Editorial

Apple Industry Evolves to Meet Market, Environmental, and Regulatory Challenges Through Science

I grew up visiting my grandparents’ farm every weekend and listening to my grandfather talk about his crops and livestock. One thing that has always stuck with me was his resilience and his ability to adapt when things became challenging. Now, in my position as executive director of the Michigan Apple Committee, I see the same resilience and the embracing of change in the apple growers I work for.

There are so many new and exciting things happening in the apple industry and they are all about investing for the future. First are the renewed investments in our land grant university, Michigan State University. Growers in our state are committed to being vested partners with the university in making our state research stations centers of excellence. New and ground-breaking research is taking place at these stations, in part because of the monetary investment of 32 cents per bin our growers have made.

Second, supporting current staff and courting new and excellent researchers and extension educators working on behalf of those land grant universities is vital. Directing the industry needs into research can be challenging at times. Our industry has the possibility of endless projects and very limited resources. This is why it is so important to maintain the researchers that are doing a great job of finding multiple funding sources, and we need those extension educators that tirelessly try to incorporate that research on the farms.

Science is driving everything – varietal improvements, technology, consumer trends, and on and on. Science, whether good or bad, is influencing consumers daily on social media platforms. Like it or not, this is where consumers get their information, and dispelling incorrect information can be challenging. The need for continued research and extension work will be invaluable going forward, as they are the “experts” and have the credibility we need to answer those questions from consumers. Who knew the science helping you grow a great product would also be what consumers want or need to hear about?

Apple consumption continues to rise, and retailers are responding with increased display space and marketing programs, during harvest and beyond. Researchers and extension educators who provide us with scientific information that we can use to engage with consumers are invaluable. Conversations online, in the media, and face-to-face that are backed by facts allow us to continue to encourage consumption of apples.

Looking ahead, we see that new challenges await. More stringent state and federal regulations, trade issues and, of course, labor, will continue to present new obstacles for the industry to overcome. I am inspired by growers, industry leaders and researchers across the country and across the globe who are already seeking ways to address these challenges.

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COVER: Red-fleshed apple cultivars under evaluation for production in the Great Lakes region
The ability to adapt to changes from the growing, harvesting, packing, regulatory and marketing standpoints will continue to be the key to success of the produce industry. The only constant is change, and I am confident that the industry is well equipped to face the challenges and advances to come.

Diane Smith
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