

OPINION

Creating a lasting brand

BACK in March, *Farmer's Guardian* wrote about The Co-operative Farms so, as the weather and crop prices are too depressing to write about, I decided to expand on what we are doing strategically.

We have now harvested our first ever sweetcorn crop, which is going into Co-operative Food stores, and packs of our beetroot have also started to appear on shelves. Everything we have produced is branded as "Grown By Us" when it is sold in our stores, so consumers can see who has grown it.

The pressure from The Co-op's retail arm is for us to produce more of what we already do, so we can get a presence in every store and they can make more of marketing it.

This year we ran out of honey and apple juice, as demand far outstripped what we produced. When we saw this coming, we had quite a debate as to whether we could blend our products with that from other farms to make it go further: was it more important to keep a product on the shelf, or to maintain the provenance?

We concluded we would never blend our produce with other people's and would work on the premise of WIGIG (when it's gone it's gone), while trying to increase volume produced for the future.

The exception is when we have to blend products. Packet flour is a good example, where



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I call the electronic tags costume jewellery for good reason

protein levels in the wheat can vary significantly year-on-year, so wheat other than our own may be needed to get the right performance of the end product.

In these circumstances we agree with our retail colleagues a minimum percentage for Co-operative Farms product and clearly label this on front of pack. This gives us some flexibility and minimises changes to the packaging.

A key challenge in processed products, if we are insisting we don't blend, is to ensure we don't add cost by having to segregate our product.

This is where it really helps to be a large farmer, as we can supply the processor with more than they need to allow for mixing at each end of our product going through. Not adding cost to a standard process is our biggest issue when working to produce end products.

Trying to address potential supply shortages, and rules on blending of products when working with flow processes, has been the subject of many discussions between farms, buying and marketing at The Co-op.

At the end of the day, however, what the consumer thinks, and whether we could defend ourselves if challenged, always wins through. We are creating a brand in Grown By Us and its longevity is what we need to think of.

We want to be able to give the consumer a quality, good value, product we have grown ourselves, so they can be confident they are doing the right thing in supporting our brand.

And that is the most exciting thing, The Co-operative Farms genuinely has a brand in Grown by Us and we need to ensure we build and protect the value of this brand in everything we do.

■ *Christine Tacon is general manager of the 24,291-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. She was awarded the CBE in 2004 and was a member of the Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group.*