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Village Farms responds to changes in consumer purchase behavior

By Christina DiMartino

Helen L. Aquino, marketing manager for Village Farms LP in Eatontown, NJ, said that the produce industry has not been immune to the far-reaching effects of the current economy.

"Consumers are responding, which is apparent in their purchasing behaviors," she said. "We have observed and responded to two consumer trends over the past 12 months. Consumers are leaning toward value and they want every-day low pricing, but not at the risk of sacrificing quality, taste, flavor or freshness. The other trend is consumers preparing more meals at home, due likely to the costs associated with eating out and in an effort to make the most of family food budgets."

She added that both trends have fostered a savvy consumer that is interested in finding unique, fresh items for making healthy meals at home that are quick, easy and fun.

"Consumers are also interested in understanding everything there is to know about their food — where it is coming from and how it is being grown," Ms. Aquino said. "They are also interested in shopping locally, and they want to know their farmers. This consumer is more of a 'foodie' in nature."

Village Farms has responded to these trends by increasing its value-added line and by adding larger pack sizes to its more popular products. "These products are especially popular with our club customers, but we are seeing more of our main-



A display of Village Farms' tomatoes at retail.

stream grocery business also starting to carry the larger pack sizes," she said. "This is because people are trying to reduce their trips to the grocery store to save

the environmental friendliness of our growing methods and provides consumers with nutritional information on our products, along with interesting recipes that are quick and easy to prepare."

The company is developing monthly newsletters for its customers and consumers. All of these social channels aid in the information exchange regarding what the company is and what it does, while simultaneously providing transparency in a perfect venue to tell its story.

Ms. Aquino said that Village Farms will launch several exclusive and unique varieties in the coming months that will appeal to consumers looking for high-quality products and unique flavors.

"These are exciting times for the overall produce business because even in a value economy, there is no substitute for fresh. And with our nation's focus on wellness, fruits and vegetables are becoming a larger percent-



(Above and below) Tomatoes in boxes following harvest in one of Village Farms' greenhouses.



age of the average consumer diet," she said. "As a greenhouse producer, we are well positioned to meet the needs of our customers and consumers by providing value all along the supply chain."

Among the items currently being produced in the company's greenhouses are tomatoes-on-the-vine in red, yellow and orange; Beefsteak and Roma tomatoes; cocktail tomatoes such as Campari, cherries and grapes; sweet bell peppers

in red, yellow and orange; and long English and miniature cucumber varieties.

Village Farms has added to its marketing team with the January hiring of Debi Street, who "is now responsible for innovation and development," said Ms. Aquino. Describing Ms. Street as having "been in the produce business most of her life," Ms. Aquino said, "Debi's combination of experience in the produce business will be a strong asset for our company."

