

Italian produce market faces huge challenge

Decade-long investigation into shopper behaviour yields useful guidance on ways to kickstart consumption growth

A ten-year study into the behaviour of Italian consumers in relation to fresh fruit and vegetables has yielded several interesting theories that its authors say could help turn around a recent significant decline in fresh produce consumption.

Compiled by Forlì-based Agroter – publisher of Fruitnet partner Italiafruit News – in collaboration with Ismea and Toluna, the publication ‘Think Fresh, I Consumi in Testa’ was unveiled in early June by Agroter’s marketing director Chiara Daltri in front of 400 industry players (including 60 retailers) at the Palazzo dei Congressi in Florence.

Based on 200,000 answers taken from interviews with around 13,000 individuals over the course of the past decade, what emerges from reading the report is a picture of a sector incontestably in decline.

From 2006, a “creeping” downturn in sales of fruit and vegetables in the country has removed 18 per cent of the sector’s revenue. Especially significant has been a 7 per cent fall in fresh fruit sales over the past five years alone.

Yes, there are categories bucking that trend – dried fruit, fresh-cut, organic – but the overall picture is worrying. What’s worse is that consumers don’t notice the decline. On the contrary, they believe they eat enough.

Mercifully, the report also argues that this sector can, and indeed must, do far more. But to engineer a reversal in fortunes a new direction is required, according to Think Fresh, a point on which various industry representatives involved in organised discussions during its Florence launch event were apparently in agreement.

Room for improvement

Key to reversing the consumption trend? Roberto Della Casa, managing director of Agroter, identified five factors: space (by which he meant the surface area of fresh produce departments is currently insufficient), wellbeing, service, performance and, as he put it, (in)formazione. The extraordinary stories behind fruit and vegetables needed to be explained better and more often.

“The sector’s problems,” Della Casa said, “are now common to all parts of the supply chain and can be attributed to economic factors: profitability is lacking from production

to retail, as is an ability to show and create value. Often, bad fruit and vegetables land on people's tables, while the good stuff is lost along the way."

Italians, for the past ten years, have been under the impression that they are buying the same amount of fresh produce when in fact they are buying less, he continued. What's worse, he added, they believe they are eating enough.

"Only by overcoming the gap between perception and reality can we seriously hope to reverse the negative trend. We have fantastic products, but we allow companies that produce supplements to steal our colours and values, we let the world of processing use fruit and vegetables to convey their ideas, while we squabble over the spare change."

For Giorgio Santambrogio, president of the Italian retailers' association Adm and the event's guest of honour, the "problem of a lack of value horizontally and along the supply chain" was clear to see and required a united response.

"We have to start selling together again," he proposed. "Retailers need producers that create stories we can tell and help ensure we are creating a feeling of empathy with fresh fruit and vegetables, rather than overcrowding the market and entering the e-commerce domain. In short, we have to recreate the pleasure of shopping."

Source : <http://www.fruitnet.com/eurofruit/article/169051/italian-fresh-produce-market-facing-huge-challenge>