

Reciprocal RETAILING

Fruit Center Marketplace suppliers are also its customers, and vice versa.

By Joseph Tarnowski



FCM'S THREE PILLARS

Running Fruit Center Marketplace's (FCM) operations are (from left) General Manager Steve DiGiusto and brothers Michael and Mark Mignosa, who manage the Milton and Hingham, Mass., stores respectively, and co-own the company with their father, Don.



The firewood displayed just outside the entrance of Fruit Center Marketplace's Milton, Mass., store is sourced from Eagle Farms, a retailer that sells lawn and garden products and seasonal items from a store just a couple of miles away. In addition to mulch, trellises and bird baths, Eagle Farms sells fresh produce, which comes from — you guessed it — Fruit Center Marketplace.

The owner of Eagle Farms is a regular grocery customer of the Milton-based two-store independent grocer, and through regular conversations with Fruit Center Marketplace management, he became a supplier

and a business customer as well.

Such symbiotic relationships are a common occurrence among Fruit Center Marketplace, its shoppers and local business owners — and these shoppers and business owners are often one and the same. And because of these relationships, the grocer's two stores (the other is in Hingham, Mass.) are tightly interwoven into the fabric of the communities in which they serve.

"My dad always said that no matter how big you get, you should always run the business like you are the corner store," says Michael Mignosa, who manages the Milton store. His brother, Mark, manages the Hingham

store, and both are co-owners along with their father, Don, who started the company 41 years ago. "Because we are so entrenched in the community, we know our customers by name and we have built relationships over the years with them, as well as their families — their parents, their children. It's not unusual to have a couple of generations of a family shopping the store at the same time."

In cases where these customers own businesses that require fresh produce, such as Eagle Farms or some of the local restaurants, chances are it's Fruit Center Marketplace that supplies it.

What it boils down to is Fruit Center Marketplace's goal of serving the community in any way it can. General Manager Steve DiGiusto, who's been with the company since 1976, says that Fruit Center Marketplace wants shoppers to be blown away by the high level of customer service provided, and inspired by the quality and selection of products and displays. He also wants shoppers to be able to stand anywhere



in the store and be surrounded by beautiful colors, products and smells.

And the architecture of the Milton store, which PGI visited, is beautiful. The Mignosas own the building that hosts the Milton Marketplace, which includes the grocery store as well as a few other retailers, including a CVS. It's a historic building that used to house a stone shed where granite blocks were dressed for industrial, decorative or commemorative purposes. Fruit Center Marketplace has its administrative offices across the street from the Milton store.



Empowered Associates

Employees at the stores are charged with doing whatever is necessary to take care of shoppers. “For example, a customer at our Hingham store asked our produce supervisor if she could buy some loose clementines,” says DiGiusto. “Without a second thought, he tore open a bag and dumped the clementines out for her to choose from. She told him that she was recently at a chain and they had refused to do that for her. We do these kinds of things all the time. If a senior citizen comes in — or anybody, for that matter — and they want us to chop up turnips for them because it’s hard for them to do it, not a problem. Can we cut a cabbage in half? Absolutely! We’ll do anything within reason to satisfy one of our customers, and our employees are empowered to do the same.”

Not surprisingly, DiGiusto and the Mignosas are very hands-on with the business, and ready to jump in at a moment’s notice to help associates with any task. After all, both Mark



and Michael Mignosa grew up in the grocery business, taking early truck rides to the market with their dad when he picked up produce, loading and unloading the truck, and often sweeping floors. “I must have swept the floor a million times,” says Mark. “We’ve done everything from the ground up, and both Michael and I have worked in every position in the store. As kids, it was our high school job, and we worked as produce trimmers in the back-room prep, baggers — we’ve worked from the bottom up in every department of the store.”

Both have been in the business full-time since the 1990s. “The more I’ve been involved, the more I appreciate what we really do here and the

FRESH FOOD, FRESH FACES

Fruit Center Marketplace is known for its fresh food — whether it be produce, meat and seafood, or its 48-foot salad bar — and its happy associates, who have voted the grocer onto the *Boston Globe’s* “Top Places to Work” list.

positive impact that we have on the community and on people in general,” says Michael. This appreciation resonates among all of the associates, and is likely a contributor to the company’s being listed among the *Boston Globe’s* “Top Places to Work” in the midsize business category for the past two years.

Local Flavor

Fruit Center Marketplace works with many local suppliers — and when it says local, it often means local to each store. Indeed, each store has a host of suppliers that are unique to that location. For coffee, the Milton store sells the Flat Black brand from nearby Dorchester, while the Hingham store

sells Red Eye Roast, and is the only retail location to stock the brand.

Each store also has its own candy supplier, and in this category, shoppers are highly supportive of the local brand. “The Milton store is supplied by Phillips Candy in Upper Dorchester, and the brand does very well in that store,” says Michael. “However, we tried them at our Hingham location, and they don’t sell well there at all.”

In season, the stores receive a continual stream of deliveries from local farms, dropping off produce that was just picked that morning. “We pick up as much local produce as we can in season,” says DiGiusto, who in addition to being general manager is also the grocer’s produce buyer. “Unfortunately, the seasons are very short here in Massachusetts.”

