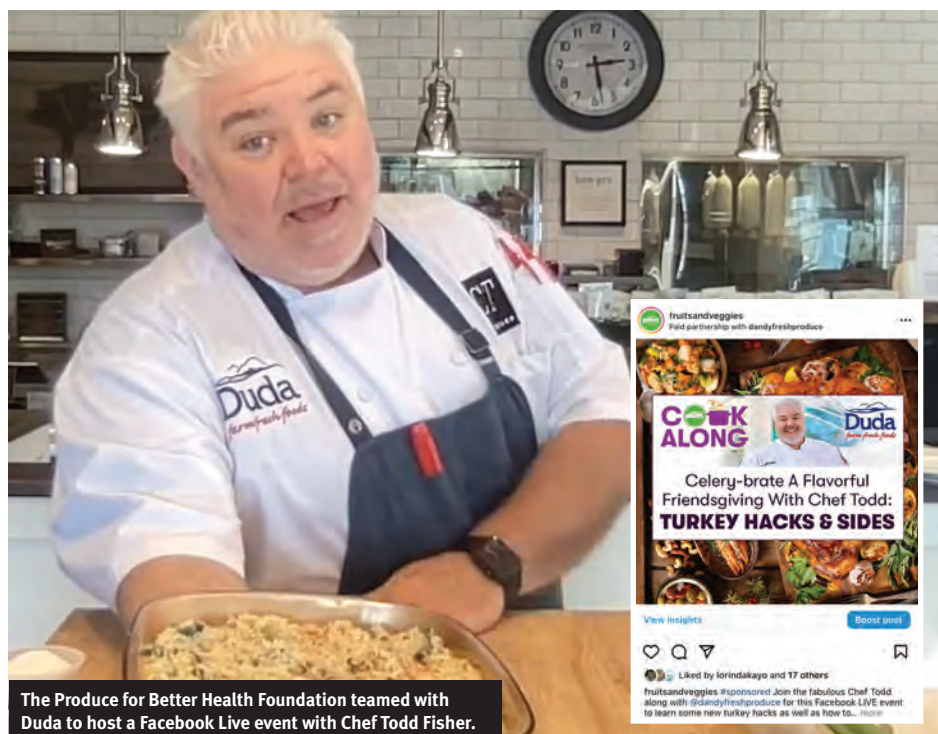
In July, Giant Food, in Landover, MD, created a TikTok channel for its Healthy Living Team of registered dietitians. Thu Huynh, MDA, RD, LDN, and Angela Parreco, RD, LDN, have upped the game on the use of this platform by reaching younger consumers with curated daily content targeted to a variety of topics. For example, there's the Local Produce Spotlight, where a video of product from a sweet corn grower in Delaware has garnered nearly a quarter million views; ditto the views with a mashed potato recipe video using Nature's Promise private label potatoes; and seasonally themed caramel apple bars with over half a million views.

"Social media is one of the deliverables we offer as part of an ad package to our vendor partners," says Huynh.

TikTok was a key channel the Healthy Family Project digital team used to show consumers how to build a Hocus Pocus Snack



"Photos are a good way for growers to help provide content to retailers," says Alexandra Rae Molumby of Country Sweet Produce.



The Produce for Better Health Foundation teamed with Duda to host a Facebook Live event with Chef Todd Fisher.

PHOTO COURTESY PRODUCE FOR BETTER HEALTH FOUNDATION

Board. The social media effort, which spanned the project's channels, tied into the excitement of the September 2022 release of the Disney Plus movie, *Hocus Pocus 2*. The snack board recipe called for blackberries and strawberries, red and green grapes, mandarins and celery sticks.

"We saw amazing engagement, with a social reach of 245,000, including 68,000 on TikTok alone. We also saw more than 1,300 shares across our channels, and the content drove over 43,000 visits to our website," says Trish James, vice president of the Healthy Family Project and chief marketing officer at Shuman Farms. "A majority of our content, including this board, features produce items."

PLATFORM CONSIDERATIONS

Like many produce brands and retailers, Coborn's Petersen likes to use multiple social media platforms to share similar messages. However, she adds, it's important to determine what is posted on which platform with a strategic mindset. A few key points Petersen considers before choosing the social media platform are: Who is the target audience? Is it more informational or inspirational/aspirational content being shared? What is the purpose of this content? (Inform consumers? Drive consumers to purchase online? Drive them to a recipe to browse?) What is the style of this content (i.e., video, static image, live, etc.)?

A good example is the retailer's Midwest Grown Local Produce campaign, she explains.

"We used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube to spread the love of local farmers

"Social media is one of the deliverables we offer as part of an ad package to our vendor partners."

—Thu Huynh, Giant Food

and connect our guests with these farming families to tell their stories. Although social media was a large component of this campaign, we did have an omnichannel marketing approach. All in all, we increased our produce sales of these local, Midwest-grown fresh produce items for all six weeks of this campaign over the prior year," says Petersen.

Another multi-faceted social media example on the supply side is Melissa's/World Variety Produce's strategic campaigns for its Hatch chile peppers.

"We love the excitement and engagement we've been able to bring to our retailers by producing Hatch chile roasting events at participating stores and leveraging our social platforms, as well as our customer's platforms, to educate shoppers and bring awareness to in-store events," says Nicholas Quintero, director of digital marketing at the Vernon, CA-based company.

"For example, we've seen three years straight of double-digit Hatch chile sales growth since we launched our Hatch at Home campaign (#HatchAtHome). Three of the social components included in 'Hatch at Home' are recipe contests, influencers and

targeted media. Part two of this example is that we're able to collect product reservations through lead forms, so shoppers can commit to buying product once it becomes available in-store."

STAYING IN FRONT

Just as 80% of sales are generated by 20% of products, the same is true for social media, says Fresh Innovations' Murray. "The 80-20 rule definitely applies. That is, 80% of your engagement will come from the 20% of tried-and-true platforms. However, social media is dynamic, and you've got to keep your ears to the ground and eyeballs open to see what new channels are bubbling up and trending."

Said another way, Melissa's Quintero says he dedicates 10 to 15% of his time each week to learning about new and emerging platforms. "When I see something outperforming or gaining traction, I'll allocate more time there to see if the hypothesis pans out."

No matter what platform, success for produce brands and retailers entails social listening. This is the key to understanding what shoppers want, where they are going to get it, and what gaps are in the market that needs to be filled, Quintero adds.

"Once we've listened and assessed the problems that shoppers are having, we're able to put solutions into play. Sometimes it's a cold DM (direct message) to shoppers letting them know where they can find the product. If you're doing it right, social media relationships are REAL relationships. You must be proactive in maintaining relationships by following through on commitments."

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