

Box Standardization:

Facing The Issue

by Charles B. Adams

Consider this situation: You're a supermarket floral manager who wants to run a promotion on 4-inch green plants. You decide you need 1,000 cases. Your local grower can't supply that much product, so you have to work with several others. After you receive the plants, you have several different carton shapes and sizes, and various packs. To top it off, the cartons don't fit on a standard 40- by 48-inch grocery pallet.

Add to this the situation of needing to stack the cartons efficiently in the warehouse, to price and bill the items correctly and to make sure the proper items are received by stores. And the situation for cut flowers is the same.

Sound confusing?

It is, says Kjell Hollen, Creative Design Services, Excelsior, Minn. Not only is this situation confusing, it also can deter supermarket floral merchandisers from promoting floral products, which means the market isn't being exploited to its potential.

The cure to this floral headache, according to Hollen and many others in the industry, is standardizing floral shipping cartons used for plants and cut flowers.

Standardization is needed to make the floral industry more consistent from grower to retailer to consumer. "When the retailer can palletize the boxes, those pallets are going to be very consistent," Hollen says.

With consistency comes several welcome aspects that all boil down to providing retailers with higher-

Many purchase a wide variety of sizes to accommodate their customers. With fewer boxes, such expense will be eliminated, Hollen says.

Standardizing floral cartons will help reduce the amount of handling they must endure during shipping, says Roy Houff, president of Roy Houff & Co., Burr Ridge, Ill. and also a member of the Box Standards Committee. The less cartons are handled, the less the chance the product inside will be damaged, he says.

Once potted plants and cut flowers are delivered to the warehouse, standardized boxes will help maximize the use of storage space, Hollen says. Most warehouses are designed for standard grocery pallets. If floral products are sized differently, the warehouse storage slots cannot be filled efficiently, according to Sebring.

Hollen says once the shipping cartons are standardized, retailers will be able to "compare price and compare quality" between growers or suppliers. Comparing is more difficult with the current system be-

much as 40 years ago, we have found references to this need at meetings of florists," he says. "It appears no one until now ever took the bull by the horns."

"No one has ever really tackled the issue," Houff says of the years that the standardization issue has not been examined seriously.

In the past, growers couldn't resolve this issue because no standards existed and most had their own box sizes they offered to customers, Roper says. As a result, retailers who dealt with more than one grower received a variety of "odd" packs and sizes.

Also, "It's hard to get 300 independent businessmen together and to agree," Hollen says.

Action now is being taken by the

Standardizing carton sizes was discussed during the 1984 PMA Floral Seminar in Washington, D.C. Several members of the SAF attended the seminar and agreed that there was a need for such standardization. The two associations agreed to form the Box Standards Committee to examine the issue and propose a set of voluntary, industry-wide standards, Johnson says.

The committee conducted its first meeting in July, 1985 at the SAF convention in San Antonio, Texas. According to Johnson of PMA, it became apparent to the committee members that they should split into two groups: one devoted to potted plants, the other to cut flowers. Even though it is hoped that both products will benefit from standar-



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the floral industry. According to Sebring, from grower to retailer to consumer. "When the retailer can palletize the boxes, those pallets are going to be very consistent," Hollen says.

With consistency comes several welcome aspects that all boil down to providing retailers with higher-quality product at a better price, which they can pass on to customers.

"We all hope that it (standardization) will do several things," says Phil Sebring, produce and floral buyer for Publix Super Markets Inc., Lakeland, Fla. Sebring is a member of the PMA/SAF Box Standards Committee.

First, if retailers can fit floral cartons on a standard grocery pallet, they will be able to load basic shipping trailers more efficiently. As it is now, cartons don't always fit on the pallets correctly and can become damaged, Hollen says.

Non-standard boxes create unused space that reduces the efficient loading of trucks. Such inefficiency needlessly raises the cost of the products. Standardization will help keep such costs to their minimum.

"The more air space that's left around the product, the more it is going to cost to move that product from point A to point B," Sebring notes.

Standardization will maximize the number of boxed plants per pallet, which also helps control transportation costs, Sebring says.

It will get floral products "to supermarkets in the best shape possible," he says. Consistency saves time, which is crucial with potted plants and cut flowers.

Standardization also will help reduce the costs of boxes for growers.

cording to Sebring.

Hollen says once the shipping cartons are standardized, retailers will be able to "compare price and compare quality" between growers or suppliers. Comparing is more difficult with the current system because one supplier may be offering more plants per pack than another. The floral buyer must convert prices to a per plant basis to make an accurate assessment.

Eventually, box standardization may lead to product and pot size standardization, Hollen says, which will allow for maximum comparison of product. There presently is some variance in the true measure of pot sizes.

More immediately, by standardizing box sizes, some product standardization may occur because only a certain number of 4-inch potted plants will fit in a particular box, according to Ray Roper, executive vice president of the SAF.

If there is any resistance to the proposed standards, it will come from the industry members themselves, Johnson says. Once the standards committee makes its recommendations, "they'll simply forward them to the industry. There's nothing that PMA and SAF can do to enforce this," he says.

The switch to standardized floral cartons will come from industry members themselves. "After the proposals are made, it gets to the level of the buyer and seller. They'll have to work it out individually," Johnson says.

Why So Long?

The issue of standardization isn't a new one, according to Roper. "As

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Box Standard Committee, comprised of members of the Produce Marketing Association and the Society of American Florists.

"We realized if anything was going to be done on this (box standardization), the pressure was going to have to come from the supermarkets. That's the approach we've taken," says PMA staff vice president Jim Johnson.

"The only thing that can make it happen (the change to standardized boxes) is the supplier saying he wants the (standard) box, and retailers not accepting a box (unless it meets the standards)," Houff says.

Hollen concurs, saying retailers will be the driving force behind the standardization changeover. "If the retailers have a system to offer, they do carry a lot of clout to make it happen—but it has to be fair (to growers)," she says.

Hollen stresses the need for a team effort to decide on the proposed standardization. Also, politically, both retailers and growers should be comfortable with the standards.

dization, Johnson says, they require separate attention and standards.

Both subcommittees sent out questionnaires to industry members to solicit their opinions on the standardization issue and also on some proposed box sizes.

The committee hopes to announce some proposed standards based on the results of the questionnaires during the Floral Seminar at the San Francisco PMA convention this October.

Sebring hopes the industry can institute its own standards instead of being regulated by the government. "We need to set our own rules, our own guidelines." He also says retailers will benefit from the industry's regulation. "They need to know what they're getting."

In addition, Sebring emphasizes that the committee's proposals may be just the beginning of the process to find a set of mutually acceptable standards.

"I hope someone else comes up with something better. This is just the start," he says. ■