

Market Fresh pushing forward under new ownership structure

By Christina DeMartino

Anthony Totta founded Market Fresh Produce LLC, headquartered in Kansas City, MO, in 1998. In January 2006, the company underwent an ownership restructuring, and is now a partnership between Mr. Totta, Steve Phipps and Jim Cipriano. The bulk of the company's business was originally in potatoes and onions, but it added sweet potatoes about five years ago, and quickly evolved into a major supplier in the category.

"We have co-packers all over North America," said Steve Phipps, principle owner and director of sales and marketing. "Our brand, 'Market Fresh,' is in place with nationwide distribution in our three primary categories, but we are also preparing to launch a nationwide tomato program."

Mr. Phipps said that one of the company's primary goals is to offer one-stop shopping on these commodities with 52-week supplies.

"We will be able to supply customers with the product in size, quality and consistency under one brand," he added. "We now service two large retail chains that have stores in multiple states. In the past, these organizations and others like them had to have three or four suppliers throughout the year. We are positioning ourselves as a procurement specialist in these categories. If we are selling sweet onions out of Peru, and then from Chile, and so on throughout the year, for example, bags will read 'sweet onions.' This will give the customer consistency throughout the year. The only exception will be Vidalia onions, which will have its own designated packaging. Bags

ing the growing region."

Market Fresh is offering two-, three-, four-, five- and six-pound mesh bags, the majority shipped in high-graphic Euro cartons. The company also offers all varieties of potatoes in bulk and in poly bag options.

In the sweet potato category, Market Fresh is sourcing from California, North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas and South Carolina. Known as being progressive in its packaging aspects, it offers a single over-wrapped microwaxable sweet potato labeled "Micro-Yummy." It is also offering its "Sweet-Petite" item, a two-pound mesh bag holding sweet potatoes sized from four- to six-ounces, what Mr. Phipps said is a more friendly portion size for consumers outside the holiday season.

"We are seeing marked increases in sales because of the size and convenience of this product," he said. "It was launched in October 2005 in over 1,600 retail stores nationwide. It is driving 15 percent of the category sales."

Market Fresh also offers Euro and standard cartons in numerous sizes, all with colorful graphics. Mr. Phipps said that communicating the great benefits of sweet potatoes on packaging is helpful. Recipes, a nutritional chart, the food pyramid and cooking instructions on packaging help to deliver the product's message.

Mr. Phipps said that company representatives communicate regularly for crop analysis so the firm can in turn provide the information to customers.

"Our contracts are not based in

just one region," he said. "If there is a weather situation or other problem that interrupts our supply flow, we source from someone else. All our sources have HACCP programs in place, and they must have sophisticated electronic scales. Many foodservice companies, especially steak houses, want specific sizes of sweet potatoes, and this is the most efficient way to accommodate those customers."



Steve Phipps

to continue supporting this growing commodity in an aggressive manner.

Market Fresh executives and staff understand the sweet potato movement today and are staying closely tuned into its growth. Mr. Phipps said that people have become highly educated on the topic of nutrition, and they know sweet potatoes are one of the healthiest products they can eat. The company plans