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Mango board turns five years old



As it turns five years old this year, its task of educating the U.S. consumer goes on, perhaps with more vigor than ever, according to the National Mango Board.

The Orlando, Fla.-based board, formed in 2005 and active since 2006, has spent all of its time spreading the word about a fruit that remains unfamiliar to many U.S. produce consumers.

"A couple of things, I think, are key to developing markets," said William Watson, the board's first and only executive director, who moved to the mango board from a similar position at the Orlando-based National Watermelon Promotion Board.

"One is benchmarking. Now, we have the ability to talk to a thousand consumers every 30 days, why they buy mangoes, why they don't."

Watson acknowledges that, even several years into the mango board's marketing activities, consumers who remain unfamiliar with mangoes still far outnumber those who are.

"The consumer panel gives us the ability to really benchmark our progress," he said.

The board has a panel of representatives who communicate with consumers every month, to track the consumers' knowledge about mangoes, Watson said.

"The demographics of the panel are the same as the country," he said. "So, theoretically, we're talking to 1,000 consumers every 30 days. This gives us a chance to understand what's going on in the consumer's mind. We're going to be able to pinpoint and react quicker. The industry never had a tool like this."

Technology gives the board unprecedented access to information about consumers' purchasing trends, Watson noted.

"We put together a set of questions and they roll the questions out and we evaluate their responses," he said, comparing it to a survey.

The board has other marketing strategies focused on educating the public about a multifaceted fruit, Watson said.

"This year we had point-of-sale material that highlighted green-skinned mangoes and yellow-skinned mangoes," he said.

Watson said his experience with the watermelon board, which had its own hurdles and occasional consumer misperceptions to handle, has served him well in the mango business.

“The ability to make changes in their infrastructure to meet consumer demand,” he said. “That’s cut mangoes and cut watermelon. I remember when I was with the watermelon board, there was a segment of the industry that did not want to support cut watermelons. It was the board’s responsibility to make them understand there was a whole segment that would eat only cut watermelons.”

Shippers note that the board has come a long way in five years.

“My wish was that we could have something like them in the European market,” said Flavio Muranaka, owner of Amexport, Petrolina, Brazil. “I think that they are (doing) a great job. Mangoes are now more and more known in U.S., and the benefits of mangoes to the health are more and more researched.”

Tony Godinez, owner of Godinez International LLC and Fresh Ripe LLC in Hidalgo, Texas, said the results of the board’s work are evident across the country.

“I think without question, there’s been a very positive impact from the efforts of the mango board,” he said. “It’s hard to go into restaurants without finding something related to mangoes on menus. Across the board, f.o.b. prices are generally higher. A lot of that is directly related to the ongoing efforts of the mango board.”

“We’re actively involved with both government and independent research labs to find out some of the benefits of mangoes,” said Larry Nienkerk, board chairman who also is partner and general manager of Burlingame, Calif.-based shipper Splendid Products LLC.