

# GOOD FRUIT GROWER



## Brandt: Global brands offer value

The enduring success of Pink Lady shows why critical mass matters for fruit branding.

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As the Washington apple industry moved from a sales model that depended on brokers and wholesalers to forming direct relationships with the retail trade, apple companies and their sales teams sought new ways to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

In the 1980s, that meant encouraging their grower base to plant “new” varieties such as Gala, Fuji and Braeburn. Having something on your inventory that your neighbor couldn’t provide meant you had a better chance of securing market share.

In the 1990s, this idea took a giant step forward when I introduced the concept of trademarking and branding a new apple cultivar with the Pink Lady, the brand for the cultivar Cripps Pink.

In this innovative system, licenses were employed to communicate and regulate the conditions surrounding the use of the trademark, with the goal of protecting the cultivar from infringement and producing a consistent product no matter where in the world it was grown. Branding the fruit produced on those patented trees under a unified trade name in the marketplace would extend a brand promise to the consumer that they could come to recognize and to trust.

Blazing this trail did not come without its difficulties and hiccups as we figured out exactly what it meant to be a “branded apple” and to educate the trade of its potential value. Now, as we look back over 20 years of experience with Pink Lady, our industry can examine those successes and failures for guidance as to what factors are key to set up a branded apple program for long-term success.

In my opinion, one of the most important of these factors is critical mass. Brands exist as relationships consumers have with products, and consumers can’t build those relationships with apple brands that pop up at the store for a few weeks and never return. Especially in turbulent times, as illustrated in the current pandemic, consumers turn to brands they know because they trust them to be reliable.

Exposure and reliable quality build those relationships. How much exposure (also known as volume) do consumers need? We don't know, but we know it's significant, and small programs can't do that except in a targeted niche.

Open any industry magazine or newsletter today and you are greeted with colorful advertisements informing the reader about the latest apple brand on the market. As more of these new cultivars are introduced, the “commodity apples” — the cornerstones of the category that the Washington apple industry built its reputation on — fade further into the shadows and further from the mind of the consumer.

To keep that precious retail shelf space from ending up in the hands of another fruit or vegetable, it is important that our industry replaces poor-performing commodity apples with options that appeal to today's consumers. It is the pull from the consumer that infuses the money back into our value chain.

We know that global brands can build success and sales. For over two decades, Pink Lady has enjoyed steady and continued growth in every market it is sold in, consistently providing some of the highest bin returns to growers of any other brand or variety, and enjoying respect and value worldwide.

Now, we have the template and we are applying it to other cultivars, including Cosmic Crisp. We need to continue to support and invest in systems to enable apple industries to work together globally for the success of all. •

—by *Lynnell Brandt*

*Lynnell Brandt is the president of Pink Lady America, Brandt's Fruit Trees and Proprietary Variety Management, the commercialization company contracted by Washington State University to manage the Cosmic Crisp and other apple varieties.*

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