Fruit Center Marketplace’s meat and seafood departments put a new

SURROUNDED BY COLOR
The produce and candy displays are examples of Fruit Center Marketplace’s artful merchandising.

spin on local, as the grocer actually brings in local businesses to run the department on its behalf. “The meat department in the Milton store, for example, is run by Kinnealey’s Quality Meats, a local meat wholesaler, and this is their only retail location,” says Michael. “They supply many of the restaurants in the area and lease the space from us. This allows us to offer very high-quality meats without having to be in the meat business.”

The same goes for seafood, which is run by Rocky Neck Fish, a wholesaler that specializes in day-boat fish, and serves both the Milton and Hingham stores.

Fruit Center Marketplace is par-



ticularly well known for its prepared foods, which are made very locally — in the larger of two kitchens on the second floor of the Milton store, which serves as a commissary for both locations (the smaller one services the Marketplace Café). That’s where the fare is prepared for the Milton store’s 48-foot salad bar, as well as the 10 varieties of soup that are available each day in the display across from it. Prepared meals range from staples such as chicken parmesan and spaghetti and meatballs to chicken pot pie. Quiche is a huge seller as well, and the grocer is always trying something new, says Mark.

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The store also features a gourmet and specialty food section that includes an olive bar, a cheese island, baked items, and Italian and other ethnic specialties. Capping off this section is the store's wine department, which is merchandised to give shoppers the feeling that they're in a wine shop. "When we started getting into the wine business about 18 years ago, we studied a lot of wine shops and how they merchandised their stores," says Michael. "Based on that research, we put together a department that works very well with the small amount of square footage we had available."

The department actually benefits from the tight space, according to Michael. "Because of the small footprint, we have to be very selective about what we carry," he says. "The upside is, you can put your hands on any bottle of our wine — from a \$10 bottle to a \$90

bottle — and it will be a great wine. We don't have the space to carry anything but the best. That carries throughout the store."

Fine Dining

The in-store Marketplace Café at the Milton location is open for breakfast and lunch every day, and features a jazz duo each weekend for Sunday brunch. This is also the place where the interconnection of Fruit Center Marketplace, its suppliers and customers — both consumer and business — is really evident, particularly during events such as wine tastings, cooking classes, and demonstrations from local restaurant chefs. The Marketplace chef is no slouch, either: Tim Paulus, the wine department manager,

'We'll do anything within reason to satisfy one of our customers, and our employees are empowered to do the same.'

—Steve DiGiusto, general manager, Fruit Center Marketplace

who is also a Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, hosts — and cooks for — Fruit Center Marketplace's monthly wine tastings.

The store's location is ideal for such events. Milton is a bedroom community, home to young professionals, and there's not much else in the way of retail traffic outside of the stores in the Market Center building, so there's a great deal of walk-in traffic. The location also sees customers from Boston, because it's right off the expressway. Many folks use the café events as their evening out.

For the monthly wine-tasting classes, Paulus prepares a multicourse meal for guests, and teaches them how to pair wines with each one. "He re-

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ally goes above and beyond and creates some unique delicacies for the group,” says Mark. “The [last] event featured was six courses and had about nine wines, all for just \$50. When we have these tastings, many couples plan it as their weekend activity. They come in, learn a few things about wine pairing and eat some great food — all of it pulled from the store downstairs, so it also helps promote the quality of our products.”

Last year, for its 40th anniversary, Fruit Center Marketplace hosted a Local Chefs Series, which consisted of several hour-long cooking demonstrations and tastings from top restaurant chefs in the area.

The wine tastings and other events are promoted through the grocer’s website and monthly newsletter, but have become so popular that they usually sell out before the newsletter arrives in customers’ inboxes. “People are actually asking for them now,” says Michael. “For example we do a yearly class with a guy from California, and a month before the classes are held, everyone is asking us for the date. It sells out before we can even post it.”

Shopper Feedback

While this kind of response obviously shows that the folks at Fruit Center Marketplace have hit a grand slam with the Marketplace Café events, they’re also highly solicitous of shopper feedback, whether it takes the form of anecdotal comments made in the store or more formal comments from an annual customer survey the grocer conducts.

“The beauty of having the size stores that we do and the close relationships with our customers is that we get a lot of regular feedback,” says Mark. “They are well educated in food, and they help us to stay on course with our existing offerings and advise us on new items to bring in.”

The formal customer survey includes anonymous responses, which Fruit Center Marketplace feels are more accurate, especially if they’re negative. DiGiusto and both brothers pour through the responses, looking for patterns.

“The beauty of the formal survey is that when you start to see patterns, where some of the same issues come up three, four or five times, then you know

it’s something important,” says DiGiusto. “If it’s a positive comment, then you have a winner, and if it’s negative that comes up that many times, it’s something that we need to address immediately. And it’s so nice to have it written in book form, which is easy to reference.”

It also serves as a wish list that provides ideas for new offerings. “The survey is one of the drivers behind us getting more competitive in our grocery department,” says Michael. “Customers were shopping here for fresh items and our produce, and then they would go to a traditional supermarket for their grocery items. We want them to shop for both of them here, so we are getting a little more competitive in that area.”

One thing you definitely don’t need a survey to measure at Fruit Center Marketplace is passion for the business — that’s immediately obvious by the smile on everyone’s face. **PGI**

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