

# TEAMWORK

makes the dream work



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**Farmers find success with third parties able to assist with market research and consumer insights.**

BY TREVOR BACQUE

Any good horticulturist must admit an upper hand in the marketplace would be a net benefit to their business. However, finding such advantages may prove elusive at times. How does one know if the flavour profile of their fruit will match with consumer preferences? Or how will the visual appearance of a vegetable resonate with shoppers in the grocery store?

Farmers can always wing it, opting for gut instinct and trust that they know consumers and their preferences. Or, farmers could leave the heavy lifting to professionals who

make it their business to assist others where they cannot due to time, ability, or both.

Vineland Research and Innovation Centre [Vineland] is one such group. The centre, stationed in Vineland, Ont., is a non-profit organization with an eligible Research Institute designation from the federal government. The Centre helps farming groups and farmers of all kinds achieve their goals, whether a person is curious about robotics and automation, applied genomics, production systems or even consumer insights.

ABOVE

**From left to right: David Ly, research technician, Consumer Insights, Amy Bowen, director, Consumer Insights and Amy Blake, senior research technician, Consumer Insights, discuss the many different characteristics of tomatoes at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.**

That last category has driven market-oriented data to individual farmers and farming groups for the last six years, according to Vineland's Amy Bowen, director of the Consumer Insights program.

The process is quite linear and customizable to suit the needs of clients: simply bring a question to be answered and Vineland will jump on it.

"We would work with them to try and understand what they're trying to achieve and create a research plan to address that question," says Bowen of Vineland's process.

The question could be as simple as: will this variety do well in a particular marketplace? It could also be as complex and challenging as: recommend us a top-selling fruit variety to grow that will be loved by consumers across Canada.

Projects can be concluded in as little as four to six weeks and cost \$1,000 or it may stretch on for multiple years and easily jump into \$100,000-plus territory.

As Bowen sees it, the financial investment all depends on what a person's or group's goals are. It also helps to have an outside voice since everyone sees their own products with rose-coloured glasses, to a degree.

"Whether you are aware of it or not, you're biased and you're putting your own spin on any evaluations you are doing," she says. "We're a third party outside of that direct space even though it's in horticulture. We're going to be providing an objective view of it."

To give those first-hand consumer insights, Vineland has a small army of people it enlists for such honest opinions. This group of people from the general population is accepted into Vineland's ranks based on their ability to identify unique flavours and aromas and rank their intensity and how they differ within food. Despite not everyone being foodies - although some certainly are - everyone is put through a training regimen that is ongoing throughout the year.

Other popular services include understanding a certain market or region and those consumers' demographics and other 'liking' drivers.

Clients can also learn about the literal guts of their products, too, thanks to Vineland's statistical and instrumental analysis services.

Bowen admits consumer insights are important, but so is knowing statistical information about products. Whether you

want to know about the thickness of a grape's skin or sugar content in an apple, Vineland can help. It's a team effort with a diverse staff of 100-plus all interested in food, but with vastly different educational backgrounds, including plant physiology, psychology, neuroscience, biology and flavour chemistry.

"That's what you need," she says. "We all come with that science background, and that helps us understand the plant biology and physiology, and how it relates [to consumer preferences]."

#### FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

One group that believes Vineland can help them with its goals is the Ontario Fresh Grape Growers' Marketing Board (OFGG). The organization, which represents 90 farmers, initially contracted Vineland in 2017 to help it scout potential new, commercially viable grape varieties. While working with Vineland, the group also asked Vineland to engage its Consumer Insights panel to get real people's feedback on what grapes they preferred and why. From there, the two projects began to form a real synergy.

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out and find varieties that will grow out in our climate and consumers will want," says David Hipple, OFGG chair and grape farmer in Beamsville, Ont.

So far, OFGG has learned about its grapes' sugars, acids, sugar-to-acidity ratio, skin thickness and more, and used that as a benchmark to finding the new "it" grape, according to Hipple.

Three years into their multi-year project, he and his group regularly communicate with Vineland, calling the research group enthusiastic in its approach, making the whole project enjoyable.

OFGG had its own designs of what grapes could be top performers, but having Vineland's research to substantiate their gut instincts made a world of difference.

"It was more a validation to us that what we were seeing as a board and growers - the qualities we liked and qualities we thought the consumers would like - were validated," he says. The one grape that shined to us early on was the one that came out on top in this report. It helped us say yes."

The Consumer Insights panel studied multiple grapes' visual appearance and conducted blind taste tests. Through the process, OFGG members had a key learning moment which was that taste supersedes everything. Since this hidden-in-plain-sight finding was revealed, the group has stepped up its ability for consumers to access grapes in store.

"Maybe it surprised me that taste is so high and it doesn't matter what it looks like," Hipple says. "If it looks good, that's great, but you want people to come back again and the taste is what is going to bring them back for the second purchase. We've always done a little bit of in-store testing, but now it seems we do it as part of our regular marketing schedule."

The Board continues its quest to find a new green grape for the 'fresh' market since it's the top seller and Vineland continues to be integral in that search. They have narrowed down a blue grape and the hunt continues for a new red-skinned option.

Hipple believes that even though the project isn't complete, there certainly is value to enlisting outside help to raise his farm's opportunities and that of others.

"There's so much work that a grower doesn't necessarily have time to do in season," he says. "I don't have [time to take] grapes to run around to grocery stores and say, 'hey, do you like these?' Having someone that's capable and willing and structured to do it is especially an asset."

Such sentiment is music to Bowen's ears back at Vineland, where she and her team always aim to bring tangible results to clients.

"We don't want to be doing research for the sake of research," she says. "We want to do it to see the varieties out in the market, make automated processes, help make value-added products, and keep the money flowing in and moving along. Whether it's a brand-new business or an established one to change their production mix, we'd be equally willing to work with them. It's just about wanting to create that impact and income for the sector." •