

PREVOR'S PERSPECTIVE NOT SO PERISHABLE



American journalist **Jim Prevor**, aka the internet's very own Perishable Pundit, offers the US and global produce sector daily insight into the mechanisms of the Stateside fruit and veg industry. He gives **Laura Gould** the lowdown on events across the pond



Perishable
Pundit
Jim
Prevor

How did you end up as the Perishable Pundit?

My family had a produce business in Russia for many generations. My great-grandfather, Jacob Prevor, left Russia and emigrated to Brooklyn, New York, where he opened a wholesale business on the old Wallabout produce market.

My grandfather, Harry Prevor, continued the family business on the old Washington Street market in Manhattan, where he was a wholesaler and an auction buyer. He was a real industry leader and for many years was the president of the Auction Buyers' Association.

My father, Michael Prevor, along with my uncles, Sydney and William Prevor, brought the business to its glory days. We had a wholesale facility on the Hunts Point Market. The bulk of our business was import – mostly from Chile and the Caribbean Basin – and export – mostly to Europe and the Caribbean Basin. But there was hardly a country or a produce item we did not deal with at some time.

My family sold the company to Polly Peck, and when Polly Peck fell into trouble in the UK, we bought back the company and eventually resold it in small pieces.

I learned the business around the dining room table. My father, now

great strategic issues of the trade. For more than 20 years, we have produced the largest and most respected magazine in the American trade. Eventually, we diversified into other food-related fields, with the launch of publications such as *Deli Business* magazine.

We had been studying the internet for more than 15 years, but we never wanted to just put the magazines on the web; we wanted to use the medium in a way that would add value to the trade. So in August 2006, we launched *PerishablePundit.com* as a free daily newsletter for the industry. It was almost instantly picked up around the world and so, over two decades in produce journalism, I suddenly became an overnight sensation.

What do you think are the key differences between the UK and US produce industries?

The two big differences are the degree of alignment between produce vendors and the multiples, and the scale and scope of the trade in the US.

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retired, was remarkably open to new ideas. At various times my family operated supermarkets, convenience stores, a restaurant chain, a farm, and plenty of other things. I was fortunate to be exposed to a remarkably diverse assortment of related businesses.

In 1985, I launched *Produce Business* magazine with my friend,

reveals a degree of integration between supplier and retailer that is exceedingly rare in the US industry. If Kroger or Safeway were opening in the UK, I doubt they would feel the need to bring their fresh-cut/processed produce vendors along.

As a result, vendors in the UK are far more willing to invest to serve the specific needs of a client, which

its own set of challenges.

Despite our shared cultural heritage and close relations, comparisons of the industry in the UK and the US are somewhat problematic. The UK population is a little over 60 million people, of which roughly 85 per cent live in England, as opposed to more than 300m people in the US.

Perhaps even more differentiating than total population is density. The UK has around 246 people per kilometre, and this figure is much higher still in England; the US has a population density of only 31 people per km, spread across the whole country. This significantly alters distribution issues, merchandising issues, retail sales velocity and much more. If Tesco struggles in the US, look to density as a key culprit.

But at the same time, produce people share a bond all around the world. The perishable nature of the item attracts people with a quick mind, a willingness to work all hours and, by and large, a high ethical standard that encourages repeat business.

Are there opportunities for our two industries to work together more closely and learn from each other?

There are always opportunities to learn, and when we share a common language it makes things easy. And a lot of informal learning does go on. I am often asked to prepare lists of American stores for visitors from the UK to visit. Americans from the produce industry visiting London are always salivating over the prepared food offerings, innovative packaging and the international scope of the produce.

More formal ties are not as

because the UK trade has strong industry institutions of its own and does not look to US institutions for leadership or ideas.

It is interesting to note that though the population of Australia is only a third that of the UK, there will be many more Australians at the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) convention this October than there will be representatives from the UK. There is probably no interest in the UK in a country council such as PMA set up this year in Australia and New Zealand. There is, thankfully, sufficient interest to keep a fair number of people in the UK reading the Pundit every day – so we are appreciative for that opportunity to build connections across the pond.

How has the US industry reacted to the E.coli spinach outbreak of 2006? Is food safety much higher on the agenda nowadays?

What really made the spinach crisis of the fall of 2006 unique was that, for the first time on a major commodity, a branch of the US government advised consumers not to eat a commodity, regardless of where it was produced, who produced it, etc. Since no reputable retailer will sell a product the government is advising consumers not to eat, it constituted a de facto recall.

That the US government felt compelled to do that smacked, primarily, of a lack of regulatory confidence in the industry. We have made many strides in regaining that confidence and, as such, total disasters are far less likely today. However, the basic fact is that post 9/11, the US government has invested in various detection

pathogens will be discovered, from time to time, on field-grown crops. Combine this fact with a zero-tolerance policy for such pathogens on fresh food that is not intended to be cooked, and the industry still has a problem to deal with.

What do you see as the key challenges facing the US produce industry?

Food safety is not going away and immigration is a quandary. If we cannot get immigrants to harvest and pack crops, then the industry will have to change.

Irradiation is opening the US market to countries and products that could never ship to America before, and China is a wild card. Despite recent concerns with quality control and food safety on product from China, it is a safe bet that it will grow its exports substantially. Even if exports do not go directly to the US, they may supplant US exports to important markets such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. Of course, as China grows wealthier, a rich upper and middle class may also enjoy imported American products.

But on the plus side, the obesity issue will rebound in favor of the industry as it places the focus on healthy eating. We can expect school lunch programmes to incorporate more produce, more school snack programmes featuring produce, and we can expect restaurant menus to include more produce items. Hollywood is trying to align itself with the angels on this issue by getting its cartoon characters on fresh produce, and retailers want to be seen as contributing to a healthy lifestyle.

What does the produce industry need to do to increase sales and keep consumers coming back for more?

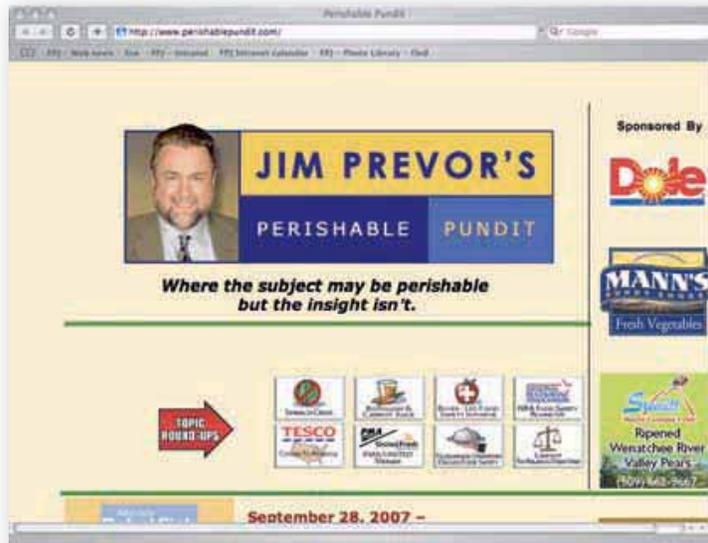
It is always the same; we have to serve the consumer. This is hard to do, because in so many cases, we wind up being focused on serving the retailer, which is not always the

and crisps are sold, fresh produce is available as well.

Secondly, we can continue to align with the health authorities and market the fact that produce is one of the very few foods that experts urge consumers to eat more of.

Thirdly, and in my assessment most substantially, we need new products. I know it is a big issue right now in the UK, but I have to suspect that 100 years from now, there will be scarcely any commercial food crop grown that is not genetically modified.

Conventional hybrid proprietary produce items, such as those developed by Sun World – which has focused on grapes and tree fruit – or Syngenta, and other companies that have developed mini melons, are moving in the right direction.



These products are being developed to delight consumers.

But this process can be accelerated a thousand-fold with genetic modification. We will have better tasting items; we will have “nutraceuticals” that can really help people avoid specific ailments; and we can increase yield and use what we think of today as unusable land.

Some new products will be created by the fresh-cut industry, and some will come from imports being allowed from previously prohibited places, but it is in breeding – especially through the use of biotechnology – that the quantum leaps will take place.

One of the big issues is that the foods considered most healthy for children often have a bitter taste and are not frequently eaten by youngsters. With aggressive breeding, we can change that taste profile, while maintaining the nutritional base.

Consumers repeat buy product

packaging and distribution schemes – but breeding will be crucial.

To what extent do organisations like United Fresh Produce Association and PMA really help the US industry?

There are many specific jobs that the associations handle: lobbying for legislation, advising and monitoring regulatory agencies, executive education, leadership development and so forth.

Beyond all this, though, it is, as I mentioned, a big industry in the US. Many substantial players do not do business together and do not know each other, or would not know each other if our national associations did not exist to provide a place and a reason to talk.

Besides, you

cannot understand Americans without understanding our penchant for forming associations. If your readers are looking for airplane reading on a voyage across the Atlantic, the best single guide to understanding Americans was written by a Frenchman in 1835. In his

book *Democracy in America*, Alexis De Tocqueville explains the relationship between Americans and associations: “The political associations that exist in the US are only a single feature in the midst of the immense assemblage of associations in that country.

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds. Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools.

“If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new

What is next for the Perishable Pundit – do you have plans to expand the site?

As a service to the industry, we are launching a free industry employment site called *PunditJobs.com*. We are asked for leads on jobs and employment every day, and this will institutionalise that process.

Besides, we depend on the excellence of the executive corps of the produce industry and want to do all we can to enhance and maintain that quality.

The motto of our company since its founding 22 years ago has been “initiating industry improvement”. If we feel we can be helpful and advance the trade, we will expand. If we cannot, we have a bully pulpit right now. ○

UP CLOSE

○ AGE

I am 46 years old – but the junior Pundits are only four and five years old, so I run with a young crowd and feel quite energetic.

○ FIRST JOB IN INDUSTRY

As a boy helping customers at our supermarket in New Jersey. Everyone in the industry should have to deal with consumers at some point in their career. As a teenager I then worked on Hunts Point, down in the warehouse – everyone in the industry should work on a terminal market at some point as well. My first produce job as an adult was as export director for my family’s produce company.

○ FAVOURITE VEGETABLE

A green salad with all the veggies on top.

○ FAVOURITE FRUIT

A fruit salad.

○ CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Seeing the first issue of *Produce Business*, being the first person ever to be named Member of the Year by United, winning the Jesse H. Neal award, being published in *The Wall Street Journal* and seeing the *Pundit* read in more than 100 countries around the world.

○ OUTSIDE INTERESTS

I have a pretty busy life. Beyond work, I just like to spend time with my wife Debbie, my boys William and Matthew, my extended family and good friends. I love cooking and eating and discussing politics, and know I need to exercise. I volunteer at my children’s school and my family’s synagogue and, on a pro bono basis, give many speeches across the US to college and university students regarding